1

It had been almost three months since I had gotten into an honest-to-goodness fight with anybody. In fact, I hadn't had a rough-and-tumble scrap with a boy my size since the middle of the summer, when the gang got into that fierce fist-fight on the slope of Strawberry Hill—the one that went down in Sugar Creek history as the famous Battle of Bumblebee Hill, which almost everybody knows about.

That well-known, nose-bashing battle was in the daytime, when I could see everything. That is, I could see until one of my eyes got socked by another red-haired, freckle-faced, fiery-tempered boy's dirty fist. That boy was Little Tom Till, who, with his parents and his big brother, had just moved into the territory.

At the top of Bumblebee Hill is the abandoned cemetery where Old Man Paddler's wife, Sarah, and his two boys are buried and where he himself expects to be buried someday. His tombstone is already up there with his name on it.

The fistfight I'm going to tell you about right now, though, happened at night when it was so foggy I could hardly see anything, anyway. So if I *had* gotten one of my eyes socked shut, it wouldn't have made much difference.

The battle was like being caught up in a whirlwind full of flying fists, with me—Bill Collins, Theodore Collins's only boy—right in the middle of it, getting whammed on the nose and chin and almost everywhere at the same time and getting the living daylights knocked out of me in the foggy moonlight.

It seemed I was being half killed there in our old apple orchard—which is where the fight actually started and also where I was when it ended. In fact, I was lying on my back looking up through the branches of a big Jonathan apple tree and wondering, *What on earth?* I hardly realized that I *was*. I was thankful that I still *was* on this earth, though, because I had been hit about a hundred times so hard it's a wonder I didn't get killed.

Don't think I am anybody's sissy, though, just because I got licked that night. I could have licked my weight in wildcats, I was so mad. But when what seemed like seventeen boys with two fierce fast-flying fists apiece started swarming all over me, what chance did I have to defend myself?

Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of the gang, who was with me at the time, was getting even more stuffings knocked out of him than I was, because he weighed almost half again as much as I did.

Before I was completely licked, I noticed that Poetry was on the ground with half the seventeen boys scrambling all over him. Their mouths were spilling filthy words that were as

dirty as a farmer's barnyard on a rainy spring day when the mud is six inches thick and the cows and pigs have been walking around in it.

Generally when I am in an exciting scrap in which I have to use my muscles on some other boy, I feel fine, even when I am getting hurt. But this time—well, how can you feel fine when a boy as big as the giant in the story of Jack and the Beanstalk grabs you from behind and whirls you around as though you were a feather and whams you onto the ground as easily as if you were a cottontail rabbit and then lands *ker-wham-bang* on top of you?

In a minute now, I'll get started telling you about that battle, how I got into it in the first place, and how I got out alive. But before I get that far in this story, I'll have to tell you something else, or you'll think the way my mom does sometimes when she looks at me with her half-worried brown eyes and says in her anxious, mother voice, "Bill Collins, how on earth do you get mixed up in so much trouble?"

Poetry and I wouldn't have had that fight at all if it hadn't been for Little Jim, the littlest member of our gang, putting a certain idea in my head just one day before Halloween. Also, I had been a little bit forgetful that afternoon and had overlooked doing something Dad told me to do—something *very* important.

Anyway, when anybody puts an idea in my mind like the one Little Jim put there, I nearly always have to do something about it. I just have to.

Dad, who is a sort of farmer-philosopher, has said maybe five hundred times in my life, "Sow an idea, and you reap an act; sow an act, and you reap a habit." I don't understand exactly what he means by that, but both Mom and Dad, probably the best parents in the whole Sugar Creek territory, are always trying to plant what they call "good ideas" in my mind, just as we plant potatoes and corn and beans in our garden. They are also always trying to pull other ideas *out* of my mind, the way I have to pull weeds out of our garden or cornfield.

