1

It was one of the finest summer mornings I had ever seen, I thought as I rolled over and out of bed, took a deep breath of fresh air, and looked out the open window of my upstairs room.

The June sun was already up, shooting long slants of light across the backyard and garden. Old Red Addie, our big red mother hog, was grunting around the front door of her apartment hog house at the south end of her pen. Fifteen or twenty of Mom's happy laying hens were already up and scratching near the garden gate, scratching and eating and singing and scratching and eating—gobbling down what Dad calls "grains, greens, grubs, and grits," which is the variety of food a good laying hen has to have to stay well and lay an egg a day.

I guess there's nothing in the world that looks finer to a boy than an outdoor morning when there is plenty of open space for the sunshine to fall in and when the sky itself is as clear and blue as the water in Sugar Creek looks on a clear day when you are looking down at it from the bridge.

In the field east of the barn, the corn was talking in a thousand voices, making a husky, rusty rustling sound, as it says in a certain poem we had to memorize in school.

I started shoving myself into my jeans to make a dash downstairs and see if Mom's pancakes and bacon would taste as good as they smelled. Suddenly, from somewhere beyond the twin pignut trees at the north end of the garden, there came a meadowlark's juicy-noted, half-wild, very musical, rippling song. It seemed to say, "Summer is coming and springtime is *here!*"

But a beautiful, wonderful outdoor summer was already here, having the time of its life making corn and beans and potatoes grow, making birds build nests to raise their baby birds in, spreading blankets of wildflowers all over Sugar Creek territory, and even making the fish bite.

Downstairs, Mom had the radio tuned to a favorite program whose theme song was "Every Day's a Wonderful Day."

Before I started to make my usual race for the head of the stairs, I happened to see our big *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* in the alcove by the bookcase. I decided to quickly look up a word—any word my eye happened to land on—which would be my word for the day. That was one of our family's fun games for the summer. Each person selected a new word from the dictionary, and all of us used it over and over again at different times during the day, just to get acquainted with it.

Already that summer I'd learned important words such as *leisure,* which Dad said was pronounced with a long *e,* but Mom said she liked

a short *e* better. It meant "spare time," which a boy hardly ever has enough of. I also learned a new meaning for the word *freeze,* which is what a gopher or chipmunk or groundhog does when it is startled or scared. It rears up on its haunches to study and think and wait until it seems safe for it to drop down to the ground and go on about its business.

I quickly ran my right forefinger and both eyes down a column of words under the letter *f* and stopped when I came to a word I thought was new. It was "flotsam." I didn't even dream what an important word it was going to be before the day was over—and especially before the summer came to its exciting and dangerous climax.

On the way downstairs I was saying over to myself the dictionary's definition of "flotsam," which was "goods cast or swept from a vessel into the sea and found floating."

Before I reached the bottom step, my imagination had me drifting along out in a boat in Sugar Creek. And one of the gang accidentally or on purpose was rocking the boat. Then the boat capsized, and all of us were getting spilled out into what my mind's eye saw was a wild, stormy, sealike creek. Our oars fell overboard, and the waves carried them away. Fishing tackle boxes, bait canteens, straw hats—everything was turned into flotsam.

That was as far as my shipwreck got right then because I was near enough to the kitchen

table to make a dive for my chair and start sawing away on a stack of pancakes.

For some reason, though, I didn't sit down right away. I got to go out to the barn first to help my father finish the chores, which meant the horses and cattle got to eat their breakfast before we did.

At the table, Mom's wonderful day was interrupted by Charlotte Ann's upsetting her bowl of cereal in her high chair tray, making flotsam out of it in several milk-spattered directions. Some of it landed on the island shore of Mom's brown linoleum floor. Mom scolded her gently.

"You won't believe it," I said to my family, as I denied myself wanting to sit still and let Mom mop up the mess, "but my word for the day is 'flotsam.'"

"I believe it," Mom said, trying to keep her excitement in her mind. "Every day's not only a wonderful day, but it nearly always has a lot of little upsets, and the main boat upsetters in this house are my two wonderful children. One of them not only rocks the boat and often upsets it but actually throws her goods overboard."

