1

I'd been hoping and hoping all through that long, slow winter that when spring came the gang could happen onto a new kind of adventure, one in which I myself, red-haired, more-or-less-fiery-tempered Bill Collins, would get a chance to use my muscles and my presence of mind to save myself or somebody from danger.

It's not that there generally wasn't plenty of excitement around Sugar Creek, especially when the gang was together. We were able to stumble onto more topsy-turvy, hair-raising adventures than you could shake a stick at. But—well, who wants to have such ordinary experiences as getting his nose bashed in a fierce, fast fistfight? Or taking a wet pet lamb to school on a rainy, muddy day to see if it really *would* make the children laugh and play? Or killing an ordinary black bear at the bottom of Bumblebee Hill?

Besides, it was Little Jim, the littlest member of the Sugar Creek Gang, who had killed the mad old mother bear, and he had done it with Big Jim's rifle, which he accidentally had at the time. All I had gotten to do in that tense excitement, while Little Jim was being the hero, was to watch and cringe, feel scared half to death, scream, and a few other things any ordinary boy could have done.

What I really wanted to do sometime was to kill a bear myself, take a picture of it, and then have it mounted—or maybe have it made into a rug for our living-room floor like the one Old Man Paddler has on the floor of his old clapboard-roofed cabin in the Sugar Creek hills. He had killed it himself, as a boy, with an old-fashioned muzzle-loading gun.

"So you want to kill a bear yourself, do you?" Dad asked me one sunshiny spring day when there was a lot of farmwork to do and I couldn't even go fishing. We were sitting at our kitchen table at the time, eating lunch. Mom was at her place at the side of the table nearest the stove, and Dad was near the water pail behind him and also near both doors, one of which I would have to use if I wanted to go outdoors in a hurry to get in a little play before the afternoon's work would start.

I was sitting on the long wooden bench opposite Mom and against the south wall of the kitchen, and Charlotte Ann, my mischievous, cute little sister, was in her high chair between Mom and Dad, wiggling and squirming and eating with the best toddler table manners I ever saw.

"Yes sir," I replied in answer to Dad's question, making my answer short because I was at the same time trying to make short work of a piece of Mom's cherry pie. She had baked it that very morning, since most mothers hadn't anything exciting to do to get their pictures in the paper. They only did such ordinary things

as ironing and washing and patching a boy's and his father's clothes and cooking their food and keeping the house clean seven days a week and, in the summertime, making garden and setting hens and stuff like that.

And Dad said, not realizing how I felt at the time, "You wouldn't settle for some ordinary wild animal such as a wildcat or a timber wolf or even a moose?"

"Kids' stuff!" I said and frowned down into my plate, knowing that if I had had a mirror and had been looking into it, I would have seen not only my reddish hair and freckles and a pair of reddish brown eyebrows like my father's, but there would be a wrinkle in my forehead like the kind our leader, Big Jim, had when he frowned about something. And if I had looked close enough, I could actually have seen what, if it kept on growing, might become a mustache on my upper lip.

"How old are you now?" Dad asked.

Before I could answer, Mom answered, "The question is wrong. It should be, 'How *young* are you?'"

And then I *knew* there would have been a Big Jim frown on my forehead, because if there is anything a boy doesn't like more than he doesn't like anything else, it's for somebody—especially one of his parents—to remind him he is as young as he is.

"I'm just a child," I said, having that very minute made the last of the short work I was making out of her pie, "probably too young to

help with the dishes today—if I may be excused." I slid out of my place on the long bench as easily as pie, saying at the same time, "I'll be down at the barn if you need me for anything."

Dad's long arm, with a strong, calloused left hand on the end of it, stopped me by the overall suspenders before I could get to my feet and my feet could get me to the door. His voice helped a little as he said, "Not so fast, sir."

"I can do it slowly," I said. I stayed stopped, shutting my right eye and trying to push my upper lip out far enough to see it by looking straight down the left side of my nose.

"Should you make such a face?" Mom asked. It seemed from the tone of voice she had used that she was glad Dad had stopped me.