We certainly have a lot of different weeds around our farm—jimsonweeds, for example. Those, when they are grown up, are tall and coarse and rank-smelling. They have pretty trumpet-shaped flowers but are very poisonous. Ragweeds are about the meanest weeds in our neighborhood and are the summertime cause of Dragonfly's hay fever—Dragonfly is the small, spindle-legged, crooked-nosed member of our gang. Then there's burdock, whose flowers turn into burrs and stick to any boy who brushes against them in the fall or late summer. We also have Canadian thistles, which swallow-tailed butterflies like the nectar of, and Queen Anne's lace, which is Dad's most hated weed, even though its heads are like lace and Mom thinks they are pretty. Queen Anne's lace has very stubborn roots. If you leave even one plant for a year, next year there is a whole family of them, and, as Dad says, "The summer after

that, a whole fieldful of them." They will even take over your whole farm if you let them.

I think Dad was afraid some crazy ideas would get started in my redheaded mind and take over his whole boy.

There was one boy in our neighborhood whose mind *had* been taken over, and that was Bob Till, who was Little Tom Till's big brother and lived on the other side of Sugar Creek. Their father never went to church and was always swearing and getting into trouble, often getting drunk and having to go to jail for a while. Big Bob's mother was the unhappiest mother in the whole Sugar Creek neighborhood. Bob had jimsonweed and ragweed and Queen Anne's lace and quack grass in about every corner of his mind, and his father had probably planted them there.

Anyway, I was telling you about the idea that Little Jim had accidentally sowed in my mind that sunshiny day before the moonlit fight in the orchard.

I was at the side of our front yard at the time, not far from the iron pitcher pump and between it and the plum tree, digging up Mom's old tulip bulbs and planting brand-new imported Holland bulbs in their place. The next spring we would have what would look like a long, straight rainbow starting about six feet from the pump and stretching in the direction of the plum tree.

One of the prettiest sights there ever was around our farm was Mom's tulip bed, which

last year, for some reason, hadn't done so well. Every spring, except last year, there were about fifty of them in a long, pretty row. Mom said that each one reminded her of a small child holding a tiny colored cup toward the sky for the sunshine and the rain to fall into.

As much as I didn't like to work sometimes, I was always glad to do something like what I was doing that nice warm Indian summer day. The sun was pouring out millions of sunbeams all over the place, and all kinds of different-shaped colored leaves from ash and maple and elm and other trees were saying good-bye to their tree parents, which had taken care of them all summer, and were falling down onto the ground where they would wait for winter to come and bury them in a white grave.

It certainly felt good digging up those spadefuls of nice, brown, still-warm sandy loam, scooping my hands into it, picking up and placing in a little pile all the old, small bulbs that Mom was going to throw away, and then putting in where they *had* been those nice, big, imported Holland bulbs. The new ones would sleep all winter, and then in the spring the sunny weather would pull them up through the soil, and they'd be one of the first flowers for us to enjoy.

That was another reason I was glad to do the work—one of the happiest sounds a boy ever hears is when his tired mother, who is working in the kitchen, all of a sudden looks up with a happy smile on her face and exclaims cheerfully, "Just look at those *beautiful* tulips!

Aren't they gorgeous?" The tulips are right where Mom can see them best through the screen of our back door, and that is what she says nearly a hundred times every spring.

I didn't even know Little Jim was coming over to our house that day until I heard his small voice behind me. Looking up from what I was doing, I saw his mouse-shaped face. He had one of the cutest grins in the whole territory, and for a minute I thought it looked like a possum's grin.

A possum, you know, is the only pouched mammal that lives around Sugar Creek. It is what is called a "marsupial." In fact, I had just learned from a book Dad gave me for my birthday that the possum is the only marsupial that lives in North America and is the only mammal in North America that has a little outside pocket in which it carries its babies. The mother possum carries as many as six or even twelve cute little, blind, helpless, hairless creatures in her pocket for about six weeks after they are born. After that, they climb out and crawl all over her grizzly gray-haired back.

Sometimes a mother possum will arch her tail up over her back, and those cute little possum children will hold onto it by their own strong tails, with their heads down and their front feet clinging to the hair of her back and sides as she goes around looking for food. Their food is most anything, such as birds or their eggs, minnows, frogs, fish, insects, or fruit.

One of the most interesting things about a

possum is that nearly always when you catch one, or when it knows it is about to be caught and is scared half to death, it will pretend to be completely dead. It will curl itself up into the smallest ball it can and lie very quiet with a sickly, simple-looking, sad smile on its pointy-nosed face, as much as to say, "My *body* is dead, but my *mind* is not, and I am very happy about it."

