1

It hardly seems fair to blame my Saturday afternoon's unusual punishment on what a half-dozen innocent-looking fishing worms did Friday. But how else can I make anybody understand that I, Theodore Collins's first and worst son, wasn't 100 percent to blame?

Of course, I didn't realize while I was being punished—the punishment actually lasted several hours—that what was happening to me would help the gang capture a couple of prodigal sons who had been committing vandalism in and around Sugar Creek.

One of the worst things the vandals had done was to fill our spring reservoir with marsh mud. Another had been to chop a hole in the bottom of our rowboat. Also, somebody—maybe the same ornery boys—had written filthy words and drawn obscene pictures with chalk on the large, red, cylinder-shaped Sugar Creek bridge abutments.

But the very worst act of vandalism was what we discovered Thursday afternoon when we came back from our trip up into the hills, where we'd gone to look after Old Man Paddler's place.

That kind, long-whiskered old man had gone off to California for a vacation. Before he

left, he had given us the responsibility of watering his house plants, filling his birdbath in the backyard patio, and—twice a week—mowing his lawn. As payment for the work, he was going to give us a whole dollar apiece, which, added up, would total six dollars, since there were that many boys in our gang.

The hole chopped in our boat stirred our tempers plenty, I tell you. And we got even madder in our minds when we saw the words on the bridge, words that weren't fit to toss into a garbage pail, and pictures that were worse to look at than a polecat is to smell.

But Thursday afternoon, when we found Old Man Paddler's wife's tombstone defaced and lying on its side in the cemetery at the top of Bumblebee Hill, that was too much to take. It just didn't seem possible that anybody in his right mind—if he had one—would want to chop a hole in a rowboat, contaminate a neighborhood's drinking water, and—worst of all—do what had been done to a dead person's gravestone! What would Old Man Paddler think, and how would he feel when he found out about it?

Maybe I'd better tell you about that Thursday afternoon right now so you'll understand why we were so boiling mad at the vandals, whoever they were.

And who were they? Were they some boys from another county who had moved into the neighborhood or somebody who already lived here? I guess maybe we all had our minds

focused on the same person, but up to then we hadn't used any names in the things we had been saying—we were only getting more and more stirred up inside.

From Old Man Paddler's place, we had come past the spring, which we'd already cleaned out, and got a drink. Then we went over to the Little Jim Tree at the bottom of Bumblebee Hill to rest awhile and to talk and also to postpone a little longer having to go to our different homes, where there would be a lot of work to do. It was almost time to start the evening chores.

The Little Jim Tree was one of our favorite meeting places. We liked to lie there in the shade and remember the time Little Jim, using Big Jim's rifle, had shot and killed a fierce old mother bear. If he hadn't pulled the trigger when we yelled for him to, Little Jim might have been buried up there in the cemetery himself.

The minute we all came puffing from our fast run to the place we'd planned to meet and rest awhile, Little Jim plopped himself down on the grass at the very spot where the bear had done her dying and leaned his shoulder against the tree trunk. I think he felt kind of proud that we had named the tree after him.

The rest of us were lying in different directions, just thinking about what had been going on around the neighborhood. Still, not a one of us mentioned any name or names of anybody who might be guilty.

Big Jim, our fuzzy-mustached leader, was sitting with his knees drawn up to his chin, leaning back a little and rocking, with his fingers laced together around his shins. His face, I noticed, was set. The muscles of his jaw were tensing and untensing, the way they do when he is thinking. He was the first one to speak. "You boys remember the Battle of Bumblebee Hill?"

We remembered, all right, and several of us said so.

Then Big Jim spoke again. "Any of you remember who was the leader of the gang we had our fight with?"

That's when I knew he was thinking about the same person I was. That fight with the tough town gang that was trying to take over the whole boys' world of the Sugar Creek territory had been our fiercest battle.

The person on all our minds was John Till's oldest boy, Big Bob, whose little brother, Tom, had been in that battle, too. Tom was the one who had given me a black eye and a bashed nose.

Circus, the acrobat of our gang, had swung himself up and was sitting on the first limb of the Little Jim Tree. He said, "If Old Man Paddler gave us charge of looking after all his property while he was away, maybe we'd better have a look at his cemetery plots and at the tombstones he's got there, where his wife and two boys are buried."