Because Dad and Mom and I liked each other extrawell most of the time, and were always trying to be funny to each other, and sometimes not being very, I said, "I didn't make it—I inherited it."

Mom was really quick on the trigger then. She tossed in a bright remark: "Poor boy! Your father shouldn't be blamed too much, though. He inherited his own red hair and complexion from *his* parents."

I felt myself grinning. "You're cute parents, but personally I think I look like a meadowlark's egg with a face on it which somebody tried to draw and didn't quite finish."

I was remembering a nestful of eggs I'd

seen once right after a mother meadowlark had exploded off it while I was running through the south pasture. Each egg was white with a lot of reddish brown freckles all over it.

It was Poetry, my barrel-shaped friend, who had given me the face idea. He had once said to me when he had been trying to count the freckles I had on only one side of my face, "You look like a meadowlark's egg with a half-finished face drawn on it by a boy who gets poor grades in art in school."

Dad was still holding onto my suspenders, and I didn't dare to go on outdoors for fear he would be left holding an empty pair of overalls at the kitchen table. He said, "I believe you're right, son. Now you can run along to the barn. You might like to get the posthole digger, take it up to the pignut trees, and run that corner posthole down another fifteen or so inches. We'll have to get the fence up as soon as we can —or even sooner. You know how Jersey Jill likes new clover—and how dangerous it is when she eats too much."

"Yes sir," I said, glad to dig postholes or most anything that I could use my muscles on rather than do something around the house. Whoever heard of a boy developing strong muscles or even growing a mustache faster by carrying a dish towel around somebody's kitchen?

On the way to the barn I stopped at the iron pitcher pump for a drink, skinned the cat twice at the grape arbor, and chinned myself

eight times to strengthen my biceps. Then I went on out to the barn, stopping twice more on the way.

One time was to speak to Old Addie, our red mother hog, who was grunting around the gate as if she wished she could have breakfast, dinner, and supper fifty times a day. Addie lived in a new apartment hog house over on the farther side of her pen, where nearly every spring she gave the Collins family seven or eight nice little red-haired piglets.

"Good afternoon," I said down to her. But she only grunted a disgusted reply as though it was still too early in the day to talk to anybody and she hadn't had her cup of coffee yet.

"Such a face," I said to her. "Should you be making such a face?"

And do you know what? She grunted out a nasal sort of answer that sounded like: "I didn't make it. I just inherited it." And because I had said it first in the kitchen as Dad was holding onto my overall suspenders, it sounded kind of funny.

The second time I stopped was when I reached the hole just below the north window of the barn, where Mixy, our black-and-white cat, goes in and out a hundred times a day and which she uses for a refuge when some neighbor's dog is chasing her. She must have heard me talking to Old Addie, because she came out stretching and yawning as if she had just awakened from a nap. Then she made a beeline for my overall legs. As I stood looking down at her,

she arched her back and rubbed herself past me two or three times.

"You're a nice cat," I said down to her. There was something nice about having old Mixy do that to me, making it seem she liked me a lot—and anybody likes to be liked, better than anything else.

Pretty soon I had the posthole digger out of the place where Dad kept it in the corner by the cabinet where he keeps his different stock medicines and tools and things for working around the barn.

Just as I reached for the digger, which was standing beside a shovel, I noticed that Dad had added a new book to his little farm library. He was always adding a book every now and then, anyway. This one was called *A Veterinary Handbook for the Average Farmer, or What to Do Before the Doctor Arrives.*

The big book was standing on the shelf beside a dozen others with long names such as *Farm Work Simplification* and *Soil Microbiology* and a few with ordinary titles such as *Vegetable Gardening, All About Field Crop Insects,* and one that sounded as if it ought to be on the shelf in our kitchen. That one was *How to Feed a Hungry Man.*

I quick leafed through the new book, just to see what Dad had been studying.

