1

It was one of the hottest, laziest summer afternoons I'd ever seen or felt—especially ever *felt*—when the mystery of the howling dog in the Sugar Creek swamp began to write itself in my mind.

I was dozing in the dappled shade of the beechnut tree near the Black Widow Stump at the time. Poetry, my almost best friend, was sprawled out beside me. The two of us were waiting for the rest of the gang to come for one of the most important gang meetings we ever had.

Of course, I didn't have any idea *how* important our meeting was going to be or what exciting and even dangerous experiences we were going to stumble onto that afternoon, or I wouldn't have been so lazy and sleepy.

Up to now, every time I'd dozed off, my chubby mischievous-minded friend had said or done something to jar me out of my dream-world into the sizzling hot afternoon that was making me so sleepy in the first place.

As you maybe remember, the beechnut tree we were lying in the shade of is just west of the Black Widow Stump, where we have so many of our gang meetings. That stump was the most important stump in the whole Sugar Creek ter-

ritory, because that was where a black widow spider had bitten Circus's whiskey-drinking father before he got scared half to death and gave his stubborn heart to God to be saved from his sins.

Circus, as you maybe know, is the curly-haired acrobat of our gang, who has to live with six sisters. He has learned to imitate almost every bird and wild animal there is in the swamp along the creek and the bayou, and he's always surprising or entertaining us with a bird-song or a growl or grunt or howl or screech or bark or squall or chirp.

That stump is also just south of the leaning linden tree that overhangs the incline leading down to the bubbling spring where we get our favorite drinking water. And that is about the coolest place anybody can find anywhere to get away from a long hot summer.

"Please!" I grumbled to Poetry, who had just punched me awake for maybe the seventh time. "Why don't you cooperate? You're going to get yourself whammed on the jaw or some place if you get my temper all stirred up!"

"Cooperate!" his ducklike voice came back. "Why don't *you* cooperate? I'm trying to tell you that Sugar Creek territory is going to be in the news—is *already* in the news. Here, look at this in the *Hoosier Graphic!* Here's a picture of the hollow sycamore tree in our barnyard and our old white mother hog with her six little pigs!"

"I saw it this morning," I mumbled back

grumpily, "and it's nothing to brag about. Our old *red* mother hog raises her pig family in a modern hog motel, not in a hundred-year-old hollow sycamore tree in a barnyard with woodpeckers nesting in holes in its dead top. Last week our Red Addie had *seven* pigs, all of them with beautiful red hair like mine."

Saying that to Poetry, I sighed a saucy sigh in his direction, rolled over three or four times to the very edge of the shade, and tried once more to sail away into the lazy, hazy, wonderful world of sleep. Maybe this time Poetry would respect my wishes and let me alone until some of the rest of the gang got there, when I'd *have* to stay awake.

Now that I was farther away from my oversized friend, the weather didn't seem so hot. A lively little breeze came to life right then and began to rustle the glossy green leaves of the beech tree. Through my half-closed eyes I could see the leaves trembling and, with my lazy ears, hear them whispering like a huddle of girls in the schoolyard.

Maybe I ought to tell you that sometimes when I am alone in the woods or down along the bayou—or just moseying around looking for snails' shells or birds' nests or sitting on the bank of the creek waiting for a sleepy fish to make up its lazy mind to bite the nice, juicy blob of fishing worms on my hook—I listen to the rustling of the tree leaves all around overhead. And they *do* sound as if they are whispering—and sometimes even as though they are

clapping their hands, as it says in one of Mom's favorite Bible verses, "And all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

All alone like that, hearing the water rippling in Sugar Creek and the birds whooping it up in the trees overhead all around, I like to think I feel like the Indian boy Hiawatha in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem. Then I'm glad to be alive enough to enjoy being alive. It's as easy as eating blueberry pie to imagine the birds are Bill Collins's chickens, and the chipmunks, groundhogs, cottontails, raccoons, possums, and even the polecats are my brothers —Bill Collins being me, Theodore Collins's "first and worst son," which is sometimes Dad's way of describing me. Sometimes when he calls me that, it's a joke, and sometimes it isn't.