It was a good idea, we thought, so we dashed

up the long grassy slope to the top. We hadn't any sooner climbed through the fence that borders the hill's rim, than Dragonfly, who was ahead of the rest of us at the time, let out a yell. "Look, everybody! Somebody's pushed over Sarah Paddler's tombstone!"

Never in my whole life had there been a feeling in my heart like what shot through me right then. It was one of the worst things I'd ever experienced. There just never was a kinder old man than Seneth Paddler, and nobody in the whole world ever had a heart that was so full of love for people, especially boys.

So it seemed I was almost as sad as if I were attending his funeral when we reached the place under the tree where, in the dappled sunlight that filtered through the branches overhead, I saw the big, tall tombstone with the name Sarah Paddler on it lying flat on the ground. Beside it was the stone that had the old man's name on it. His gravestone also had on it the date he was born. The date of his death would have to be put on some other time after the old man himself went to heaven.

Little Jim whispered in my ear in an awed voice, "Look at the hand with the finger pointing!" The carved hand with one finger pointing upward was one of the things a boy remembered. I'd seen it hundreds of times, maybe, when the stone stood straight up. The words chiseled where the wrist would have been, if there had been a wrist, said "There is rest in heaven." And there *is* for anybody who,

as our Sugar Creek minister says, "trusts for his soul's salvation in the Savior and not in himself or in how good he is—or thinks he is."

Big Jim let out a groan and shook his head as if he just couldn't believe it. The grass all around the place was mashed down, and an urn that had been there with flowers growing in it was also turned over. The dirt and flowers were spilled out and scattered, and the red roses were wilted and looked like dried blood on the ground.

The right thing to do, it seemed, was to report what we'd just seen to the sheriff.

Dragonfly would have touched the stone if Poetry, our detective-minded member, hadn't stopped him. "Don't! Don't touch it! They'll want to go all over it for fingerprints!"

So we left the cemetery without touching anything and went off to make the phone call. I tell you, we were a pretty grim-faced gang as we swung out across the cemetery, climbed over the fence, hurried down the hill, passed the Little Jim Tree, and galloped on to the rail fence just across the road from my house. We crossed the road, and while the gang waited outside, I went inside and called the sheriff.

As important as making the call was, I couldn't feel proud of myself for being the one to get to do it. I was just hoping hard that the stone would be back in place and it would look the way it always had by the time Seneth Paddler came back from California.

In only about seventeen minutes, the sher-

iff and his deputy came driving up to our mailbox, and we all went back to the cemetery.

They went over every inch of the tombstone, several other stones around the place, and the upset urn. Near the fence they made a plaster of paris cast of somebody's shoe track.

We told him about the mud in our spring reservoir, the barnyard language we'd found and washed off the bridge abutments, and also about the hole in the bottom of our boat. We got a good looking over by the sheriff to see if any of our eyes were giving away a lie and none of them were, he decided.

"I think," he mused, as he studied us all there by the cemetery fence, where we'd been watching them make the cast of the shoe print, "you boys might be interested to know that vandals struck in town last night, too. The fountain in the park was defaced, and the water pitcher broken."

Then, to our surprise, the sheriff had every one of us lift our feet to see if any of *our* shoes had soles like the ones in the track by the fence. It was a waste of time, because every one of us was barefoot.

He winked at us then to let us know he was only joking, and we were glad he was. "The town council is offering a hundred-dollar reward," he finished, "for evidence leading to the arrest of whoever is doing this mischief."

When we were alone again, we talked for a while about the beautiful spraying fountain we'd all watched so many times in Sugar Creek

Park and the statue of the tall lady holding a stone pitcher in her right hand with water pouring out of it day and night all summer long.

Our next trip to Old Man Paddler's clapboard-roofed cabin in the hills would be Saturday. I had a feeling in my mind that we ought to go even tomorrow, but most of us had to work tomorrow, so we decided to wait.

Poetry was the last one to leave my house that afternoon. He said to me secretly before he left, "Our fishing calendar says that tomorrow is a good fishing day. Maybe we ought to go—just you and I—say, along about two o'clock at the mouth of the branch?"