The only thing was, Little Jim's grin wasn't simple, but for a minute, because he has a mouse-shaped face that is also shaped like a possum's, he did make me think of the only North American marsupial there is.

"Hi there, red-haired, freckle-faced Bill Collins, Theodore Collins's only son!" he said mischievously.

"Hi, Little Jim Foote."

"What do you think you are trying to do there, anyway?" he asked me.

"I don't think—I just work. My mother does the thinking for me."

"I work like that, too, sometimes," he answered, and his grin looked even more like a possum's grin than a possum's does.

"What you all dressed up for?" I said, starting to work again.

"Going to church," he said.

"To church? This isn't Sunday."

"Mother's on the committee for the banquet, and Daddy's taking her over to help decorate."

"What banquet?" I asked.

"Don't you know? The father-and-son ban-

quet in the basement of the church. We get a free supper and get to see some movies about Old Man Paddler's missionary work up in Alaska."

"I know it," I said. "I just wanted to see if you did."

I must have had a sad tone in my voice, because he asked, "Aren't you glad? A free supper and everything!"

"But that's Halloween night," I answered, "and we won't get to wear masks or go trick or treating or anything!"

"Aw, who wants to do *that?*" Little Jim said scornfully, "That's little-kid stuff," as if he didn't care to believe that he was the only one of the Sugar Creek Gang who was little enough to be called a little kid. But maybe, like most any boy his age, he thought he was bigger than he was.

It had been two whole years since I had been as little as Little Jim was, which means I had lived through two more whole, wonderful Sugar Creek springs, two more great summers, two more autumns in which there were two sunshiny October Indian summers, and two more long, cold, snowy winters. That is twenty-four more months—more than seven hundred and thirty days—more than Little Jim had lived. And that made me a whole lot older than he was.

Also, I would *always* be two years older. I hadn't been a little kid for a long time.

So I answered Little Jim, "Yeah, I know, but when you're disguised in old clothes and wearing a mask, nobody is going to know who you are, and it's worth pretending to be a little guy

for all the candy and peanuts and popcorn and stuff you get!"

Then Little Jim surprised me by saying, "Maybe that's the idea. My mother says that if all the boys of the Sugar Creek Gang are at the banquet, they won't get blamed for any damage any other boys do to people's property."

And maybe Little Jim's mother was right. Nearly every Halloween I could remember, things had happened around Sugar Creek that nobody in his right mind, if he had one, would be guilty of doing. There were such doings as dragging shocks of corn out of cornfields and standing them up in the roads or in people's front yards, taking gates off hinges and letting cows and sheep and pigs run all over everywhere, setting the gates somewhere else, unfastening people's rowboats and letting them float down the creek, letting air out of automobile tires, upsetting small farm buildings . . .

And sometimes some of the things that were damaged cost the farmer or whoever else they were done to a lot of money to get them repaired. So maybe Little Jim's mother had a good idea. If the Sugar Creek Gang was at the banquet, eating a free supper and seeing a missionary movie, our parents and the sheriff and the town marshal wouldn't have to wonder if *we* were to blame for any expensive Halloween pranks.

All of a sudden, Little Jim said, "They're going to take up a special offering for the mis-

sionary speaker, and my father says I can give two dollars if I want to."

And that was one of the ideas that got planted in my mind and was part of the cause of the fight in the apple orchard.

Little Jim explained it to me—his dad was one of the members of Old Man Paddler's missionary board and knew ahead of time what they planned to do. The dinner for the fathers and sons was to be free, but after it was over there would be what our church called a "free-will offering" to pay for the dinner, and the money that was left over would be used to pay for preaching the gospel to the Indians and Eskimos and others who lived in Alaska.

"Mother is going to give five music lessons," Little Jim went on.

I knew that meant she would give ten whole dollars, because she received two dollars apiece for the piano lessons she taught. Little Jim got his lessons free, though, and he was one of the best players in the whole county.

"Circus wants to give three muskrats if he can catch them, but he has only caught one so far," he said.