Dad, maybe trying to lighten our family boat a little, said, "There are three words that usually go together: 'flotsam,' 'jetsam,' and 'lagan.' Lagan, Son, if you ever look up its meaning, is goods cast to drift or sometimes sunk on purpose, but it's attached to a buoy to float, so that if anybody finds it, they will know it belongs to *somebody*."

Trying to be funny and maybe not being very, I managed to say, "Who would want to tie anything to a *boy?*"

"B-U-O-Y," Dad spelled and winked at Mom. Then he remarked to her, "Anything tied to a B-O-Y would be *really* sunk—some other father's boy, of course."

Well, we had a few minutes' talk about a Bible verse, which we try to do once a day at our house so that we would have an anchor to tie our minds to in case we had an upset of some kind. Then we left the table and moved out into the working part of the day, hoping it would be as wonderful *all* day as it had been up to now—which it had to be for a certain B-O-Y.

I say it *had* to be, because the six sets of parents of the Sugar Creek Gang were sending the whole gang on a special errand, which I will tell you about in a few minutes, just as soon as I can write that far.

"Here's a little flotsam," Mom said, stopping me as I was about to go outdoors. She handed me a little basket containing a warm package of something wrapped in transparent plastic. It smelled as if it had just come from the oven, which it had. "Be sure, now, to make the Fenwicks welcome. Remember your best manners; smile and offer to do anything you see needing to be done."

"I will," I said, enjoying the smell of the warm, freshly baked something or other.

And away I went, remembering my best manners even at home by shutting the screen

door quietly. I was quickly on my way down to the Black Widow Stump to meet the gang. As soon as the whole gang was there, we'd have a hurry-up meeting to decide different things. Then we'd all take whatever our different mothers had baked and go across the bridge and down the creek to the Maple Leaf, a brand-new cabin we had helped build on a wooded knoll across the creek from the mouth of the branch.

In the Maple Leaf, having moved in only yesterday, was a missionary couple. They were to be the very first missionaries to spend part of their furlough in it. Dr. John Fenwick and his wife, Elona, had spent a lot of years in Central America, and they had come home for a rest and to get a little change from the very hot, humid climate that far south.

John Fenwick was a medical doctor, we found out, and *his* doctor down in Costa Rica had ordered him home for a rest. He had the kind of heart trouble called "angina pectoris."

The Maple Leaf, maybe I ought to tell you, was built on property owned by Old Man Paddler, the kind, long-whiskered old man who lived up in the hills and was always doing kind things for people—especially for missionaries, whom he seemed to like almost better than he did boys.

The wooded knoll had been given to the Sugar Creek Church, and all the men of the church as well as a lot of other men in the neighborhood—and also the Sugar Creek Gang itself—had built the cabin for free. That had

seemed even more fun than swimming and diving in the old swimming hole or catching sunfish and goggle-eyes. It certainly was a lot more enjoyment than weeding the garden and helping clean out the barn.

Anyway, today was *the* day. As soon as we'd get our welcoming visit over, the rest of the whole morning would be ours to do with as we liked, our twelve parents had told us.

Mom's final orders about politeness having been tossed back into the history section of my mind, I was now on my way like a "barefoot boy with cheek of tan," as a poem by James Whitcomb Riley says. I sped across the yard to the walnut tree by the gate, gave the rope swing a fling toward the east, and leaped out of the way when its heavy board seat came swooshing back. It would have bowled me over if it had hit me.

I took a quick look around the base of the tree to see if there were any new ant lion larva traps, and there were—three new conical pits in the powdery sand. I knew that buried at the bottom of each pit—now seven all together—was a hairy larva, the hatched egg of a night-flying insect. Each larva would stay buried, all except its head, until an ant or other insect accidentally tumbled into its trap. And then, *wham! Flurry! Chop! Chop! Slurp! Slurp!* And the ant lion would have had its breakfast without having to work for it or wait for its mother to cook it.

