1

If I hadn't been so proud of the prize watermelon I had grown from the packet of special seed Dad had ordered from the state experiment station, maybe I wouldn't have been so fighting mad when somebody sneaked into our garden that summer night and stole it.

I was not only proud of that beautiful, oblong, dark green melon, but I was going to save the seed for planting next year. I was, in fact, planning to go into the watermelon-raising business.

Dad and I had had the soil of our garden tested, and it was just right for melons, which means it was well-drained, well-ventilated, and with plenty of natural plant food. We would never have to worry about moisture in case there would ever be a dry summer, because we could carry water from the iron pitcher pump that was just inside the south fence. Our family had another pitcher pump not more than fifteen feet from the back door of our house. Both pumps got mixed up in the mystery of the stolen watermelon, which I'm going to tell you about right now.

Mom and I were down in the watermelon patch one hot day that summer, looking around a little, admiring my melon, and guess-

ing how many seeds she might have buried in her nice red inside.

"Let's give her a name," I said to Mom. The Collins family, which is ours, gives names to nearly every living thing around our farm anyway.

She answered, "All right. Let's call her Ida."

Mom caught hold of the pump handle and pumped it up and down quite a few fast, squeaking times to fill the pail I was holding under the spout.

"Why Ida?" I asked with a grunt, as the pail was getting heavier with every stroke of the pump handle.

Mom's answer sounded sensible. "Ida means 'thirsty.' I noticed it yesterday when I was looking through a book of names for babies."

I had never seen such a thirsty melon in all my life. Again and again, day after day, I carried water to her, pouring it into the circular trough I had made in the ground around the roots of the vine she was growing on. And always the next morning, the water would be gone. Knowing a watermelon is more than 92 percent water anyway, I knew if she kept on taking water like that, she'd get to be one of the fattest melons in the whole Sugar Creek territory.

Mom and I threaded our way through the open spaces between the vines, dodging a lot of smaller melons grown from ordinary seed, till we came to the little trough that circled Ida's vine. While I was emptying my pail of water into it, I said, "OK, Ida, my girl. That's

your name: *Ida Watermelon Collins*. How do you like it?"

I stooped, snapped my third finger several times against her fat green side, and called her by name again, saying, "By this time next year you'll be the mother of a hundred other melons. And year after next, you'll be the grandmother of more melons than you can shake a stick at."

I sighed a long, noisy, happy sigh, thinking about what a wonderful summer day it was and how good it felt to be alive—to be a boy and to live in a boy's world.

I carried another pail of water, poured it into Ida's trough, and then stopped to rest in the shade of the elderberry bushes near the fence. Dad and I had put up a brand-new woven wire fence there early in the spring, and at the top of it we had stretched two strands of barbed wire, making it dangerous for anybody to climb over the fence in a hurry. In fact, the only place anybody would be able to get over *really* fast would be at the stile we were going to build near the pitcher pump, halfway between the pump and the elderberry bushes.

We would *have* to get the stile built pretty soon, I thought. In another few weeks school would start, and I would want to do as I'd always done—go through or over the fence there to get to the lane, which was a shortcut to school.

I didn't have the slightest idea then that somebody would try to steal my melon or that

the stealing of it would plunge me into the exciting middle of one of the most dangerous mysteries there had ever been in the Sugar Creek territory. Most certainly I never dreamed that Ida Watermelon Collins would have a share in helping the Sugar Creek Gang capture a fugitive from justice, an actual runaway thief the police had been looking for for quite a while.

We found out about the thief one hot summer night about a week later, when Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of our gang, stayed all night with me in his green tent, which my parents had let us pitch under the spreading branches of the plum tree in our yard.

Of course, everything didn't happen that very first night, but *one* of the most exciting and confusing things did. It wouldn't have happened, though, if we hadn't gotten out of our cots and started on a pajama-clad hike in the moonlight down through the woods to the spring—Poetry in his green-striped pajamas and I in my red-striped ones and Dragonfly in—

But I hadn't planned to tell you just yet that Dragonfly was with us that night—which he wasn't at first. Dragonfly is the spindle-legged, pop-eyed member of our gang. He is always showing up when we don't need him or want him and when we least expect him and is always getting us into trouble—or else we have to help get him *out* of trouble.