I knew that meant that Circus, the acrobat of our gang, was going to try to give three dollars to the missionary offering at the banquet, since a muskrat fur was worth a dollar a pelt that fall.

Last year, Circus had had a trapline along Sugar Creek and the bayou and had caught thirteen muskrats and three possums. His

father, who hunted at night, had caught thirty-seven coons with his big long-eared, long-voiced hounds.

I tossed up another spadeful of dirt and said, "How come he's caught only one muskrat so far? I'll bet there are a dozen in the bayou right above the spring. I saw three yesterday myself."

Little Jim picked up a clod of dirt and threw it toward a blackbird that had just lit by our rosebush and was probably looking for a grub to eat. I had been digging around the rosebush that afternoon, heaping dirt high about its roots to get it ready for winter.

Little Jim acted as if he hadn't heard me, so I said to him again, "How come?"

He answered, "Maybe the muskrats are smarter this year than they were last year. They keep setting off his traps without getting caught."

Just that second a car honked out in front, and it was Little Jim's dad's car. It had stopped beside our mailbox.

"I have to go now," Little Jim said, and away he ran, past the rosebush toward our front gate by the walnut tree, whisking along as light as a feather, and for some reason reminding me not of an awkward, gray-haired possum, as he had a few minutes before, but of a happy little chestnut-colored chipmunk dashing from one stump to another along the bayou.

For quite a while after their car disappeared up the gravel road, I stood looking at

the long train of gray dust floating in the air, being carried by the wind across Dragonfly's dad's pasture toward Bumblebee Hill.

I was thinking how much easier it was for Little Jim's folks and for Little Jim himself to give a lot of money to missionary work than it was for some of the rest of the gang members, especially Circus, whose father hadn't been a Christian very long and hadn't been able to save any money. He had been an alcoholic before that, and most of the money he had made had been put into the Sugar Creek Bank by the owner of the Sugar Creek Tavern instead.

Then I got to thinking about Little Tom Till again, whose father was still an alcoholic, and how Little Tom had been invited to go to the banquet with Dad and me. I knew Tom wouldn't have anything to put in the offering basket when it came past his place at the table, and he might feel sad inside and ashamed and wish he hadn't come.

Then all of a sudden a cheerful idea popped into my mind, and it was: get Dad to hire Little Tom to help me with the chores tonight and maybe do some other work tomorrow morning and pay him for it. And Tom would be proud to put part of whatever he earned in the offering and also be glad he was alive.

Thinking that made me feel as happy as a cottontail rabbit hopping along the path that goes through our blackberry patch down in the

orchard. And before I knew it, I had finished putting in the last tulip bulb and covered all of them with eight inches of soft brown dirt. It certainly felt good to have strong muscles, and be in good health, and be able to work, and just be alive.

The more I thought about my idea, the better I felt. The only thing was, I didn't realize that my being especially friendly to Tom was going to be one of the things that would get me into trouble and into the middle of that fist-fight in our apple orchard.

2

When I'd finished cleaning the dirt off the spade I had been using and had hung it on the toolshed wall, I was feeling so happy inside that it was like a little whirlwind spiraling in my mind. I felt even better than I sometimes do when it's summer and I am splashing and diving in Sugar Creek with all the other members of the gang—not only Little Jim, the littlest and best member, but Poetry, the barrel-shaped one; Big Jim, with an almost-mustache on his upper lip; Circus, the acrobat; and Dragonfly, the allergic-nosed, spindle-legged member.

I was thinking that Tom Till was really a great little guy. I was remembering also that his hair was as fiery red as mine, his face had even more freckles than mine, his temper was just as quick as mine, and it was *his* dirty fist that had socked me in the eye in that other fight—the one that was called the Battle of Bumblebee Hill.

There were seven boys in that tough town gang that day and only six in our gang, but every one of us had two fists apiece. That made twenty-six fists, making almost as many fists as there were bumblebees.