Any boy who knows anything about an ant

lion knows that its mother is a damselfly and that she lays her eggs on the surface of sandy or dusty soil under a rocky ledge or close to a house or barn or tree. As soon as the wormlike babies are born, they dig those cone-shaped traps themselves and are ready for breakfast without having to dress or help their parents do the chores or wash dishes or baby-sit, since each ant lion is its own baby-sitter.

But also, an ant lion never knows how good it feels to plop-plop across a dusty road with its bare feet—which it doesn't have anyway—or go racing like the wind through the woods on the way to meet a gang of other ant lions its age and size.

I must have daydreamed several minutes too long at the walnut tree, because from the house I heard Mom yell, "Hurry up, Bill, and get gone! Charlotte Ann's on the warpath! She wants to go with you. So the sooner you're out of sight, the sooner you'll be out of her mind, and she'll be out of my hair!"

The worry in Mom's voice made me sing out across the grassy yard to her, "Every day's a wonderful day!"

"For B-O-Y-S!" she called back. "Now you hurry up. And tell the Fenwicks we're glad they're here and to let us know whenever there's anything we can do for them. Be sure to make them feel at home!"

And then away I did go, plop-plopping my bare feet in the dust all the way across the road. I hadn't any sooner swung up and over the rail

fence than I remembered that at that very place, a few yards from the elderberry bushes, I had had a fierce, fast fistfight with one of the orneriest boys that ever lived in the territory. That boy's name was Shorty Long. In spite of my having given him a licking, he was still one of the worst boys anywhere around.

The only peace the gang had from him was when his family was away spending their winter vacations in a warm climate somewhere, which they did every year.

I took a look at the arena where we'd had our battle and said, gritting my teeth, "Take that—and that—and *that!*" I swung my one free fist around a little, then came to myself and started on toward the Black Widow Stump, saying to myself as I ran—and quoting my father, who had given me a talking to about keeping my temper under control—"Tempers are given to us by the Lord, Son. You can use them or lose them. If you waste your good temper in an explosion, you feel *sick* afterward. Some people actually feel as weak as a sick cat."

"How," I had asked my lowered-eyebrowed father that day—he had his own temper under good control at the time—"how can a boy who has had his nose bashed in a battle *keep* from losing his temper?"

Dad's answer was as if I had thrown a hard snowball at him and he had dodged it. Here is part of what he told me: "Just keep your eye on your mother. A hundred times a day things go wrong around the house and farm that could

make her the saddest or maddest person in the world. Instead, she keeps her mind filled with thoughts of God and with Bible truth. She keeps her heart's radio tuned to heaven and—well, you just watch her, and you'll see!"

I *had* been watching my wonderful gray-brown-haired mother ever since, and little by little I was learning.

"But," I said to myself as I zip-zip-zipped and zag-zag-zagged my way along on the little brown path to the Black Widow Stump, "What do I do today if my worst enemy happens along and stirs my temper all up with something he says or does?"

Shorty Long, being the only boy in the neighborhood whose parents took winter vacations in warm climates, was very proud of himself and very uppity about things they saw and did in the places they visited.

I gave my shoulders a twisting shrug as if I was a bucking bronco in a rodeo. And right away, in my mind, I *was* a bucking bronco, and Shorty Long was a cowboy trying to ride me and couldn't. I was a trained Western pony, my mane blowing in the wind. Shorty Long was lying in the dust behind me as I leaped into a fast gallop toward what was maybe going to be one of the most wonderful days the gang would ever have.

Maybe.

2

It was one of the happiest gallops through the woods I'd ever had. Nature helped me feel excited by letting me scare up a cottontail rabbit, whose white almost-no-tail went bob-bob-bobbing along toward a brush pile near a patch of light green mayapples.

"Don't worry, Little Brer Rabbit!" I called after him. "I know you were born and bred in the bramble patch, and I wouldn't hurt you for anything in the world!"