Sometimes when we were working together in the garden or in the cornfield, he would start to explain something to me, and I always liked to say, "Sure, that's right. Now you can go

to the head of the class." And then, before he could start to tell me anything else, I would tell him first and try to ask questions he couldn't answer, so that I could say, "Sorry, Theodore," calling him by his first name as if I was a teacher in our red-brick schoolhouse and he a boy in maybe the fifth grade.

It took me only what seemed six minutes to read a half chapter on what to do if your cow or calf gets what is called "bloat," which was where Dad had left a bookmark and maybe was where he had been reading last.

Then I quickly took up the posthole digger. It was the hinged type with long steel blades that could take a big ten-inch bite of dirt in its six-inch-diameter jaws. A man or boy using its five-foot-long handles could dig a fast hole most anywhere on the Theodore Collins farm.

Then I was out the barn door, stepping all around and over Mixy to keep her from getting smashed under my feet. And in a minute I was up by the pignut trees, working and sweating and feeling fine, with my powerful biceps lifting big bites of yellowish clay out of the posthole and piling them onto a yellow brown mound beside me.

Several blackbirds, thinking maybe I'd unearth a grub or a night crawler or something, came flying and walking around excitedly. But I wasn't interested—not much, anyway, until I happened to think what they were there for. For some reason that made me think what else night crawlers were good for, and all of a

sudden I remembered I hadn't gone fishing for almost two days. And the sun was shining down so warm and getting warmer every minute. In fact, it was getting *hotter* every minute. It would be a shame not to go fishing.

I hardly realized what happened after that, but in almost no time I had left the posthole digger down in the hole with a big bite of yellow clay in its jaws. I had gone to the barn and come back with the shovel and was over by the garden fence, not far from a pile of boards, digging up some of the nicest fishing worms that ever tempted a sunfish and was putting them into a tin can I found close by. The reason I hardly realized what I was doing was that in my mind I was already down at the mouth of the branch, where Poetry, my barrel-shaped friend, and I nearly always could catch quite a few fish.

I soon found out what I was doing, though, because suddenly out of nowhere there was a voice behind me saying, "I didn't want the posthole dug *there,* Son—over *here* where the fence is to go up. And you can't dig a posthole scratching around on the surface with a shovel!"

I felt my face turn as red as my hair, and with quick presence of mind I said, "Take a look in the hole over there. See if I haven't dug it deep enough. No use to dig it too deep and have to fill it up."

Dad picked up a clod of dirt and tossed it at several blackbirds, not because he didn't like them but because he was still a little like a boy that had to throw something at something

every time he saw something to throw something at.

Then he took a squint down into the hole my biceps had made and, taking the digger by its long ash handles, brought up a big yellow bite of clay and emptied it onto the top of the mound beside the hole. He absolutely surprised me by saying, "If you can wait till the bass season opens, I'll take two days off, and we'll run up to Little Wolf and catch some big ones. We really ought to get the fence up first, though, don't you think?"

It was hard to believe my ears, and it was also hard not to get to go down to the mouth of the branch right that very minute. But I knew Dad was right. I gave up and helped him finish setting the big corner post, but not till I had tried another idea that came to my mind, which was: "That's a long time to ask Mom to wait for a fish supper, when she likes sunfish and goggle-eyes just as much as she does bass. She could have fish for supper tonight if anybody would just say the word."

But Dad wouldn't say the word. And I could tell by the way I felt that it wouldn't be a good idea for me to say even one more word about it. So I started in strengthening my biceps again, using the posthole digger, while Dad got busy with a saw and hammer and nails, making a crossbar on the bottom end of the big cedar post we were going to set in the hole.

As soon as we had the hole finished and the crossbar on the post, we carefully eased the

heavy post in, piling big rocks onto the crossbar in the bottom of the hole and tamping gravel and hard clay all around the rocks. Finally we filled the hole all the way to the top, tamping it hard all the way.