I guess it was the bumblebees that saved the day for all thirteen of us and kept us from get-

ting thirteen broken noses. Boy oh boy, those yellow-and-black bumblebees had probably been living in that little underground gopher den for a long time. So when one of our twenty-six bare feet accidentally stepped on the entrance, it woke up the whole hairy-bodied army, and they came storming out in every direction. In only a few seconds, the thirteen of us were going in the same number of directions to get away, swatting at them with our straw hats and dodging, running down the hill for the shelter of the elderberry bushes. And just like that, the fight was over, which is how six middle-sized boys licked seven bigger boys—the bumblebees helping us a little.

I wasn't the only one of our gang who thought Tom was a pretty nice guy. Circus himself had taken a special liking to him and was always giving him an ice-cream cone or candy bar. And when the gang was running through the woods and Tom accidentally stubbed his toe and fell down, Circus would stop and help him up and act as if he thought Tom was as special as I think my baby sister, Charlotte Ann, is.

Maybe that was because every time they got a new baby at Circus's house—which was about every year—not one of the babies was a boy but was always a girl. As much as Circus liked every one of his sisters, so far he always had to get over being disappointed when he didn't get a little brother.

There was one other reason he liked Tom so well, and I was the first one of the gang to

find out about it. He explained it to me one day when we were down at the farther end of the schoolyard. I had noticed that nearly every noon at school Circus would sneak a sandwich out of his lunch box, when he thought no one was looking, and would slip it to Tom.

"How come you do that?" I asked him.

He said, "Do what?"

"You know—give Tom part of your lunch."

"It's not part of my lunch," he said. "My mother sends an extra sandwich every day just for him."

"How come?" I asked.

Circus looked all around to be sure no one else was close enough to hear him and said, "Because when Dad used to be—I didn't always get enough to eat myself. Now that my dad is a Christian and Tom's isn't—"

Circus's voice broke, and he never did finish his sentence. He didn't have to, though. I understood, and it helped me like Little Tom Till even more. I also liked Circus himself better, and I felt more and more sorry for Tom and his mother and even for Tom's big brother, Bob, and his mean father.

Bob Till had been the leader of that tough gang that had been on the losing side of the Battle of Bumblebee Hill. Tom had been a member of that gang, too, at the time. But since he and Bob had moved into our neighborhood, Tom had been playing around with us. Bob was the only boy in the whole territory that was what could be called a "bad boy" or, as

I overheard Dad tell Mom, "a juvenile delinquent."

As I shut the toolshed door after planting the tulip bulbs and went to get a drink, I noticed I was whistling "Yankee Doodle."

But then I stopped whistling for a minute and stood at the pump, remembering that just one week ago Dad and Mom had been standing at that very place when he had said that to her about Bob—his being a "juvenile delinquent."

Dad had just pumped a tin cup of sparkling water and handed it to her with a sparkle in his eyes, as though he thought she was wonderful. And Mom had just taken it from his hand and was drinking it and looking over the top of the cup at him with a sparkle in her own eyes, as if she thought he was a pretty nice person himself.

Then Dad said, "Sometimes—not always—it's delinquent fathers that make delinquent sons. In this case, John Till is probably to blame for his oldest boy being what he is."

At that minute, I happened to be hanging upside down by my knees from the two-by-four crossbeam at the top of the grape arbor. I heard Dad with my upside-down ears and saw him with my upside-down eyes, so I asked him, "What's a 'juvenile delinquent'?"

Dad explained that it was a boy or a girl who, for some reason or other, had a twisted heart or mind and did things that were against the law or just weren't right to do.

By the time he had finished saying that, I decided I was thirsty, too, so I said, "Let me see if I can take a drink upside down."

Dad gave me an astonished look, but he turned quick, pumped a cup of water, and started toward me, saying, "Anything to accommodate an only son."

I was surprised that Mom didn't try to stop him, as she sometimes does when he tries to do something she thinks isn't sensible. (Dad doesn't always stop.)

Mom not only didn't try to stop him, but she didn't even try to stop me from trying to drink it. So I decided to try it. It was probably a silly thing to do. If you don't believe it, just try it yourself sometime when *you* are hanging upside down somewhere.