Ho-hum! Lying there beside Poetry that sweltering summer afternoon, sailing along like Wynken, Blynken, and Nod in the poem in one of our schoolbooks, I was just beginning to drift farther and farther "into the sea of dew," when all of a temper-awakening sudden, Poetry let out a hissing sound like a tire losing its air and exclaimed loud enough to scare the living daylights out of me, *"Hear that?"*

Not having heard that or any other that, I groaned a grumpy growl and tried to yawn myself back into Wynken, Blynken, and Nod's sailboat to snooze off again.

"I mean it!" Poetry's voice exploded into my peace and quiet. "I heard a dog howling!" He rolled over several times to where I was

lying and bumped into my back. Then he sat up and shook me by the shoulders. "Wake up, Theodore Collins's first and worst son! I heard a dog howling!"

"A dog howling or a boy's brains rattling—if he has any?" I came back with.

Up to now it seemed that everything in nature had been cooperating with me, trying to help me get the nap I needed. There was the buzzing and droning of seven hundred or more honeybees gathering nectar from the thousands of creamy yellow, sweet-smelling flowers of the leaning linden tree. Every now and then a lonesome crow croaked a cracked-voiced caw from a tree somewhere in the woods. Down in the creek the friendly little riffle laughed gaily along, singing a singsong song, which is one of the most musical sounds a boy ever hears in Sugar Creek country. And the hot sun was scattering showers of heat all over everywhere, and . . .

Even though all nature was trying to help me, the nature of the roly-poly boy who was my almost best friend was *not* cooperating.

"Do you know what day this is?" he asked, and I didn't and didn't care and didn't answer him.

Then's when Poetry tickled my nose with what felt like the feathered flower of a bluegrass stem, which made me sneeze a sneeze that woke me all the way up.

"I don't care if it's day or night!" I growled.

I sighed a sizzling sigh at him and turned my face toward the bayou.

"The calendar"—Poetry answered his own question—"says that today is just one month since we buried Alexander the Coppersmith, and that gives us something to do today: go up to the haunted house cemetery and help Little Jim put a bouquet of wildflowers on Alexander's grave."

That might have interested me, but it actually only irked me a little more at my round-in-the-middle friend for trying too hard to get my attention.

I could have let my mind do what it had done so many times the past month—unroll the story of one of the most exciting things that had ever happened to anybody in Sugar Creek history. That, as you maybe know, happened just thirty days ago. A fierce-fanged wildcat as big as a mountain lion moved into the neighborhood, and my cousin Wally's copper-haired, city-bred mongrel, named Alexander the Coppersmith, had saved Little Jim's life. He had attacked the savage-tempered cat while it was flying through the air straight for Little Jim's throat.

You have to hand it to that nervous, nonsensical, half-hound, half-Airedale for being brave without knowing it and living a dog's life better than any dog I ever saw. He proved that day to be one of the biggest dog heroes in the county—maybe in the whole state—by diving headfirst into a fierce, fast, furious fight with

that wildcat. You can imagine what the battle looked and sounded like if you've ever seen and heard a neighborhood dog, who ought to know better, and our old black-and-white house cat in a tooth-and-claw, life-and-death struggle for the survival of the fightingest.

There was barking and yelping and hissing and scratching such as I'd never seen or heard before. I watched and cringed and yelled, "Attaboy!" to Alexander, while Little Jim beside me, saved by the battle, clung to my right arm as if he was holding onto a tree root on a cliff side to keep from falling over the edge.

"Sic 'im!" I yelled to Alexander, and he did sic 'im, more savage than ever, while Circus and Big Jim, Dragonfly and Wally, and even Little Jim also kept on rooting for that daring dog doing what was natural to him.