Now that I've mentioned Dragonfly and

hinted that he was the cause of some of our trouble—mine especially—I'd better tell you that he and I had the same kind of red-striped pajamas. Our mothers had seen the same ad in the *Sugar Creek Times* and had gone shopping the same afternoon in the same Sugar Creek Dry Goods Store and had seen the same bargains in boys' nightclothes—two pairs of red-striped pajamas being the only kind left when they got there.

Little Tom Till's mother—Tom was the newest member of our gang—had seen the ad about the sale, too, and his mother and mine had bought for their two red-haired, freckle-faced sons blue denim jeans exactly alike and maroon-and-gray-striped T-shirts exactly alike. When Tom and I were together anywhere, you could hardly tell us apart. So I looked like Little Tom Till in the daytime and like Dragonfly at night.

Poor Dragonfly! All the gang felt very sorry for him because he not only is very spindle-legged and pop-eyed, but in ragweed season—which it was at that time of the year—his crooked nose, which turns south at the end, is always sneezing, and also he gets asthma.

Before I get into the middle of the stolen watermelon story, I'd better explain that my wonderful grayish brown haired mother had been having what is called "insomnia" that summer. So Dad had arranged for her to sleep upstairs in our guest bedroom. That was the farthest away from the night noises of our

farm, especially the ones that came from the direction of the barn. Mom simply had to have her rest, or she wouldn't be able to keep on doing all the things a farm mother has to do every day all summer.

That guest room was also the farthest away from the tent under the plum tree—which Poetry and I decided maybe was another reason that Dad had put Mom upstairs.

Just one other thing I have to explain quick is that the reason Poetry was staying at my house for a week was that his parents were on a vacation in Canada and had left Poetry with us. He and I were going to have a vacation at the same time by sleeping in his tent in our yard.

It was a *very* hot late summer night, the time of year when the cicadas were as much a part of a Sugar Creek night as sunshine is part of the day. Cicadas are broad-headed, protruding-eyed insects, which some people call locusts and others call harvest flies. In the late summer evenings, they set the whole country half crazy with their whirring sounds from the trees, where thousands of them are like an orchestra with that many members, each member playing nothing but a drum.

I was lying on my hot cot just across the tent from Poetry in his own hot cot, each of us having tried about seven times to go to sleep, which Dad had ordered us to do about seventy times seven times that very night, barking out his orders from the back door or from the living-room window.

Poetry, being in a mischievous mood, was right in the middle of quoting one of his favorite poems, "The Village Blacksmith," speaking to an imaginary audience out in the barnyard, when Dad called to us again to keep still. His voice came bellowing out through the drumming of the cicadas, saying, "Bill Collins, if you boys don't stop talking and laughing and go to *sleep,* I'm coming out there and *put* you to sleep!"

A few seconds later, he added in a still-thundery voice, "I've told you boys for the last time! You're keeping Charlotte Ann awake—and you're liable to wake up your mother too!" When Dad says anything like that, I know he really means it, especially when he has already said it *that* many times.

I knew it was no time of night for my cute little brown-haired sister, Charlotte Ann, to be awake, and certainly my nice friendly-faced mother would need a lot of extra sleep, because tomorrow was Saturday and there would be the house to clean, pies and cookies to bake for Sunday, and a million chores a farm woman has to do every Saturday.

"Wonderful!" Poetry whispered across to me. "He won't tell us anymore. He's told us for the last time. We can laugh and talk now as much as we want to!"

"You don't know Dad," I said.

"I'm thirsty," he said. "Let's go get a drink." His voice came across the darkness like the voice of a duck with laryngitis.

Right away there was a squeaking of the springs of his cot as he rolled himself into a sitting position. He swung his feet out of bed and set them *ker-plop* on the canvas floor of the tent. I could see him sitting there like the shadow of a fat grizzly in the moonlight that filtered in through the plastic net window just above my cot.

A split second later, he was across the three feet of space between us and sitting on the edge of *my* cot, making it groan almost loud enough for Dad to hear.

"Let's go!" he said, using a businesslike tone.

I certainly didn't want to get up and go with him to get a drink. Besides, I knew that the very minute we started to pump the iron pitcher pump at the end of the board walk, not more than fifteen feet from our kitchen door, Dad would hear the pump pumping and the water splashing into the big iron kettle under the spout. He would come storming out, with or without words, and would start saying again something he had already said for the last time.

I yawned the laziest, longest yawn I could, sighed the longest, drawn-out sigh I could, and said to Poetry, "I'm too sleepy. You go and get a drink for *both* of us."

Then I sighed once more, turned over, and began to breathe heavily, as though I was sound asleep.