With my cup of water in my upside-down hand, I was trying to put a right-side-up cup of water to my upside-down lips and swallow upside down. I managed to get it to my lips all right and was just starting to try to drink when, for some reason, the water spilled over the rim of the cup. Then, instead of running down my chin, the way it would have if I had been right side up, it ran into the two upside-down nostrils of my upside-down nose and up—*down,* rather—into what I decided afterward was a pretty dumb head. In a second, my nose was full to the top—or to the bottom—and the rest of the spilled water ran into my eyes and onto my forehead and my mussed-up red hair.

I quickly dropped the tin cup and almost

dropped myself. If I had, I would have landed *ker-wham-bang* on my head in the path that leads from the back door to the grape arbor to the toolshed. I might have gotten a concussion or something. But I quickly scrambled into a skin-the-cat movement, bent double, caught hold of the two-by-four, and swung myself up onto the top of it, where I sneezed several times in quick succession.

Mom, deciding for sure it hadn't been a good idea, said, "Such nonsensical things you two do sometimes! It's a wonder you don't make a juvenile delinquent out of that boy—the way you let him do any ridiculous thing he gets into his head."

"Such as drinking water?" Dad asked with a mischievous grin. Then added to Mom, "I don't have to worry about him. He'll never become one as long as he has you for his mother."

In spite of my having tears in my eyes as well as pitcher-pump drinking water, I was able to see Dad and Mom looking at each other again as though they liked each other in spite of me. And a fleeting thought flashed through my mind that it *would* be pretty hard for a boy to be an honest-to-goodness-for-sure juvenile delinquent with such nice people for his parents.

Well, as I said, today I was whistling "Yankee Doodle" when I went to get a drink.

Dad saw me by the pump and said, "Run into the house, will you, Bill, and look in my other pants to see if my keys are there?"

I started to go but had to stop at the

kitchen door to keep Mixy, our black-and-white cat, from going into the house with me or ahead of me or after me. She always tries to do that when I go into the house.

A minute later, I was in the downstairs bedroom closet going through Dad's pockets for his ring of keys. I had to do that almost twice every day, because Dad was always changing his pants and forgetting to take the keys out of one of the four or five pockets that each of his many pairs of pants had, and which is four or five times as many as a marsupial has.

Mom, hearing me rummaging around, called from the front room rocking chair, "You won't find any cookies in the clothes closet!"

Now what on earth made her think I was looking for cookies? I had to tell her what I was looking for, because Dad was making a fatherly noise out in the barnyard for me to hurry up.

Mom also heard him, so she told me to get her own ring of keys from her handbag.

"Which handbag?" I called.

She called back, "The brown one. It's on the dresser upstairs."

It seemed I had no sooner started upstairs than I heard Mom's voice calling, "But be *quiet!* Don't knock the house down! You'll wake up Charlotte Ann!"

I went the other few steps up the stairs as quiet as a mouse, but a second later I yelled back down to her again, "They're not in the brown one!"

"Then come on down and look in the

green butterfly bag! I think I left it on one of the dining room chairs!"

I took a half-worried look out the screened upstairs window under the ivy leaves that Jack Frost had changed from green to red. Dad was standing by the cab of the truck with both hands on his hips and both elbows straight out from his sides, looking toward the house. Knowing what he was thinking from the way he was standing, I yelled to him, "Wait till I look in the green one downstairs in the dining room!"

Dad yelled back, "I haven't got any green pants, and I certainly didn't leave them in the dining room!"

Well, there wasn't any use to try to explain anything to him right then. I finished knocking the house down as I hurried two steps at a time down to the dining room, where I raced through all the different compartments of Mom's green butterfly-shaped handbag. Some of its pockets were fastened shut with zippers and one with a snap. The stuff she had in that handbag!

I found the keys, though, and a little later was out the back door, scooting across the barnyard to where Dad was waiting.

"Here's Mom's keys," I said and handed them to him. "I couldn't find yours."

"Oh, fine," Dad answered. Then he added, "Don't forget I have them. I'll just have time to get there and back."

"Where you going?" I asked him. "Can I go along?"

"I would like to have you—in fact, I need you—but your mother needs you worse," Dad answered.

The way he said it made my heart sink. As much as I had enjoyed planting tulip bulbs, I felt sure that what Mom probably wanted me to do was to help with the dishes or something else that was made for girls to do.

"Where are you going?" I asked Dad again.

"Over to Thompsons'—to get a load of hay."