It took us nearly all afternoon to get it all done, but it was fun. And Dad learned quite a few things he pretended he didn't know before about what to do before the doctor comes in case old Jersey Jill, our fawn-colored milk cow, ate too much dew-wet clover some morning on an empty stomach, and gas built up in her paunch, and she couldn't belch, and the gas got worse and worse, and she swelled up more and more, and her left flank bulged so badly it looked as if she was twice as big as she ought to be.

"That," Dad said after I'd told him, "is what to do *after* you've called the vet and while you're waiting for him to come, or if he can't come right away."

But it wasn't only fun. That information about cows was also something every farmer ought to know, because he could lose an expensive cow or heifer in just thirty minutes after she started to get the bloat, if something wasn't done to save her.

"But *this* that we're doing right now is what to do so you won't *have* to call the veterinarian," Dad explained. "A good fence will keep your cattle out until you're ready to let them in. And never, *never* let a hungry cow loose in a field of white clover or alfalfa or ladino clover

or even crimson clover when the dew is on it, or in any pasture with a high percentage of legumes. The very minute you see your cow or sheep beginning to bloat, get after her; make her keep moving, chase her up a hill—anything to make her belch."

"Right," I said to Dad. "You can go to the head of the class."

"You go," Dad said with a joke in his voice. "I've been there so often and stayed so long at a time that it would be nice for the rest of the class to have a chance."

I had the handle of the fence-stretcher in my hands at the time, strengthening my biceps by pulling on it and stretching the fence at the same time. I was wondering—if I had my shirt off—if anybody could see the muscles of my back working like big ropes under the skin as I'd seen Big Jim's do.

I answered Dad by saying, "I'm not so much interested in going to the head of the class as I am to the mouth of the branch."

I didn't look up when I said it but kept on making steady, rhythmic movements and feeling fine, not expecting my remark to do more than make Dad grunt like Old Addie and make a face like the kind a father shouldn't have to make too many times in one day.

He stopped all of a sudden, looked at his watch to see what time it was, and then at the sun in the west to see if his watch was right. He said, "If you think the night crawlers might be a little crowded in that small can, you could

empty a few of them out one at a time down where the branch empties into the creek. If you hurry, you can get back with enough sunfish for supper."

Suddenly my biceps felt as strong as they needed to, and I looked into Dad's gray green eyes under his shaggy brows to see if he meant it, and he honest-to-goodness did. Just to be sure, though, I said, "Shouldn't I gather the eggs first? Or help feed the horses and chickens and carry in another load of wood for Mom?"

"Orders are orders," Dad said. "I'm testing your obedience. Go on and go fishing."

I looked at my own watch and saw it was still only four o'clock. I'd have at least one hour to sit on the bank in the shade of the sycamores and watch my bobber run around in little circles and plop under. I'd have an hour to see the dragonflies flitting around, and listen to frogs piping and birds singing, and smell the nice, fresh spring weather that for several weeks had been making the whole county the most wonderful place in the world to be alive in.

"My mother has taught me always to obey my father," I said.

It wasn't more than three minutes before I was started on the way to my favorite sport, my cane fishing pole in one hand and the can of worms in the other, running a barefoot-boy race toward the house, where I had to phone Poetry to see if he could go with me.

I stormed into the house and was on our

party-line phone before Mom, who was upstairs doing something or other, realized what was going on.

Poetry's mother answered, and I quickly asked if I could talk to Poetry. It was very important, I told her.

"Sorry," she said, "but he's down at the creek somewhere. He's trying to catch a few fish for our supper."

"Thank you very much," I said politely and hung up quick.

Then I was outdoors and racing through the orchard toward Poetry's dad's woods and the mouth of the little branch that winds a sunshiny way through it to the place where it empties into Sugar Creek and where the sunfish always are, if there are any.

I might even run into some kind of exciting adventure before I get back, I thought as I flew along. When you are with mischievous, detective-minded Poetry, you never can tell when your innocent fun is going to turn into a hair-raising experience of some kind, as it has done quite a few times in my life.

Over the last fence and through the woods I went, feeling as fine as anything, better even than the way a certain poet whose poem we had had to memorize in school felt when he wrote, "I know a place where the sun is like gold, and the cherry blooms burst with snow, and down underneath is the loveliest nook where the four-leaf clovers grow."