While I was still stopped, I eased over to a little thicket of seven-foot-tall bushes. I wanted to have a look at a thrush's nest I'd stopped at yesterday, to see if any of the four green-and-brown speckled eggs had hatched. And I got one of the worst scoldings that ever a boy can get. The mother thrush came storming out of those bushes, leaping from one branch to another, saying *"Prut-prut!"* in a short, sharp, angry, high-pitched tone. It certainly didn't sound anything like her early spring song, which is one of the sweetest bird melodies in the whole territory.

I worked my way cautiously through the branches and took a quick peek into the nest, but there weren't any baby birds. There were still only the same four light green, thickly

speckled eggs. Then I stepped back and got out of the way, because suddenly *two* rusty red birds were storming all around, screaming at me as if I wasn't a part of nature at all.

"All right! All right!" I scolded them back. "What're you doing up there, letting your eggs get cold! Get back on the nest! And learn to keep your voices down when you have company!"

I wasn't really angry at them, though. I was remembering what Mom once told me about the brown thrasher, which is another name for the brown thrush. She had said, "It sings best in late April and May. But when it begins to build its nest and get its family started, it's too busy looking after the house and the children."

I took a good-bye look at the half-hidden nest of grapevine tendrils, dead grass, twigs, and stringlike roots, and said to the eggs, "Now you hurry up and get yourselves hatched! And furthermore, from the day you're old enough to know anything, start being polite to strangers! Obey your parents and make it easy for your mother to sing around the house!"

With that advice, I swung back into the path made by boys' bare feet, listening in my mind to the words of a song we use every Sunday or so in our church school. It starts, "Look all around you, find someone in need. Help somebody today!"

That, Bill Collins, I explained to myself, *is the real reason why you feel fine inside this morning. You're on the way to do something for somebody else—not just to have fun for yourself.*

"You're right," I answered me and galloped on.

At the bottom of the slope, maybe fifty feet from the Black Widow Stump, I stopped again and looked through the dancing heat waves hanging over the open space to see if any of the gang was already there, but none of them was.

Listening for footsteps, I heard instead the busy buzzing of maybe seven thousand honeybees, which this time of year went swimming and diving and tumbling over each other among the flowers of the leaning linden tree. At the same time, my nose was caught up into a whirlwind of the sweetest natural perfume in the whole territory—the nectarlike scent of thousands of creamy yellow flowers of the tree that bees seem to like even better than they do wild crab apple blossoms.

"Slaves," I said, half to myself and half to the bees, "you don't know it, but you're working for my father. The honey you make out of that sweet nectar is being stored in my father's own beehives. But we do appreciate it very much, my little friends. Maybe that's the reason you're so happy—*you're* helping somebody else, even if you don't know it!"

Sitting on his haunches on the stump was one of my favorite animal brothers, a chestnut brown chipmunk. He was looking the world over, listening to see if there was any danger.

"Good morning, Chippy-chip-chee!" I cooed, not wanting to scare him. The second he was

scared, he would all of a sudden disappear the way other ground squirrels do. Sometimes—but only sometimes—Chippy-chip-chee would let us creep up really close. Then, maybe deciding we were for sure his friends, he would scoot back and forth all around in front of us, working his way closer and closer until he got up enough nerve to dash in and pick up a nut or piece of bread or cracker crumb we had tossed out to him.

For some reason Chippy was a little nervous today. And when he saw me creeping toward him, like a flash he was gone.

Getting to the Black Widow Stump before any of the rest of the gang arrived, I plopped myself down in the long, brown, last year's grass to rest, not being as tired as I would have been if I had been pushing our one-row cultivator across Theodore Collins's garden.

My nose was close to the flotsam Mom had given me, and I wondered if it would taste as good as it smelled. Right then it seemed like a good idea to put it about three feet behind me, which I did.

And right away I was daydreaming again—this time while I was looking toward the linden tree and the rail fence beside it. Growing there, and dancing a little in the breeze, were maybe seventeen yellowish fawn lilies, nodding their heads to each other as fawn lilies do when they are in full bloom.