But Poetry couldn't be stopped by sighs and yawns. He shook me awake and said, "Come on, treat a guest with a little politeness, will you?"

He meant I had to wake up and get up and

go out with him to pump a noisy pump and run the risk of stirring up Dad's already stirred-up temper.

When I kept on breathing like a sleeping baby, Poetry said with a disgruntled grunt, "Give me one little reason why you won't help me get a drink!"

"One little reason?" I yawned up at his shadow. "I'll give you a *big* one—five feet eleven inches tall, one hundred seventy-two pounds, bushy-eyebrowed, reddish brown mustached—"

"You want me to die of thirst?" asked Poetry.

"Thirst or whatever you want to do it of. But hurry up and do it and get it over with, because I'm going to sleep."

That must have stirred up Poetry's own temper a little, because he said, "OK, pal, I'll go by myself!"

Quicker than a firefly's fleeting flash, he had zipped open the plastic screen door of the tent, whipped the canvas flap aside, and stepped out into the moonlight.

I was up and out and after him in a nervous hurry. I grabbed him by the sleeve of his green-striped pajamas.

But he wouldn't stay stopped. He growled at me and whispered, "If you try to stop me, I'll scream, and you'll be in trouble."

With that he started off on the run across the moonlit yard, not toward the pump but in a different direction—toward the front gate!—saying over his shoulder, "I'm going down to the *spring* to get a drink."

That idea was even crazier, I thought, than pumping the iron pitcher pump and waking up Dad.

But you might as well try to start a balky mule as try to stop Leslie Thompson from doing what he has made up his stubborn mind he is going to do. So a minute later, the two of us were hurrying past "Theodore Collins" on our mailbox—Theodore Collins being Dad's name. Then we were across the gravel road, over the rail fence, and following the path made by barefoot boys' feet through the woods to the spring. Poetry used his flashlight every few seconds to light the way.

And that is where we ran into our mystery!

Zippety-zip-zip, swishety-swish-swish, clomp-clomp-clomp, dodge, swerve, gallop. It's nearly always one of the happiest times of my life when I am running down that little brown path to the spring, where the gang has nearly all its meetings and where so many interesting and exciting things have happened. Generally, my barefoot gallop through the woods is in the daytime, though, and I feel like a frisky young colt turned out to pasture. I had never run down that path in red-striped pajamas at night or when I was as sleepily disgruntled as I was right that minute for having to follow a not very bright barrel-shaped boy.

So when we had passed the Black Widow Stump and the linden tree and had dashed down the steep grade to the spring itself and found a dark green watermelon floating in the

cement pool that Dad had built there as a reservoir for the water, it was as easy as anything for me to get fighting angry at most anything or anybody.

A watermelon there could mean only one thing—especially when right beside it was a glass fruit jar with a pound of butter in it. It meant there were *campers* somewhere nearby. And campers in the Sugar Creek woods were something that which the Sugar Creek Gang would rather have most anything else. It meant our peace and quiet would be interrupted, that we would have to wear swimsuits when we went in swimming, and we couldn't yell and scream to each other the way we liked to do.

Poetry, who was on his haunches beside the spring, surprised me by saying, "Look! It's plugged! Let's see how ripe it is!"

Before I could have stopped him even if I had thought of trying to do it, he was working the extralarge rectangular plug out of the middle of the extralarge melon's long fat side.

It was one of the prettiest watermelons I had ever seen. In fact, it was as pretty as Ida Watermelon Collins herself.

Then Poetry had the plug out and was holding it up for me to see.

Somebody had bitten off what red there had been on the end of the plug, I noticed.

Then Poetry said, "Well, what do you know! This melon's not ripe. See, it's all white inside!"

That didn't make sense. This time of year, even a watermelon that wasn't more than *half*

ripe would be at least pink inside. My eyes flashed from the rectangular plug to the hole in the melon, and Poetry was right—it *was* white inside!

Then he said, "Oh, there's something *in* it! There's a ball of white *paper* or something stuffed inside it!"

I felt curiosity creeping up and down my spine and was all set for a mystery. Hardly realizing that I was trespassing on other people's property and most certainly not having a right to, even if the melon *was* in our spring, I quickly stooped and with nervous fingers pulled out the folded piece of paper. It was the kind that comes off a loaf of bread and which, at our house, I nearly always toss into the woodbox or the wastebasket unless Mom sees me first and stops me. Sometimes she wants to save the paper and use it for wrapping sandwiches for Dad's or my lunches, mine especially during the school year.