I was smelling the sweet smell of wild plum

blossoms right that minute, and the sun glinting on the water of the riffle of the branch toward which I was racing was like live silver hurrying on its way to the creek. Poetry and I wouldn't need any four-leaf clovers to help us have good luck. I was sure of it as I dashed down the hill on one of about thirty-seven paths made by boys' bare feet that crossed and crisscrossed the countryside everywhere.

It certainly felt fine to be free from work for a while. But I never dreamed that, while Poetry and I were in the middle of some of the best luck we had ever had, we'd be interrupted by one of the most nonsensical experiences.

I didn't have any idea, either, that before sundown that day I'd get my temper all stirred up by the beginning of a series of adventures that would be different from any we had ever had—and that, before the summer was half through, I'd really need some of the information I had read in Dad's new book, which he had on the shelf of the tool cabinet by the north window of our barn, named *What to Do Before the Doctor Arrives.*

2

Poetry was at the mouth of the branch before I was, and he already had almost three fish. He was sitting on a root at the base of a big sycamore tree with his cane pole in both hands, his face tense, and his eyes focused on his line, which was hanging loose on the end of his pole about fifteen feet out in the lazy water.

He hardly looked at me when I showed up in the path that runs from the little bridge to the mouth of the branch. He just half glanced back over his shoulder, scowled, and shook his head, meaning to keep still as he might be getting a bite.

"You caught any?" I whispered.

He whispered back, *"Sh!"* holding up three fingers to show me how many.

I looked down at the edge of the water to see if he had a stringer there and to see what kind he had. But I couldn't see a single fish. The stringer was still coiled up beside him on the ground.

As quickly and as quietly as I could, except for breathing hard from running, I baited my hook as I whispered, looking at the empty stringer, "I thought you said you had *three*."

"Not three," he answered. "Just *almost* three."

My line was out right away, and my red-and-

white bobber was in the middle of a small circle of widening waves it had just made when it landed not more than five feet from Poetry's bottle-cork bobber. On the hook on the end of my line were six long fishing worms, each of them dangling. I knew if they were doing what ordinary fishing worms do on a hook, they were down there near the bottom of the creek, twisting and squirming and wrapping themselves around the shank of the hook like the arms and legs of six boys on the ground in one tangled-up pile in a football game.

Saying "almost three" was silly, and I said so to Poetry, who answered with another shush, adding, "Just as soon as I get this one and two more, I'll have *three*."

It was supposed to be a joke, so Poetry laughed. Then he stopped quick as his bobber started moving around in a circle, then dived under and stayed under. His line went tight, and *wham!* Poetry set the hook, and I could see he really had something.

Wham again out there! And this time it was *my* line. My bright red-and-white bobber made a plunking noise as it smacked the water and shot under just as my line went tight. The two of us let out yells, each of us saying, "I've got a fish!"

And we had. *Really* had, I mean. I had never felt such a heavy weight on my line in Sugar Creek. Why, this fish felt as if it was as big as one of Old Addie's piglets, and it kept running wild down under the water, making me actually

need all the strength of my powerful biceps as I held on for dear life.

"Get your line out of my way," Poetry ordered, "or we'll get them crossed and lose both of them!"

Because he was right next to the branch, I knew he couldn't go more than four feet in his direction without having to get into hip-deep water and getting all wet. But I could go left down the creek and probably land my fish there.

So I worked my way along the slippery bank as fast as I could, without stumbling and without letting that monster fish of some kind get a slack line. In a few seconds I was the whole length of a cane pole from where Poetry, on his bare feet, was struggling to land his own fish.

Neither of us had reels on our poles, but we were trying to do what you generally do with a fish when you have just a cane pole and only a line.

"I'm getting mine!" Poetry cried happily. "He's coming!"

"So am I!" I cried back.