"I'm not sure about that," I answered him. "Dad's gone, you know." In fact, both of our fathers were in Memory City at the agricultural convention.

"That's what I mean," he whispered back, just as my mother came out of our back door to shake a dust mop. "There won't be anybody to say we can't."

I looked at my mother's face as she shook the dust mop and said, "What do you mean, there won't be anybody?"

Mom heard my voice but maybe not what I'd just said, and she called to us, "There are two pieces of apple pie left, if anybody is hungry."

Poetry was, and pretty soon there wasn't any pie left at all.

Just as Poetry was leaving, Mom made something clear to us. "You boys being away

every other afternoon this week means Bill has to work harder and faster every other day. I suppose it's that way at your house too?"

Poetry looked at me and winked, and for some reason I felt the wink was a substitute for words that were saying, "Tomorrow afternoon at two at the mouth of the branch."

Poetry was very polite around Mom when there was leftover apple pie. He thanked her with his very special company voice and shuffled off across our lawn to the gate. He opened it, went through, and then away he went, whistling down the dusty road.

It was easy to see that it wasn't going to be what anybody would call pleasant for me to work in the garden all afternoon tomorrow, which is what Mom had planned for me.

Along about five minutes to two that next afternoon, while I was working in the garden, some lively, wriggling, plump fishing worms began to be turned up by the shovel of our hand-powered garden cultivator. For some reason, I could hardly see straight for feeling there was going to be trouble of some kind—and there soon was. We were about to have one of the most exciting adventures that ever happened in the Sugar Creek territory. And this is where the worms come into this story.

Before I get into that topsy-turvy experience, though, I'd better tell you about something extraordinary that happened that night. It was something that had even more to do with the solving of our mystery than the earthworms

did. What happened also set me to worrying and stirred up my anger a little more at a certain boy who lived in the neighborhood.

2

Our having reported the vandalism in our neighborhood to the sheriff didn't mean the Sugar Creek Gang had washed its hands of the problem or that we weren't interested in helping capture the guilty boys or men, whoever they were.

In fact, the hundred-dollar reward was in my mind all the while I was doing the evening chores. I flew around the barn, the chicken house, and the hog lot, getting Dad's work done as well as my own.

In the haymow, throwing down alfalfa for the cows, I stopped hurrying, though. I climbed up on the eight-by-ten-inch beam that stretches all the way across the barn, and with as oratorical a voice as I could, I recited the Gettysburg Address, winding up with an important change in the words, saying, "That government of the Sugar Creek Gang, by the Sugar Creek Gang, and for the Sugar Creek Gang shall not perish from the territory!"

My voice sounded a little lower in pitch than it used to, I thought. I wondered if maybe I was getting old enough to have what people call a "voice change." If it was changing, that meant that pretty soon I might be old enough to shave.

It seemed also that the last words of the address—the ones I had altered—were arrows with sharp barbs on each one, and that I was shooting them fast and straight at any vandals that might be trying to take over and run the territory to suit themselves. "If I ever get a chance to strike that thing, I'll strike it hard!" I repeated to myself, remembering something Abraham Lincoln had once said about slavery.

Thinking that, I jumped off the beam into the hay, swept up the three-tine pitchfork, and whirled into throwing down the hay. I was thinking, *No wonder Poetry wants to go fishing tomorrow. He's got something to tell me about who is doing the malicious mischief. Poetry is the best detective in the whole Sugar Creek Gang. Maybe if I meet him tomorrow at the month of the branch at two o'clock—*

That was as far as I got to think about that right then, because I heard a woman's high-pitched voice calling from the house. It was my mother, wanting me to come quick about something.

I did come quick and, as I got close to the house, was surprised at the wonderful odor coming from the kitchen. It was almost supper time, but generally I didn't get called until the last minute.

"Get the picnic basket," Mom ordered me. "We'll have to hurry now to get there in time."

"Get where in time for what?" I asked as I started toward the west room just off the kitchen. The top shelf of the linen closet was

where we kept the large round wicker basket the Collins family always used when they went on a picnic.

She startled me by saying, "To the Tills'. Mrs. Till's in bed sick, and tonight's our turn to furnish the dinner."