It was not only maybe the fiercest fang fight ever fought but also one of the shortest. All of a sudden, the battle came to a spine-tingling, heart-sickening, bone-breaking end. I saw it and didn't want to believe it but had to because it was happening right before my worried eyes. That copper-colored canine and tawny-furred feline, all of a barking, hissing, howling, eye-scratching, fur-flying sudden, started to roll over and over and over like two tangled-up tumbleweeds in a Western wind, right toward the edge of the ledge they had been fighting on. And over the edge and down they both went—down and down and down and down and *down!*

Even while they were still falling, my eyes leaped ahead of them to see where they were going to land. Maybe a hundred feet below was an outcropping of jagged rocks.

We buried Wally's brave little mongrel not far from where he fell in battle, in a sandy place we found on the bank of the fast-flowing canyon river. Never again would we see Alexander streaking like a flash of burnished copper down the road, giving chase to a passing car. Never again would we hear at night his high-pitched wailing as he ran with Circus's dad's hounds in full cry on the trail of a coon down along the bayou. Never again would I get to sit on our side porch under the ivy canopy and stroke his half-sad, half-glad head—when I could get him quiet enough to let me do it.

As the last bit of gravelly soil was shoveled onto his grave, I realized that at last he was a quiet dog and would never again get himself into any trouble for not thinking or planning in advance what he was going to do.

A day or two after the funeral, we had a second one for the same dog, because we got to worrying. What if there should be a flash flood some day or night? It might send a wall of water roaring down the canyon. It might wash Alexander's body out of its grave and carry it a mile or more downstream, where it would lie exposed to the weather and might be eaten by buzzards or some carnivorous four-legged animal that sometimes roamed the hills of Sugar Creek territory!

It was a sad day for all of us, especially for Wally, and extraspecially for Little Jim, whose life Alexander had saved. It was too sad for me to even write about it for you at the time. But we dug up his body and carried it in a gunnysack through the woods to Old Tom the Trapper's dog cemetery behind the haunted house where Old Tom himself had once lived. There we dug a deep hole in the southwest corner under an elderberry bush and buried him again.

And I will never forget the time the gang made a special trip to the cemetery to help Little Jim put up the grave marker his father had made out of a slab of birch wood. His mother, who is an artist as well as the best pianist in the whole neighborhood and is our church organist, had stenciled a sleeping dog on it and lettered what is called an *epitaph*, which Little Jim decided he wanted on it. It was:

ALEXANDER THE COPPERSMITH
Long may he live in our hearts.

There were tears in my eyes as I stood looking at the mound of yellow earth under one of the overhanging flower clusters of the elderberry shrub. That one cluster was so heavy, and hanging so low, it was like a ripe sunflower head, almost hiding the epitaph's last three words, "in our hearts." It seemed we had lost a member of the gang instead of a dog.

While we were all standing and thinking, I

took a quick look around at us. Standing nearest the marker, sort of leaning on his shovel, was Big Jim, our leader, his jaw set, his almost mustache like a shadow under his nose. Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of the gang, was holding his handkerchief to his nose, maybe to keep from sneezing. He was maybe allergic to the gunnysack we'd buried the dog in or to dog hairs or to some weed or wildflower around the place. Poetry's round face under his dark and shaggy eyebrows was very sober for a change. The very curly brown hair of Circus, our acrobat, was shining in the afternoon sun. And, last of all, there was Little Jim himself—last except for me, Bill Collins, Theodore Collins's first and *best* son. Right that minute anyway.

I wasn't the only one to have tears in my eyes, either. Little Jim gave his head a quick jerk, the way he nearly always does when there are tears in his eyes and he doesn't want anybody to know it. That quick shake of his high forehead shakes the tears out without his having to use his handkerchief. Not any boy I know would want anybody, especially any other boy, to see him cry.

We all turned away then, carrying Alexander "in our hearts," as it said on the epitaph. Not a one of us said anything for quite a while, but all of us were doing different things to make it seem we weren't as sad as we felt. Some of us were picking up rocks and throwing them at anything or nothing. Others were taking off on a fast run in some direction or other, leap-

ing up and catching hold of tree branches and chinning ourselves or skinning the cat—things like that.