A second later a great big yellow-stomached, brown-backed, bullhead fish, a foot long and with horns on his head, came struggling up through the excited water, battling against my biceps and stirring up a lot of new waves and foam. If any other fish had been around, they'd have been scared half to death.

And then I got a sickening surprise as Poetry shouted, "Hey, you! You've got your line wrapped around mine!"

What a letdown! I was disgusted. "It's your fault!" I cried to my best friend. "If your old fish hadn't made a beeline for mine, he wouldn't have gotten all tangled up in it."

Well, there wasn't anything I could do but help Poetry pull in his fish. In another minute, I thought, we'd land him together, and then it'd be fifteen minutes of wasted time while we untangled our lines before we could start fishing again.

And all for a silly bullhead or catfish. It was probably a catfish, which is in the same family as a bullhead, anyway. At least I, Bill Collins, hadn't wasted my perfectly wonderful, juicy-tasting six-wormed bait on a slimy bullpout. That is another name for the dumbest-looking kind of fish that lives in Sugar Creek.

In another minute, sure enough, we had landed it, and it *was* a whopper! Boy oh boy! We swung him away back up onto the bank about fifteen feet from the water's edge and into the tall weeds and bushes behind us. And then both of us went back to see how big he really was and to get our lines untangled.

Talk about a surprise! What to my wondering eyes should appear but—

"Hey!" I cried excitedly. "He's on *my* hook! He's *my* fish! It was your dumb old line that got tangled up and wrapped itself around *mine!*"

"It was not! He's on my hook!" my best friend thundered back at me. "It's your dumb old line that—"

Poetry stopped short of finishing what he

had started to say and exclaimed, "Well, for land's sake. *Look,* would you!"

I had already seen. That giant-headed bullhead or catfish had *both* hooks in his huge mouth, and his beady black eyes were glaring at us as much as to say, "It's *both* your faults! You *tricked* me!"

And we were both right. We had both caught a fish, maybe the biggest one there ever was in Sugar Creek. Boy oh boy! Our lines were entangled plenty, but nobody was to blame.

That is, I thought nobody was, but Poetry for some reason was stubborn about it. "My bobber went under first! He took my bait first!"

I looked at the huge mouth and remembered how hard it was to clean a bullhead. In a second I had my knife out of my pocket and had cut off my line right where it entered the cavernous mouth, saying cheerfully, "OK, pal, he struck your line first. He's your fish. I'll see if I can catch another. You untangle the lines while I get started."

I quickly snipped off the other end of my line at the end of the pole where I had it tied and in a jiffy was on my way out of the bushes, hurrying toward the creek and taking another line out of my pocket as I went. *Let him be selfish,* I thought. *Let him have his old fish. Let him untangle the lines himself.*

And right then is where we ran into something else we had to untangle, and it took both of us to do it.

Like the sound of a hippopotamus running

or something as big, a noise sounded in the bushes and tall weeds behind us. *Smashety-crashety-swishety.*

What on earth! It was coming straight toward us, and I could imagine it to be as big as a circus elephant—and as dangerous, if you happened to be in the way while it was charging toward you!

"Look out!" Poetry yelled behind me. "Get out of the way, or you'll get crushed under her feet!"

I looked out, and I jumped out of the way of something as long and as tall and as wide as I had always imagined a rhinoceros would be if it was like the ones I'd seen in the animal picture book I had in my library in my upstairs room.

And its color was *blue!* Blue, imagine! And it had horns and wild eyes and was crashing through the underbrush as if there wasn't any there.

Poetry was on the ground by the catfish or bullhead, whichever it was, and was all tangled up in the lines. And all I had to defend him with—because he couldn't get up—was my lineless cane pole. I quickly whirled around and started yelling in the direction of the horned wild animal. I rushed toward it and screamed for it to stop.

If it didn't stop, it would charge feetfirst through the underbrush into the little tangle of weeds and shrubs where Poetry, my best friend, was down and couldn't get untangled in time to save himself.

It was a tense minute, and it didn't make any difference whose fishing worms had caught whose fish. I *had* to save Poetry. I still had my straw hat on, and I started waving it as I yelled.