I was a little confused in my mind. I felt hot tempered at Bob Till, and now my mother said we were going over to their house to take his mother a casserole of food that smelled good enough for us to have for our own supper!

But in a little while, Mom and Charlotte Ann and I were in the car. Mom was driving, and I was in the backseat with the picnic basket, baby-sitting—and wrestling—with my sometimes-cute little sister to keep her from standing up on the seat or walking on the picnic basket.

"How sick is Mrs. Till?" I asked Mom. She spent more time in our house than I did and talked on the telephone about different things and people.

Mom's voice came back over her shoulder above the sound of the car engine. "She may have to have an operation. The doctor was there this morning. That's why the neighborhood women are taking over. We may have to drive her to the hospital ourselves."

"Where's old Hook-nose?" I asked. "Can't he take her?"

Mom said something sharp. But we had just reached the Sugar Creek bridge, and the car wheels were making the floorboards rattle. The vibration was shaking the rafters. I could hardly

hear what she was saying. But then she said, "John Till is in Valparaiso on a road job, and Tom is with him. They left just yesterday, and it'd be a shame to call him home so soon—not when he hasn't had work for over a month."

We were across the bridge now, but I could tell by Mom's face in the rearview mirror that she didn't want me *ever* again to call John Till "old Hook-nose." It wasn't polite. "Hook-nose," as you maybe know, is the name our gang had called him for several years when he was such a wicked father and before he had been saved from drowning. Boy, had that been a spine-tingling adventure!

Up to now, his son Bob was just as ornery a boy as he had ever been. Of that I was very sure. And he proved he was still the same when Mom and Charlotte Ann and I went into their old, unpainted, but surprisingly clean house to take Mrs. Till her supper.

It took Mom only a few minutes to get Mrs. Till propped up on pillows and to carry her a tray of hot beef and noodles, a cool green salad, and other tasty-looking food.

Bob, who had been in the house when we came, was quickly out the back door. He was nowhere around while we sat and visited a little with his mother.

"I know I need an operation," Mrs. Till said, "but you know how it is—you just keep putting it off. And with John out of work and all . . ."

Once I heard a sound at the kitchen door

and saw a boy's mussed-up head of hair and a pair of eyes peeking at us. But it was only for a second. Then he was gone again, and I heard a door slam in another part of the house.

"Bob's timid about meeting people," his mother apologized. "But he's been good to me since John left, washing the dishes, keeping plenty of firewood in the box . . ."

I wasn't sure I wanted to hear anybody say Bob had been kind to his mother, not when he could do such terrible things as it seemed he had been doing around our neighborhood.

Also, I wasn't sure it was timidity that kept him out of the room while we were there.

I got one of the biggest surprises of my life right about then—one that worried me a little.

While my mother was holding a straw for Mrs. Till to take a sip of the cold water I'd just pumped from their wooden-handled pump, Mom asked, "Has our pastor called on you since you've been down?"

"Not yet," Mrs. Till answered and sighed as if she was having a little trouble getting enough fresh air. It *was* stuffy in the room—with the sun shining its good-bye to the territory through a long torn place in the green window blind. *We ought to be going soon,* I thought, *so there'll be more air for one person to breathe.*

Then, as if Mrs. Till didn't want anybody to be blamed, especially our minister, she added, "He phoned this morning to tell me he was praying. He had a funeral this afternoon at his

former church in Placerville. He's been so kind to us."

"Maybe, dear," Mom said, "you'd like to hear a little something from the Book?"

Bob Till's mother said yes and pointed to the table beside her bed where her half-worn-out Bible lay.

My thoughtful mother opened the Bible to a place in one of the psalms and was about to read. That's when I got my surprise.

"Run out and see if Bob would like to come in," Mrs. Till said to me.

Imagine that! With all the anger in my heart toward Bob Till, *I* was expected to go out and ask him to come in to hear my mother read a psalm from the Bible?

But I had to go, and I did go, and I got a short answer from Big Bob Till. He was standing at the woodpile with an ax in his hand, only waiting till I got through asking him, so that he could start splitting wood again.

He was too busy, he said. He had to get the firewood split before dark.