And that was the last of Alexander the Coppersmith, the most wonderful, nonsensical dog hero there ever was. At least he was the most important dog that had ever lived and hunted and howled in Sugar Creek territory.

The last of him, that is, until a mystery dog began howling in the Sugar Creek swamp and along the bayou at night. And the howling and bawling and baying and squalling sounded exactly like the sounds Alexander the Coppersmith used to make when he ran pell-mell with a pack of hounds on the trail of a coon or fox or other varmint that lived in our neighborhood.

When you and your parents and your common sense all tell you there isn't any such thing as a ghost dog—that when an animal dies that is the last of his life on earth or anywhere else—and then all out of nowhere you hear the dog yourself after he is dead, you get a creepy feeling moving like cold chills up and down your spine.

Was Alexander alive or not? Before the week was over we were going to find out, in one of the strangest adventures that ever happened to the Sugar Creek Gang.

2

In the late afternoon of the day we set up Alexander's epitaph, Little Jim stopped at our house to get his bicycle, which he'd parked against the walnut tree near our front gate only a few feet from our mailbox. Just before he swung onto the seat of his neat blue racer to go flying down the road to the Foote house for supper, he got a faraway look in his eyes and said, "I wonder if there is a heaven for dogs."

It was such a surprising thing to say that for a minute I studied his face to see if he really meant it, wishing I could tell him there was but not knowing for sure if there was or wasn't.

When there had been quite a few more silent seconds, and still I hadn't answered, he came out with "Alexander didn't get to live even half as long as a healthy dog usually does. It seems like he ought to have another chance somewhere."

"He *will* live in our minds," I thought to say, remembering the epitaph on the grave marker under the elderberry bush.

"I don't mean live *that* way," he answered and sighed a sad sigh, giving his head a jerk. "I mean I wish he could live somewhere in his *own* mind and know he is alive."

For what felt like maybe three extralong

minutes, neither of us said another word. But I had my mind made up to ask my parents about it the first chance I got. Both Mom and Dad were Sunday school teachers and studied the Bible a lot. We also had a special book in our home library that explained every verse in the Bible.

When I spoke again, I answered Little Jim with "I wish he could, too." Then I turned to the rope swing that hung from the overhanging branch of the walnut tree. I plopped myself onto the board seat that was the same size and shape as Alexander's grave marker and started to swing, pumping a little so it would seem that I wasn't as unhappy as I really did feel.

That serious-faced friend of mine kept on standing there, his foot on his bike pedal, ready to take off.

"Do you know what?" I asked him as my swing whizzed past on its way back. When I had swooshed back and forth several times without his answering anything, I let my feet drag me to a stop.

It seemed that curly-haired littlest member of our gang, whose life had been saved by a dog dying for him, was maybe one of the best and most likable boys in the whole world. It made me proud to have him sometimes tell me his secret thoughts, which he never told anybody else.

When Little Jim still didn't answer my "Do you know what?" I said to him, "I'd rather have *Little Jim Foote* alive and in his own mind."

Hearing me say that the very special way I

said it, Little Jim gave me a quick, half-bashful glance, then looked away and swallowed a lump in his throat. For a few silent seconds he stared toward the eastern sky beyond the twin hickory nut trees growing at the entrance to the lane leading to Bumblebee Hill, as if maybe he was still thinking about Alexander and wishing there really *was* a heaven for dogs. Then he cleared his throat, swallowed again, and said, still without looking at me, "I guess maybe you're my best friend."

Saying that, that neat little pal of mine swung himself up onto the seat of his bike, gave the right pedal a push, and as fast as a firefly's fleeting flash was off down the gravel road toward the Foote house.

I stood up on the board swing seat and pumped myself into a high, fast, forth-and-back swing. I began to enjoy it as much as I could—the cool wind in my face, my shirt sleeves flapping in the breeze I was making—and thought how good it was to be alive in my own mind. That I was me, Bill Collins, not anybody else or a pig or a cow or any other kind of animal. Certainly I wouldn't want to be a dead dog buried under an elderberry bush in Old Tom the Trapper's canine cemetery, not knowing anything at all.