And then the animal stopped and stood stock-still. I saw its face as clearly as anything. What I was seeing didn't seem possible, but I was seeing it, anyway. It was a wild-eyed, scared cow. A skinny, half-starved-looking *blue* cow!

She saw me at the same time I saw her, and she was probably as surprised at seeing a boy with red hair on the top of his head as I was in seeing a blue-haired cow. She whirled, snorted, raised her tail up over her back, swerved to the right, and charged toward the branch, not stopping till she had landed out in the middle of it in water up to her stomach.

And then I saw a very round boy with a long stick in one hand, puffing down the incline near the bridge and hurrying toward us. Seeing me, he started yelling, "You leave my cow alone! Don't you dare hit her with that old fish."

And then I knew who it was.

I cried out to Poetry, "It's Shorty Long!"

He was the new boy who had moved into our neighborhood one winter and who had caused a whole lot of trouble for our gang. But then his folks had moved again, and we hadn't heard from him since.

What was *he* doing in our territory again? Had his folks moved back? I certainly hoped not. He had almost divided our gang by getting

Dragonfly, our pop-eyed member, on his side and teaching him some filthy-minded things a decent boy doesn't care to know.

Imagine that! Shorty was the only person in the world who was as hard to get along with as my city cousin, Wally Sensenbrenner, who had been to visit us with his nonsensical copper-colored dog and had upset the whole neighborhood. Shorty was just as bad, or worse, and he had brought with *him* a blue cow! *Blue,* mind you! It didn't make sense!

Also, I could tell from just one look at that wild-eyed quadruped that she wouldn't have any respect for boundaries of any kind. And most any farmer in the Sugar Creek territory could expect to wake any morning, or maybe any midnight, and find her in his cornfield or pasture or orchard or strawberry patch. If she didn't know any more than to come charging into the privacy of a boy's favorite fishing place and then, when she got stopped, to plunge horns first out into the branch—

But I didn't have time to do any more worrying about what she might do in the future, because right that second Shorty was after her, trying to round her up so that he could get her back to the road.

And a second later, she started on a wild, splashing run up the middle of the branch toward the bridge.

"Crazy old dumb bunny!" Shorty's squawky voice cried after her and also toward us, maybe to get our sympathy. "She absolutely refuses to

cross that bridge! She's scared to death of it. And I've got to get her home. You guys come help me!"

"Where's home?" I called to him.

He called back, "First house past Dragonfly's."

In the next few fast-flying seconds, I was remembering the first time I had met Shorty Long. It was in the wintertime, and he had accidentally run face first into a snowball I had made and thrown with all my might toward the corner of our barn. I didn't know he was going to come around the corner just in time to get squished with it.

There had been a rough-and-tumble fight in a snowdrift right after that, till we had gotten well enough acquainted to stop fighting, which I was glad to do. I had just had the wind knocked out of me and was struggling to get out of that snowdrift I had plunged headfirst into.

While I was gasping for breath because of having had the wind knocked out of me and from being smothered in the snowdrift, Mom had come out the back door of our house just in time to invite all of us in to have a piece of blackberry pie, which she had just that minute taken out of the oven.

Well, a boy in trouble is a boy in trouble, so it seemed I ought to try to help Shorty. I left Poetry to untangle himself from his horned, yellow-stomached bullhead, while I started off after Shorty and his horned, blue-backed cow

to help him chase her back up to the road and across the bridge.

But my first impression about her disposition was right. She *was* wild. She was in shallower water now, and she kept on right in it, in spite of my chasing along the shore after her and prodding her with my fishing pole and ordering her to get out of the water and head toward the road, up the ditch, and onto the bridge.

Maybe she heard the word *bridge,* though, because at last she made a splashing beeline for it—not up to the road to go across it but straight up the branch to it. Then she went *under* the bridge, where I knew the water was deeper and where many a time I'd seen hundreds of chubs and silversides and smaller minnows playing in the riffle.