The melon *was* ripe, I noticed. The inside was a deep, dark red.

While my mind was still trying to think up a mystery, something started to happen. From up in the woods at the top of the incline there was the sound of running feet and laughing voices. There were flashlights and flickering shadows, and it sounded like a whole flock of people coming. *People!* Only these weren't boys' voices or men's voices but *girls'* voices. *Girls!* They were giggling and laughing and coming toward the base of the linden tree just above us. In

another brain-whirling second they would be where they could see us, and we'd be caught.

When you are wearing a pair of red-striped pajamas and your barrel-shaped friend is wearing a pair of green-striped pajamas, and it is night, and you hear a flock of girls running in your direction, and you are half scared of girls even in the daytime, you all of a sudden forget about a plugged watermelon floating in the nice, fresh, cool water of your spring, and you look for the quickest place you can find to hide yourself!

We couldn't make a dash up either side of the incline, because that's where the girls were. And we couldn't escape in the opposite direction, because there was a barbed-wire fence there, separating us from the creek. But we had to do *something!* If it had been a gang of boys coming, we could have stood our ground and fought if we had to. But not when it was a bevy of girls. They sounded like a flock of blackbirds getting ready to fly South for the winter, except that they weren't getting ready to fly south but *north,* which was in our direction.

"Quick!" Poetry with his faster-thinking mind cried to me. "Let's beat it!" He showed me what he wanted us to do by making a dive east toward the place where I knew we could get through a board fence and on the other side of which was a path. It wound through a forest of giant ragweeds leading to Dragonfly's dad's cornfield in the direction of the Sugar Creek Gang's swimming hole.

In another jiffy I would have followed Poetry through the fence, and we would have escaped being seen. But my right bare foot, which was standing on a thin layer of slime on the cement lip of the pool where the melon was, slipped out from under me, and I felt myself going down, *down*.

I couldn't stop myself. I struggled to regain my balance and couldn't. I couldn't even fall where my mixed-up mind told me would be a better place to fall than into the pool, which would have been in a mud puddle on the other side. Suddenly, *thuddety-whammety, slip-slop-splashety*, I was half sitting and half lying in the middle of the pool of ice-cold springwater, astride that long green watermelon like a boy astride a bucking bronco at a Sugar Creek rodeo!

From above and all around and from every direction, it seemed, there sounded the voices of happy-go-lucky girls with flashlights, probably coming to get the watermelon, or the butter in the glass jar, or maybe a pail of drinking water for their camp.

2

There wasn't any sense to what I did then because of the confusion in my mixed-up mind, if I had any mind at all. But that very minute, the light of three or four—or maybe there were seventeen—flashlights dropped over the edge of the hill. And all of them at the same time splashed down upon me, hitting me in the face and all over my red-striped pajamas.

I let loose with a wild, trembling cry like a loon's eerie ghostlike quaver, loud enough to be heard as far away as the Sugar Creek bridge. I began to wave my arms wildly, to splash around in the water, and to yell to my watermelon bronco, "Giddap! Giddap! You great big green good-for-nothing bronco!"

I let out a whole series of loon calls, splashed myself off the watermelon and out of the cement pool, and made a fast, wet dash down the path to the opening in the board fence, through which Poetry had already gone. I quickly shoved myself through. A second later I was making a wild, moonlit run up the winding barefoot boys' trail through the forest of giant ragweeds toward the swimming hole, crying like a loon all the way until I knew I was out of sight of all those noisy girls.

Even as I ran, flopping along in my wet

pajamas, I had the memory of flashlights splashing in my eyes and some of the things I heard while I was going through the fence. Some of the excited words were, "Help! Help! There's a wild animal down there at the spring!" Other girls had simply screamed, the way girls do when they are scared. But one of them had shrieked an unearthly shriek, crying, "There's a *zebra* down there—*a wild zebra, taking a bath in our drinking water!*"

That, I thought, dodging my way along the path, was almost funny. In fact, sometimes a boy feels fine inside if something he has done does make a gang of girls let out an unearthly explosion of screams. Most girls scream not because they're really scared, anyway, but because they like to make people think they are.

Where, I wondered as I zigzagged along, was Poetry?