Far down the road I could see Little Jim. His legs seemed to be pumping him faster and faster as he steered past the North Road corner. "There," I said to myself, "goes a boy who maybe really is your best friend."

I gave myself a few more easy pumps, and while I was swinging and thinking, I heard myself whistling the words of a hymn we sometimes sing in the church the gang attends: "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear . . ."

While I was whistling and swinging, my mind took off on a quick journey into the past, and it seemed for a minute that I was standing at the foot of a skull-shaped hill outside Jerusalem. I was looking up at a wooden cross where the Savior was hanging. There were spikes driven through His hands and feet and a crown of thorns on His bleeding forehead.

As I kept on looking in my mind toward the cross and at the Savior, I began to wonder what if, all of a sudden, He would look straight down at me and say, "In three more days I will be alive again, and I would like to be your best friend, your very, *very* best!"

I gave my head a quick jerk and noticed that one or two tears flew out. They fell in a dusty place at the base of the walnut tree, where there were a half-dozen little cone-shaped holes in the sand, which are ant lions' insect traps for catching flies or ants or the larvae of some small beetle that might accidentally tumble into them—and then the ant lions would have a free supper.

Just then a friendly little breeze came trembling out across our lawn, carrying with it the smell of frying hashed brown potatoes. Through the kitchen window I could see my grayish

brown-haired mother moving around the range, and for some reason it seemed I didn't need to swing any longer.

I quick helped the old cat die, meaning I stopped the swing from coming to a slow stop by itself, and followed my nose toward the back door of our house. On the way I stopped at the iron pitcher pump, pumped a pan of clean water, carried it to the stand beside the board walk, then washed my face and hands and dried them on a towel that hung on a nail on the grape arbor post. I dampened my red hair and ran my pocket comb through it enough times to make it look neat in the mirror. Then I followed my nose the rest of the way to the screen door and inside to see whether supper was going to taste as good as my olfactory nerves had promised me it would.

Olfactory—that's the name of the nerves of smell, and every boy in the world has forty of them, twenty on each side, and they are for making food taste better and for making him sneeze when something tickles them. I'm going to be a doctor someday, maybe, so I'm learning in advance as many things about the human body as I can.

After supper and after all the chores were finished and I had washed my bare feet as clean as a tired boy can wash them and was upstairs getting ready to tumble into the already turned-down bed, I thought I heard a dog barking. It was a series of short, sharp barks, the kind a dog makes when he has chased a squirrel or a coon

up a tree and is bragging on himself as excitedly as he can to let his master know he has done something important and for him to please "*Come* quick-quick! *Come* quick-quick! *Come. Come* quick-quick-quick!"

I was too tired to say very much of a good-night prayer to God, and I was glad I knew He would rather have a boy get his needed sleep than to pray a long time when he didn't feel awake enough to do it. Besides, I had been thinking about God quite a few times that day and had said different things to Him at different times, the way Mom does around the house even when she is ironing or washing or baking a pie or out taking care of the chickens.

As soon as I was between Mom's nice clean-smelling sheets, I sighed a worn-out sigh and sailed off in a wooden shoe like Wynken, Blynken, and Nod in that poem we have in our school reader.

Wynken and Blynken, the poem says, are "two little eyes," and "Nod is a little head."

Nearly always when I glide off to sleep like that, the next thing I know it is morning, the sun is shining in our barnyard and garden, and the birds are whooping it up with happiness because they have another day to build nests, eat worms, and have the time of their lives living their bird lives in. I certainly didn't expect to wake up in the middle of the night—be *waked* up, I mean—by a strange sound. It was a long, howling squall like a Western coyote wailing at the moon.