On the way back to the house door, I had in my mind's eye not a boy with an ax splitting wood but that same ax being raised in the humid air near the old swimming hole and coming down *ker-wham* into the bottom of somebody's rowboat!

Mom read the psalm, and then Mrs. Till said, "I'm sure Pastor Johnson would be pleased to have you pray too."

And then came the rest of the surprise. My

own mother, who, it seemed, ought to know better, asked me, Bill Collins—in my bad mood—to pray the way a minister was supposed to pray at somebody's bedside!

I had to do it—and I did it—wishing even while I was saying the words that I was as sincere as maybe I sounded. I could hardly hear myself anyway, on account of from the backyard there was the *chop—chop—chop—chop—chop* of a powerful-muscled boy using an ax.

It didn't seem right for me to pray while feeling like that, so on the way home, with nobody knowing what I was doing except Theodore Collins's own ornery son, I asked God's forgiveness and felt a little better even before we had reached the bridge.

There wasn't any use to ask Mom's forgiveness. Right that second she was saying, "I was so proud of you, Bill. That was such a nice prayer—and so comforting. Did you notice the tears in her eyes when you finished?"

I swallowed a lump in my throat and didn't answer.

She stepped on the brake, then turned off the motor. "Let's listen awhile," she said.

"To what?" I asked but needn't have, because from the marsh below us on the west came one of the prettiest sounds a boy ever hears around Sugar Creek—frogs trilling and redwing blackbirds calling to each other from the willows.

"I used to come here often when I was a girl," Mom said, "and I just wanted to relive

some of the memories." Then she added, "When you're as old as I am, you'll have memories like this, too. And you'll love them. They'll make drab days easier to take. It's the little things that pleased you as a boy that will make rainbows out of your stormy times."

I didn't really understand what she was trying to tell me, but I could tell it made her feel happy inside to hear birds singing and frogs trilling and to just sit in the twilight and look at a sunset.

But her memories got interrupted then, and she had to leave her peaceful past for the stormy present to hurry on home and get a fussy Charlotte Ann her supper. We had stayed at the Tills' quite a lot longer than we had planned to.

Well, as I mentioned in the first chapter of this story, about five minutes to two the next day my plow began to turn up long, slender worms with tapering ends.

It didn't seem important right then that my father was always glad there were a lot of earthworms in our garden. He said they helped keep the soil loose and that, when they got through digesting all the dirt they could eat every day, they brought the part they couldn't digest to the surface, which is very good for a garden. What did seem important right then was that an earthworm could go down deep in the water and bring a sunfish or a bass to the surface and

that a boy could eat and digest the fish. Very important, in fact.

Grunt and groan and sweat and wish I could go fishing—the hardest part about working was wanting to do something else. A sentence I'd read somewhere was following me back and forth across the garden, as I pushed the lazy little one-wheeled, one-shoveled garden cultivator along between the rows of lettuce. It kept repeating itself in my mind: *Nothing is work unless you'd rather be doing something else . . . Nothing is work unless . . .*

"I, Bill Collins, Theodore Collins's first and worst son, would rather be doing something else. Therefore what I am doing right now is work—hard work!" I complained to myself.

It took me almost thirteen tiring minutes before I finished the black-seeded Simpson lettuce and had started to cultivate the Ebenezer onions. Ebenezer was Mom's favorite variety of onions, maybe because the name was a Bible name and meant "Up to now, the Lord has helped us."

But *now* was two o'clock, and that was worrying me. Mom had gone to town for groceries and wouldn't be home for quite a while, she had told me. She hadn't actually said I *couldn't* go fishing.

As I have just said, I had the black-seeded Simpson lettuce all cultivated and had started on the Ebenezer onions when I noticed the long, very fat, squirming, shining, lively fishing worms being turned up by my hand-plow shovel.

I don't know how it happened—or maybe I do—but almost before I got to the end of the row I was cultivating, all of a sudden it looked as if there weren't more than twenty minutes of work left and I'd be done. Why, I could get to the mouth of the branch, catch all the fish that would bite, and still be home and going back and forth between the last few rows of Golden Bantam by the time our car came driving in past "Theodore Collins" on our mailbox!