I didn't have to wonder long. By the time I was through the tall weeds and at the edge of Dragonfly's dad's cornfield, I had caught up to where he was. His flashlight beam hit me in the face as he exclaimed in his ducklike voice, "Help! Help! A zebra! A *wild zebra!*"

I stood still with my wet pajama sleeve in front of my eyes to shield them from the blinding glare of his flashlight. "It's all your fault!" I half screamed at him. "If you hadn't had the silly notion you had to have a drink!"

His voice was saucy as he said back, "What a mess you made of things—falling into that water and yelling like a banshee! Now those

Girl Scouts will tell your folks, and your father will *really* get on your case!"

"Girl Scouts?" I exclaimed to him with teeth chattering from being so cold and still all wet with springwater. Also, for some reason I didn't feel very brave and most certainly was not very happy.

"Sure," he said, "didn't you know that? A bunch of Girl Scouts have got their tents pitched up there by the papaw bushes for a week. Old Man Paddler gave them permission. They're *his* woods, you know."

And then I *was* sad. Girl Scouts were supposed to be some of the nicest people in the world—even if they were girls, I thought. What would they think of a red-haired, freckle-faced creature of some kind that was part loon and part zebra, splashing around in their drinking water, riding like a cowboy on a watermelon, and acting absolutely crazy? I would never dare show my face where any of them could see me, or some of them would remember having seen me in the light of their flashlights.

I knew that one of the very first things some of those Girl Scouts would do this week would be to come to the Collins house to buy eggs and milk and such things as sweet corn and new potatoes. They would ask my mother whose boy I was. Besides, some of them would be bound to recognize me.

"We had better get back to the tent and into bed quick, before somebody comes running up to use your telephone to call the police

or the marshal or the sheriff, to tell them some wild boys have been causing a disturbance at the camp!" Poetry said.

It was a good idea even if it was a worried one, so away we went, not the way we had come but *lickety-sizzle* straight up through Dragonfly's dad's cornfield. We would swing around the east end of the bayou and back down the south side of it until we came to the fence that goes to Bumblebee Hill, we decided.

Once we got to Bumblebee Hill we would turn southwest to the place where we always went over the rail fence in front of our house. Then we would scoot across the road and past our mailbox, hoping we wouldn't wake up Theodore Collins in the Collins west bedroom, and a minute after that would be safe in our tent once more!

The very thought of safety and the security of Poetry's nice green tent under the spreading plum tree gave me a spurt of hope and put wings on my feet. I followed my lumbering barrel-shaped friend, for the moment not remembering there would be more trouble when I got home because of my very wet red-striped nightclothes.

The wind I was making as I ran was blowing against my wet eighty-nine pounds of red-haired boy, making me feel chilly all over in spite of its being such a hot night.

It was a shame not to be able to enjoy such a pretty Sugar Creek summer night. Sugar Creek nights are almost the most wonderful

thing in the world. I guess there isn't anything in the whole wide world that *sounds* better than a Sugar Creek night when you are down along the creek fishing and you hear the bullfrogs bellowing in the riffles, the katydids' rasping voices calling to one another, *"Katy-did, Katy-she-did; Katy-did, Katy-she-did!"*—and the crickets singing away, vibrating their forewings together and making one of the friendliest lonesome sounds a boy ever hears. Every now and then, you can hear a screech owl too, crying *"Shay-a-a-a-a!"* like a baby loon.

Oh, there are a lot of sounds that make a boy feel good all over—such as Old Topsy, our favorite horse, in her stall crunching corn, the strange noise the chickens make in their sleep, the wind sighing through the pine trees along the bayou, and every now and then somebody's rooster turning loose a *"Cock-a-doodle-doo!"* as if he's so proud of himself he can't wait until morning to let all the sleeping hens know about it—all as though it was a waste of good time to sleep when you could listen to such nice noisy music.

From across the fields you sometimes can hear a nervous dog barking and somebody else's dog answering from across the creek. You even like to listen to the corn blades whispering to each other as the wind blows through them.

Summer nights on our farm even *smell* good. Nearly always there is the smell of new-mown hay or pine tree fragrance, which is

always sweeter at night. If you are near the creek, you can smell the fish that don't want to bite, and the wild peppermint, the sweet clover, and a thousand other half-friendly, half-lonely smells that make you feel sad and glad at the same time.

Things you *think* at night are wonderful, too. You can lie on the grass in the yard in the summertime and look up at the purplish blue sky—which is like a big upside-down sieve with a million white holes in it—and in your mind go sailing out across the Milky Way like a boy skating on the bayou pond, dodging this way and that so you won't run into any of the stars.