I was jarred out of my daydream right then by a flock of voices. Rolling over and up to a sit-

ting position, I leaned back against the stump and watched five different-sized, different-shaped boys moving toward me. There was Big Jim, our leader, the oldest and biggest of us, the only one with fuzz on his upper lip and whose voice was beginning to sound like the quawking of the big night heron that lives in the swamp. There was Circus, our acrobat, who had six sisters and never got a chance to help his mother with the dishes—which is why Charlotte Ann ought to hurry and grow up. There was Little Jim, carrying—as he always does—his handmade ash cane. There was Dragonfly, the most spindly-legged one of us, and last of all, Poetry, my almost best friend, the chubbiest one of us. He was on a diet this summer and *had* been on it on and off all spring.

In the right or left hand of each boy was a package of something for the Fenwicks.

Almost right away we called our business meeting to order so that we could decide different things we would try to do the next few weeks to make the Fenwicks feel at home. In the middle of the meeting, Big Jim unfolded a piece of typewriter paper, saying, "Here, gang, is something we can do this morning."

On the paper was a hand-drawn map of the whole Sugar Creek playground. Outlined on the page were the spring at the bottom of the incline, the swimming hole, the bridge, the island, the cave, Old Man Paddler's cabin up in the hills, the haunted house, Old Tom the

Trapper's canine cemetery behind it, the best fishing places—things like that.

Our meeting over, we were soon on our way, all of us having put our flotsam in the big picnic basket Poetry had brought his in—and letting him carry it. A vote we had just taken had decided it that way.

Pretty soon we came to the rail fence near the bridge and went through or over or under the rails, whichever our minds told us to do. Then we started across the board-floored, extra-long bridge. It is over one of the widest places in Sugar Creek and has several deep fishing holes below it. The best fishing place is on the north shore, fifteen feet out from the leaning sycamore tree.

Halfway across, we stopped, all of us facing west to look toward the island and especially toward the wooded knoll where the Maple Leaf missionary cabin was. Blue wood smoke was rising from the barbecue pit.

"Look, g–ang!" Dragonfly beside me stammered. "There–there–there's a white boat at the dock!"

I'd already seen it. With its prow moored to the dock post was what looked like a brand-new, shining aluminum boat.

"And–and–and," Dragonfly stammered on, "it's got a life preserver! Who needs a life preserver around here?"

Big Jim answered in a teacher voice, "Every boat ought to have one, even in a creek like ours. There are a lot of places too deep for

wading. And besides, you could accidentally gulp water in an upset and not be able to swim. You can drown in a bathtub, you know. A boy nearly did last week in Brown County—remember?"

"The boat's got a name on its side," Little Jim said.

I tried to read the letters but couldn't make them out, and neither could any of us.

Anyway, it was time to go on, which we kind of bashfully did. Not a one of us had seen the Fenwicks in person. We had only seen their pictures on the bulletin board in the foyer of the Sugar Creek Church. We'd seen and heard quite a few different missionaries in our church but had never had a chance to see how they lived in the ordinary everyday world. For the next few weeks, we would get to, beginning just seven minutes from now.

Pretty soon we were all the way across the bridge and down the steep embankment on the other side, walking single file on the path that bordered the shore, not hurrying, because maybe we wouldn't be able to act natural when we got there.

Back at the Black Widow Stump we had voted for Poetry to be the spokesman, knock at the Maple Leaf door, and hand in the basket of baked things. Big Jim had ordered, "After that, everybody act natural. Just be ourselves."

But *that* wouldn't be easy, my mind told me as I dodged the swinging branch of a willow Dragonfly hadn't bothered to hold back. If I

acted natural right that very second, a spindly-legged boy would get tripped by the right foot of the red-haired boy behind him. Then, if we both kept on acting natural, there'd be a rough-and-tumble scramble of arms and legs, plus some grunts and maybe even a few groans.

Also, how can a boy act natural just because he has been ordered to or voted to? Especially when, at a time like this, it would be unnatural to act natural.