Then I *did* want to go, because Thompson was the last name of my almost favorite member of the gang—Poetry, the barrel-shaped one, whose actual name is Leslie.

I would rather go to Poetry's house than to any other place in the neighborhood. There are so many interesting things we can do at his house. His folks have a recreation room in their basement, where we can play Ping-Pong or checkers or look over his seashells. Or I watch his snails run a lazy race or his pet tree frog gobble down mealworms. Poetry had the cutest little green-and-brown frog living in a glass jar with an inch of water in it and an upside-down small glass in the container for a stool. The jar had a net cover so that the friendly little fellow couldn't jump out.

Also, Poetry always had more mischievous ideas and plans for adventure than any of the rest of the gang. We could have more fun together just by imagining we were pirates, or policemen, or cowboys, or something else a boy is always imagining himself to be.

"Are you sure Mom needs me? Can't I help her when I get back?" I asked with a hopeful question mark in my voice.

But Dad put a sad period on the end of his answer by saying, "Absolutely not. Poetry may have a little work to do himself, and his parents wouldn't want him to be interrupted."

"I could help him help you load up the hay. Poetry and I could go up into their haymow and throw the hay down for you."

"The hay is already down. It's *baled* hay."

That didn't seem to make sense. Our barn was already full of hay, anyway. A lot of it was baled, and it seemed strange for Dad to be going after a load, so I said, "We don't need any more hay, do we?"

I felt a little bit stubborn in my mind about not getting to go, but when Dad says a thing and is sure he means it, it's the same as trying to push over a barn to get him to change his mind. So I only asked, "What do we need any more hay for?"

"To feed those starving old apple trees out there in the orchard—the ones that didn't bear apples last year. They are getting old and scraggly and need some good high-nitrogen hay."

What on earth? I thought, trying to imagine an apple tree eating hay. It really sounded silly. We fed hay only to horses and cows and pigs and sheep around our farm—actual honest-to-goodness livestock, certainly not to anything that belonged to the vegetable kingdom, which is what trees belong to.

I knew Dad was always reading farm magazines and books and trying to use up-to-date methods and ideas, but I couldn't imagine an apple tree eating hay. It was ridiculous.

Dad started the truck then and gave me several last-minute instructions. "You behave yourself this afternoon and do everything your mother says. I'll be back in time for supper. And the first thing in the morning, you can help me feed the trees. We want to get them mulched down before the fall rains start, so the nitrogen in the hay will soak down to where the roots can feed on it all winter. And then, next year we'll really have apples!"

I guess I must have looked doubtful, so Dad took another minute to explain it to me.

"Farmers in some of the Eastern states have been spreading high-nitrogen hay under their apple trees instead of fertilizer out of a sack, and the nonproductive trees have come to life in a very wonderful way. Those five trees next to the blackberries have been limping along for two or three years, hardly bearing at all."

It sounded silly and sensible at the same time.

But I still wanted to go with him. I hadn't seen Poetry since yesterday—yesterday being the last day of school for this week, because of there being a teachers' convention today and tomorrow. All schools in the county were closed, giving all the tired-out boys and girls a three-day weekend.

"Maybe you can bring Poetry back with

you," I suggested, "and he could help us unload the hay"—anything to get to be with my good friend for a while.

"I can't do that either," Dad said, racing the motor and getting ready to start. "I'm getting the hay from their other farm—on the other side of the creek."

And that was that. I watched him drive through the gate and down the turnpike to the north road. There he turned and went on toward the bridge, leaving a trail of gray dust moving along behind him.

I was still standing by "Theodore Collins" on our mailbox, watching the gray dust boiling along after the truck and remembering I had forgotten to ask Dad if we could hire Little Tom Till to help with the chores. I was feeling sad inside—in spite of not having had to go to school today—when Theodore Collins's wife opened one of the windows of our front room, the one next to the telephone, and called Theodore Collins's son to come in and help her.

Almost right away I started taking slow, sad steps toward the kitchen door to see what she wanted. I hoped it wouldn't be dishes, not knowing I was going to stumble onto another strange adventure that very afternoon before Dad got back—one that would make any red-haired boy's hair stand on end.