But this wasn't the right time to hear or see or smell how wonderful a night it was. It was, instead, a time for two worried boys, including a red-haired, freckle-faced one, to get inside the tent and into bed and to sleep.

Pretty soon Poetry and I were at the rail fence across from our mailbox. There we stopped, keeping ourselves in the shadow of the elderberry bush that grew there. It seemed the moonlight had never been brighter, and we couldn't afford to let ourselves be seen or heard by anybody.

I was shivering with the cold, and just that second I sneezed.

Poetry shushed me with a shush that was almost louder than my sneeze, and he whispered, "Hey, don't wake anybody up! Your father has told us for the last time to—"

"Shush, yourself!" I ordered him.

We decided to go along the fence and cross the road by the hickory nut trees, then climb over into our cornfield and sneak down between the corn rows to arrive at the tent from the opposite side. That way, nobody could see us from the house. So we did.

We had to pass Old Red Addie's apartment hog house on the way, which is the kind of place on a farm that *doesn't* have a nice, clean, sweet farm smell. Pretty soon, though, still shivering and wishing I had dry nightclothes to sleep in, we were behind the tent, waiting and listening to see if we could get in without being seen or heard.

Right then I sneezed again, and I knew I was either going to catch a cold or I already had one. I quickly lifted the tent flap and swished through the plastic screen, expecting Poetry to follow me.

But he didn't and wouldn't. He stood for a second in the clear moonlight that came slanting through a branchless place in the plum tree overhead. Then he said, "I'll be back in a minute." And he started toward the house—*in the moonlight, where he could be seen!*

"Wait!" I called to him in as quiet a whisper as I could. "Where are you going?"

"I'm *thirsty,*" he whispered back. "I forgot to get a drink at the spring."

"You'll wake up my *father!*" I exclaimed. "Don't you *dare* pump that pump handle!"

But Poetry couldn't be stopped, and I knew that if Dad ever waked up and came out to

prove he had meant what he had said, there'd *really* be trouble. He would hear me sneeze or see my wet nightclothes, and he would wonder what on earth and why.

So in a second, like the old story in one of our schoolbooks about a man named Mr. McGregor chasing Peter Rabbit, who was all wet from having jumped into a can of water to hide—and Peter Rabbit sneezing—in a second I was acting out that story backward. I myself was a very wet, very dumb bunny chasing Leslie Poetry Thompson to try to stop him from getting us into even more trouble than we were already in.

We arrived at the pitcher pump platform at the same time, where I hissed to him not to pump the pump. I pushed in between him and the pump, blocking him from doing what his stubborn mind was driving him to do.

"I'm *thirsty,"* he squawked.

"The pump handle squeaks!" I hissed back to him and shoved him off the platform. My wet left pajama sleeve pressed against his face.

What happened after that happened so fast and with so much noise it would have wakened seventeen fathers. Poetry, my almost best friend, who had always stood by me when I was in trouble, who was always on my side, all of a sudden didn't act as if he was my friend at all.

We weren't any more than three feet from the large iron kettle filled with innocent water, which up to that moment had been reflecting the moon as clearly as if it had been a mirror—

clearly enough, in fact, for you to see the man in the moon in it.

The next second, Poetry's powerful arms were around me, and he was dragging me and himself toward that big kettle. The next second after that, he scooped my eighty-nine pounds up and, with me kicking and squirming and trying to wriggle out of his grasp and not being able to, he set me down *kerplop-splash, double-splashety-slump* right in the center of that large kettle of water.

"What on *earth!*" I cried, my voice trembling with temper, my teeth chattering with the cold, and my mind whirling.

My words exploded out of my mouth at the very minute Dad exploded out the back door. "'What on earth' is right," he exclaimed in his big father-sounding voice. "What on earth are you doing in the *water?*"

Poetry answered for me, saying politely, "It's all my fault, Mr. Collins. We were getting a drink and I—I shouldn't have done it, but I pushed him in. I—" Then Poetry's voice took on a mischievous tone as he said, "The water was so clear and the man in the moon reflected in it was so handsome, I wanted to see what a good-looking *boy* would look like in it. I couldn't resist the temptation."

Such an innocent voice! *So* polite! I was boiling inside as I splashed myself out of the kettle and stood dripping on the pump platform.

Then I did get a surprise. Dad's voice, instead of being like black thunder, which it

sometimes is at a time like that, was a sort of husky whisper. "Let's keep quiet—all of us. We wouldn't want to wake up your mother, Bill. You boys get back into the tent quick, while I slip into the house and get Bill a pair of dry pajamas. Hurry up! *Quick,* into the tent!"