"We'll get her now!" Shorty puffed behind me. "There's a fence under there on the other side. If I can catch her by the halter, we'll lead her across if we have to drag her."

But old bossy had different ideas. That old fence on the other side, which had been a nuisance to us boys many a time when we had wanted to wade around under the bridge, and which had kept all the livestock that pastured in the woods from getting through, was just like so much spider web to her.

She charged under the bridge, splashing water all over herself and everywhere, and ignored the fence as if it wasn't there—which it wasn't after she hit it head-on. In a few wire-squeaking seconds she was running like a wild

thing up the steep bank and out into the woods I had come through just a little while ago myself.

Whew! And for land's sakes! If I had been on the comics page of the newspaper that comes every day to Theodore Collins's mailbox, I would have had question marks and exclamation points shooting out of my head.

Just then I heard a woman's voice coming from the direction of my house, quavering out across our orchard and through the woods. I knew it was Mom's voice calling me to come home. In fact, it was the same kind of call I'd heard a thousand times around our farm when I was quite a way from the house and it was time to eat.

I looked at my watch to see if it was suppertime, then I looked at the sun to see if my watch was right. At the same time I noticed an empty feeling in my stomach that made it seem that was what time it really was. Supper was ready, and Mom wouldn't get to have fish fillets at all—not even fried bullhead.

I looked through the arch of the bridge I was now under and at the broken fence. The post it had been fastened to at one end was floating in the water. The current of the riffle was pulling it downstream toward me and toward the creek.

And then, Shorty, instead of appreciating that I had left off what I had been in the middle of doing, which was putting a new fishing line on my pole so that I could throw it out and

catch another fish—this one probably the biggest sunfish that ever lived in Sugar Creek—well, Shorty was mad at me for trying to help him.

"Look at her go!" he cried angrily from his dry standing place up on the bank. "What'd you get her all excited for? You scared her into breaking down somebody's fence, and my father will have to pay for it, and now I never *will* catch her!"

Such appreciation!

"Oh, is that so!" I said up to him. My overalls were all splashed up, and the cuffs, which I had rolled up, were soaking wet where I'd stepped into a hole in my mad race to help him get his cow out of the branch and up onto the road and across the bridge where he wanted her.

And that boy looked down at me from his dry standing place and said, "Yes, that's so! You're the same kind of impulsive boy you *used* to be!"

Then from behind me, I heard another boy's voice saying angrily, "Oh, is that so! Well, I want you to know that Bill Collins is my best friend, and whoever insults him insults me."

Shorty's broad face looked from Poetry to me and back again to Poetry.

I saw that Poetry's eyebrows were down and his jaw was set, and I could tell he was really mad.

Then Shorty shrugged his shoulders twice in a way that would stir up the temper of even

Little Jim himself or maybe Dragonfly, who was sometimes slow to get angry. He said saucily, "You two hotheads better go on back to the creek and finish your fishing." Then he spied our big catfish, which Poetry had on his stringer, and said, "Oh, a bullpout! Well, what do you know? Didn't you ever see a bull *pout* before? Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Then he whirled and started off toward the bridge.

That fired Poetry's imagination as well as his temper, and he shouted after him:

"I never saw a purple cow—I never hope
to see one;
But I can tell you anyhow, I'd rather see
than be one."

And that fired *Shorty's* temper. He stood stock-still and shouted back at Poetry:

"You are a poet, and don't know it;
If you had whiskers, you'd be a *go-at*."

Then that short-tempered boy whirled again and went on toward the branch bridge, waddling along as though he was very proud of himself as well as disgusted with two very ordinary boys who, when they went fishing, couldn't catch anything more important than an ugly, slimy bullpout.

And that was our introduction to Shorty Long's blue cow! Also, it was the beginning of a

lot of upsetting trouble for the whole Sugar Creek Gang but especially for Theodore Collins's only son.

I knew that one of the very first things the gang would have to do would be to call a meeting to decide what we'd better do about having the peace and quiet of our neighborhood interrupted. Something would *have* to be done —and done quick.