I sat straight up in bed, my heart pounding. That bawling was the same kind of wail I'd heard many a night when Alexander had been alive and was on a red-hot coon chase with Circus's dad's hounds. Even when they were in full cry, my ears could always pick out Alexander the Coppersmith's higher-pitched bawl, just as you can hear Circus's mother singing higher and prettier than any of the other voices in the Sugar Creek Church choir.

I felt a cold cringing in my mind and chills up and down my spine. The sound of that squalling bawl was coming in through the north window of our upstairs, which is in the direction of the creek, the bayou, and the leaning linden tree.

I kept on sitting tense and even scared a little. It seemed Alexander the Coppersmith might actually still be *alive*—not in his copper-colored body away up in the hills in Old Tom the Trapper's dog cemetery but in his *mind,* racing through the woods and along the bayou and the creek bottoms, living a happy-go-lucky dog's life the way he had lived before.

I kept on sitting up in bed and listening and wondering, *What on earth?* Then, after a few half-scared minutes, there wasn't any sound of a howling dog, and I began to get sleepy. "Look," I scolded myself, "you're just hearing things! There isn't any such thing as a ghost dog!"

I sighed again a few times, plopped down on my pillow, and was just sailing off again with

Wynken and Blynken and their dopey little Nod when the sound came again—a moaning, quavering wail. This time it sounded as if it was coming from the direction of the tall pignut trees that grow near our chicken house at the other end of the long garden.

Quick as you can say scat to a cat, I was out of bed and looking under the ivy leaves that cover the upper half of our upstairs south window. I was expecting to see in the moonlit barnyard or garden the shadow of some animal, sitting on its haunches, looking up and baying at the moon.

I also was wishing for Little Jim's sake that *his* wish could come true—that Alexander the Coppersmith was dead only in the body he had lived and died in and that he was alive again in some kind of ghost body he could run and play and bark and bawl and squall in.

To make it easy for me to see out the low window, I was on my knees with my nose pressed against the screen, and that's when I was startled half out of my wits by the sound coming again. It was a lonely, sad, quavering wail. *"Shay-shay-shay-a-a-a!"* It wasn't very loud but was as sharp as a worried mother calling her son to answer her when he has already heard her call twice *without* answering.

That *"shay-a-a-a"* told me the disappointing truth: I hadn't heard a howling dog at all but one of the half-dozen screech owls that live around our place and in the woods across the road. A second later I knew for sure it was an owl

when, from one of our garden fence posts, there was movement as if the top of the post had come alive. Then a wing-shaped shadow sailed out across the chicken yard, over Dad's apiary, and disappeared among the orchard trees.

Even though I was disappointed and disgusted with a rusty red night bird for waking me out of a sound sleep and deceiving me into feeling scared, I remembered Dad's firm order to me and to some of the rest of the gang *not* to kill the screech owls because, as he put it: "They eat a lot of pests like English sparrows, which clutter up our garages and barns and spoil our haymow hay, and they also like cutworms better than a boy likes blueberry pie, which saves the farmers a lot of new corn—as much, maybe, as hundreds of dollars' worth in one county alone."

As I plopped back into bed again, I must have been a little mixed up in my mind, because I started dreaming about somebody's mother baking a cutworm pie that looked like blueberry pie. And when the pie was opened, four-and-twenty blackbirds spread their wings and took off, sailing higher and higher into the sky, each bird the size and shape of a wooden shoe with wings.

Anyway, the next thing I knew it was morning, and there was the smell of frying bacon and pancakes coming up the stairs. I quick rolled over and out of bed, shoved myself into my clothes, and, not being quite awake, sort of staggered past the big *Webster's Unabridged Dic-*

tionary on its stand at the head of the banister. Then I followed my olfactory nerves down to the kitchen.

That was one thing I always liked to do—be on time for breakfast—partly because, if I missed it, I'd get too hungry before lunch, which I had done only twice in my half-long life.

We were right in the middle of breakfast when Mom surprised Dad and me by saying, "There's something special our family is going to do this summer. I just got the idea yesterday from a magazine article I read. It sounded so good I decided it was something our family was going to do."