He turned, tiptoed to the back screen door, and opened it quietly while Poetry and I scooted to the tent. A second later we were inside, standing in the shadowy moonlight that oozed in through the plastic window above my cot.

Dad was back out of the house almost before I was out of my wet pajamas. He whispered to us at the tent door, "Here's a towel. Dry yourself good. Put these fresh pajamas on —but *be quiet!*" He whispered the last two words almost savagely. "Here, let me have your old wet ones. I'll hang them on the line behind the house to dry. And remember, not a word of this to your mother, Bill. Do you hear me?"

"Don't worry," I said. It was easy to hear anything as easy to listen to as that.

Then Dad was gone.

In only a few jiffies I was dry and had on my nice, fresh, clean-smelling, stripeless yellow pajamas, and there wasn't even a sniffle in my nose to hint that maybe I would catch cold.

Boy oh boy, was it ever quiet in the tent! The only sounds were those in my mind. Everything had happened so fast that it seemed as if it all had taken only a minute. But it also seemed as though a year had passed. So many exciting things had happened—crazy things,

too, such as a boy galloping around on a green watermelon in a pool of cold water while a gang of girls screamed like wild hyenas that there was a zebra taking a bath in the spring.

"Wait," Poetry ordered, as I sat down on the edge of my cot and started to crawl in. "We can't get in between your mother's nice clean sheets with feet that have waded through mud and dusty cornfields. I'll go get the wash pan from the grape arbor, fill it with water, and bring it back."

"You stay *here!*" I ordered. "I don't trust you out of this tent one minute! I'll get the water myself."

And do you know what that dumb bunny answered me? He said in his very polite voice, "But I'm thirsty. I haven't had a chance to get a drink. I—"

"Stay *here!*" I ordered again. "I'll *bring* you a drink."

"After all I've done for you, you won't even let me go with you?" he begged.

"What have you done for me, I'd like to know? You—with your plunking me into the middle of that kettle of water!"

Poetry grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. "Listen, pal," he said fiercely, "I saved you out of big trouble. I heard your father opening the back door, and I knew he'd be there in a minute. If he found you all wet with that *spring*water, he'd have asked you how come, and you'd really have been in a pretty kettle. So I pushed you in. Don't you see?"

Well, I decided maybe Poetry really had been my friend. Besides, if I let him go to get a pan of water for washing our feet, and if Dad did see and hear him, Dad would probably not say a word—not wanting to wake Mom up.

"All right," I said with a sigh, "but hurry back."

Which he did.

Pretty soon we had our feet washed and dried on the towel. When we got through, I noticed that the towel might also have to be washed in the morning.

In only a little while we were in our cots again and, I guess, sound asleep, for right away I began dreaming a crazy mixed-up dream. I was running in red-striped pajamas through the woods, leaving the path made by boys' bare feet and working my way along the crest of the hill where the papaw bushes were, just to see how many girl campers there were. Then it seemed I was in the spring again, galloping around on a green no-legged bronco, which somebody had stolen and plugged and maybe sold to the girls. Or maybe some of the girls had invaded our melon patch that very night and stolen it themselves.

I hated to think that, though, because any girl who is a Girl Scout is supposed to be like a boy who is a Boy Scout, which is absolutely honest. Besides, as much as I didn't like girls—not most of them, anyway—and was scared of them a little, it seemed there was a small voice inside of me that all my life had been whispering that girls are kind of special. Anybody couldn't help

it if she happened to be born one. Mom had been a girl for quite a few years herself, and it hadn't hurt her a bit. She had grown up to become one of the most wonderful people in the world.

But who had stolen my watermelon? And how had *it* gotten down there in the spring? It *was* my melon, of course!

The idea woke me up. Or else my own voice did when I heard myself saying to Poetry, "Hey, you! *Poetry!* Come on, wake up!"

He groaned, turned over in his cot, and groaned again. "Let me sleep, will you?"

"No," I whispered, "wake up! Come on and go with me. I've got to go down into our watermelon patch to see—"

"I don't want any more water," he mumbled, "and I wouldn't think you would either."

"That melon in the spring," I said. "I just dreamed it was my prize melon! I think somebody stole it. I want to go down to our garden to see if it's gone."