At the pier that we had helped our fathers make, we stopped to study the white boat and to admire the outboard motor attached to the stern. Just looking at that very pretty shining new boat made our own boat, which was chained to a small maple sapling up near the spring, seem like a last year's bird's nest. Ours was made of wood. It needed painting and also cleaning on the inside.

We were still standing at the dock, admiring the boat, feeling a little envious of it maybe and *not* liking ours as well as we usually did, when John Fenwick came down to where we were. He was panting a little, being short of breath as if he had seen and heard us and had come in a hurry to make us welcome.

While he was still coming, Poetry gave a low whistle in my ear and whispered, "Look at those bulging muscles!"

The gray-brown-haired missionary, still working his way down the slope, was dressed in gray everyday slacks and an almost snow-white T-shirt. His face, arms, neck, and shoulders

were a healthy tan, and their muscles did look like the muscles of the village blacksmith in a school poem of that name, part of which goes:

Under a spreading chestnut tree
The village smithy stands;
. . . . . .
And the muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands.

Poetry, who is always thinking in rhyme, having maybe a hundred-and-one poems stored in what he calls the "reference section" of his mind, whispered to me a little more about "The Village Blacksmith."

"He goes on Sunday to the church,
And sits among his boys;
He hears the parson pray and preach;
He hears his daughter's voice . . ."

I don't know what I expected a missionary dressed in ordinary clothes to look like, but for some reason it felt good to see John Fenwick looking and acting as much like a human being as a human being does.

Anyway, we pretty soon found out that the Guenther Longs had spent their winter vacation in Costa Rica, and on Sundays they had attended the little mission chapel there. Then the Fenwicks found out that the Longs lived at Sugar Creek, and the Longs found out that the Fenwicks had been invited to spend a month of

their furlough in the new Sugar Creek missionary cabin.

"Well," John Fenwick told us, "that's why I bought the new boat. When I was a boy, our family lived for several years on a beautiful little creek like this one. And the only boat I had was a battered old homemade one that leaked like a sieve. So I thought that for once in my life I'd like one that would help me live my boyhood dreams in a modern sort of way. Here, let me show you the very latest in boats."

The big missionary stepped out onto the dock, asking us to follow him, and that's when we got a close-up of the long, wide, aluminum boat.

"The seats," John explained, stooping and showing us, "have built-in Styrofoam, which makes it impossible for the boat to sink. That's another thing about my boyhood boat—I had an upset with it once, and it sank. It wouldn't even float to shore.

"You boys remember that, if you're ever out on a large body of water in a modern boat—*never* try to swim to shore if it's far. Just stay with the boat. Most of them will not sink unless they have too much weight in them and too much water. Usually you can hang on outside the boat, keeping your body under—all except your head, of course—and by and by your boat will drift to a shore or island or somewhere."

While John Fenwick was still talking and admiring his boat, looking at it as though he was a boy of our age and size again, I had my

mind on a certain other boat that I knew would sink if it accidentally got filled with water, especially if it had a boy or two in it or even hanging onto it. It seemed maybe there wasn't a boat in the world that was as worthless as ours, which *didn't* have two new lightweight oars, two metal carrying handles on its stern, a self-bailing assembly, a fish stringer ring, or any of what John called "foam flotation encased in its seats."

Dragonfly, who had never liked our old boat anyway—because sometimes, especially in ragweed season, he thought it was the wet wood of the gunwales that made him sneeze—right then sneaked an idea into my mind. He said, "If we'd make him a member of the gang while he is here, he might let us borrow his boat."

"Sh!" Big Jim, who had seen us whispering, stopped us with a shush, because right that minute John's wife was standing at the top of the incline by the large wide-topped stump of a tree one of our Sugar Creek fathers had cut down.

She was calling to us, "Come on up!"

We went on up, and Elona Fenwick was maybe even more like a human being than her husband was. She had a very cheerful sense of humor, and she looked at us with her twinkling brown eyes as though she liked barefoot boys with dusty feet and everyday play clothes.