"*You* decided what *our* family was going to do?" Dad said from under his reddish brown mustache, which he had just wiped with a napkin after finishing his first cup of coffee.

I was looking at him over the top of the mug of milk I had just reached the bottom of.

"Certainly," Mom answered. "Don't you know that I always make up our minds?" There was a mischievous tone in her voice, though, and a twinkle in her eye. Before Dad or his son could laugh at a joke we had laughed at quite a few times before, Mom explained what she had made up her mind we were going to do.

"The magazine article said that life was so full of worries and troubles that we all need a change now and then. The family in the story called it 'taking a happiness break,' just like office workers and others take a coffee break. Every day each person in the family gets to do

one thing he especially wants to do to make himself happy."

Dad came out then with an idea that wasn't in the magazine. He said, "Wouldn't it make a person happier if he did something to make someone *else* happy? I just read the other day in a poem by Byron that 'he who joy would win must share it, for happiness was born a twin.'"

For a minute it looked as if Mom was going to lose the happiness that had been in her eyes. Then she took a sip of her second cup of coffee, set the cup in its saucer, and said, "Why didn't the article mention that? I think I'll write the editor and tell him. Maybe somebody'll read the letter and decide to help somebody else to be happy."

For a few minutes my parents sort of forgot about their son and talked back and forth about happiness. Dad wound up with a Bible verse, "'Give, and it will be given to you . . . good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over.' We all know who said that, don't we?"

I watched for a chance to get in one of yesterday's leftover questions, which was: "Does anybody know whether there is a heaven for dogs?"

Two coffee cups went down in their saucers at the same time, and two voices, one from the end of the table and the other at the side next to the range, asked, "Whatever makes you ask a question like that?"

"Little Jim," I said. "He doesn't want Alexander to be dead in his mind—only in his body in Old Tom the Trapper's cemetery."

That question upset Mom's happiness-break plans, because all of a sudden it seemed she would be happier if the breakfast dishes were washed and Dad would be happier if the outdoor chores were finished.

But before ten more minutes had passed, we had come up with a plan to let each one of us have his own happiness break at least once a day—to do anything he wanted to if it didn't break any family rules or make anybody else in the family unhappy. Also Dad said he would look in the Bible for an answer to Little Jim's question, since the Bible is the only book in the world that has all the right answers about life and death and afterward.

"My happiness break this summer," Mom announced from the dishpan, where her hands were getting their three-times-a-day beauty treatment with her favorite detergent, "is to set those three old hens we've got out there in the break-up pen."

I looked out the screen door to the break-up pen by the garden gate, where three of our best laying hens were in our chicken jail. The break-up pen was where we always put any of our laying hens when they stopped laying and went cluck-cluck-clucking around the barnyard all day, cranky-fussy because they wanted to sit on a nest of eggs for three weeks and raise a family of little chickens. One week in the pen, and they would always be cured and go back to laying again.

"Hey!" I said to Mom. "What's old Bent

Comb doing in there?" Bent Comb was my favorite mother hen. When she had been a little chicken, I had saved her life after her foot had been stepped on by a horse. Instead of letting Dad kill her because he thought she would die anyway, I had begged him to let me nurse her back to health. She did get well, though she always walked and ran with a limp.

Looking out at the three hens in the chicken jail, I saw old Bent Comb limping around from one end of the pen to the other, her feathers ruffled like those of her other two hen friends. She was cluck-cluck-clucking as if the only way in the world *she* could ever be happy would be to go cluck-clucking around the place with a family of cheeping little chickens running all over everywhere after her.

"My happiness break," Dad announced, "is to patch the roof on Old Addie's hog house. We don't want her seven little pigs to get wet."

I finished wiping a plate and looked at Dad.

He was getting ready to go out to the iron pitcher pump and pump a pail of water to carry out to the hog trough.

"I'll help," I said.

"Fine," Dad said. "I was going to ask you at the breakfast table but got sidetracked with happiness."

And so our day was started—a day that might be one of the most important days in the history of happiness.