Then Poetry showed that he hadn't been asleep at all. He rolled over, sat up, swung his feet out over the edge of his cot and onto the canvas floor, and I knew we were *both* going outside once more—*just once more.*

What we were going to do was one of the most important things we had ever done, even if it might not seem so to a boy's father if he should happen to wake up and see us in the melon patch and think we were two strange boys out there stealing watermelons.

Pretty soon Poetry and I were outside the tent again in the wonderful moonlight, where now most of the cicadas had stopped their whirring and the crickets had begun to take over for the rest of the night. Fireflies were everywhere, too. It seemed there were thousands of them flashing their green lights on and off in every tree in our orchard and in all the open spaces everywhere. The lights of those that were flying were like short, yellowish green chalk marks being made on a schoolhouse blackboard.

Poetry, with his flashlight, was leading the way as he and I moved out across our barnyard. At the wooden gate near the barn, he said, "Hear that, will you?"

I listened, but all I could hear was the sound of pigeons cooing in the haymow. The low, lonesome cooing of pigeons is one of the friendliest sounds a boy ever hears.

There are certainly a lot of different sounds around our farm. I have learned to imitate nearly all of them so well that I sound like a farmyard full of animals sometimes, Dad says. Mom also says that sometimes I actually *look* like a red-haired, freckle-faced pig—which I probably don't.

Did you ever stop to think about all the different kinds of sounds a country boy gets to enjoy?

While you are imagining Poetry and me cutting across the south pasture to the east side of our melon patch, I'll mention just a few that

we get to hear a hundred times a year: the wind roaring in a winter blizzard, Dragonfly's dad's bulls bellowing, Circus's dad's hounds baying or bawling or snarling or growling, our black-and-white cat meowing or purring, mice squeaking in the corncrib, Old Topsy neighing, Poetry's dad's sheep bleating, all the old setting hens clucking, the laying hens singing or cackling, Big Jim's folks' ducks quacking, honeybees and bumblebees droning and buzzing, crows cawing, our red rooster crowing at midnight or just at daybreak, screech owls screeching, hoot owls hooting, cicadas drumming, crickets chirping. And Dragonfly sneezing, especially in ragweed season, which it already was in the Sugar Creek territory.

There are also a lot of interesting sounds down along the creek and the bayou too, such as water singing in the riffles, the big night herons going *"Quoke-quoke,"* cardinals whistling, bobwhites calling, squirrels barking. And when the gang is together, the happiest sounds of all are with everybody talking at once and nobody listening to anybody.

There are also a few sounds that hurt your ears, such as Dad filing a saw, Old Red Addie's family of piglets squealing, the death squawk of a chicken just before it gets its head chopped off for the Collins family's dinner, and the wild screeches of a bevy of girls calling an innocent boy in red-striped pajamas a *zebra!*

In only a few minutes we were out in the middle of our garden, looking to see if any

melons were missing. I was just sure that when I came to Ida's vine, I'd find a long oval indentation where she had been. The dream I had had about her being stolen was so real in my mind.

"All this walk for nothing," Poetry exclaimed all of a sudden, when his flashlight beam landed *ker-flash* right on the fat green side of Ida Watermelon Collins, as peaceful and quiet as an old setting hen on her nest.

I stood looking down at her proudly, then I said in a grumpy voice, "What do you mean, making me get up out of a comfortable bed and drag myself all the way out here for nothing! You see to it that you don't make me dream such a crazy dream again. Do you hear me?"

I felt better after saying that.

Then Poetry grunted grouchily and said, "And don't ever rob *me* of my good night's rest again, either!"

With that, we started to wend our way back across the melon field in the direction of the barn again.

We hadn't gone more than a few yards when what to my wondering ears should come but the strange sound of something running. That is, that's what it sounded like at first. I stopped and looked around in a fast moonlit circle of directions. Then I saw, away over by the new woven wire fence near the iron pitcher pump, something dark and about the size of a long, low-bodied extralarge raccoon, moving toward the shadows of the elderberry bushes.

I could feel the red hair on the back of my neck and on the top of my head beginning to crawl like the bristles on a dog's or a cat's or a hog's back do when it's angry, except that I wasn't angry—not yet, anyway.

A little later, though, I was not only angry, but my mind was going in excited circles. If you had been me and seen what I saw and found out what I found out, you'd have felt the way I felt. I was all mixed up in my thoughts, worried and excited and stormy-minded, and ready for a headfirst dive into the middle of one of the most thrilling mysteries that ever started in the middle of a dog day's night.