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The Sugar Creek Gang was having one of the most exciting, adventurous summers ever. When we killed the fierce, savage-tempered, twenty-eight-toothed wildcat, we never dreamed that the very next week we'd have a hair-raising experience in a haunted house.

It had been quite a while since the gang had visited the haunted house, far up in the hills above Old Man Paddler's cabin. In fact, we hadn't visited Old Man Paddler himself for some time. And in a way, that kind, long-whiskered old man was responsible for our running into the brand-new, very dangerous, haunted-house mystery.

Big Jim, the leader of our gang, had seen the old man that morning and had an important story to tell us when the gang met the afternoon of that ordinary day—ordinary, that is, until we heard what Big Jim had to tell us.

The part of the story that had to do with me, Bill Collins, started at our house. That's because it was very important that I get to go to the gang meeting down by the swimming hole, and whether or not I could go depended, as it usually does, on Mom or Dad or both.

It also depended on me. And on that day I wasn't very dependable. My parents didn't

think so, anyway. It never feels good to be on the outs with your parents when it's your own fault, and they seemed to think it was my fault.

Dragonfly, the crooked-nosed, allergy-pestered member of our gang was going to start on an out-West vacation the very next week to get away from the ragweed pollen, which always gave him hay fever and asthma. His folks had bought him a pair of beautiful cowboy boots and a very fancy broad-brimmed Stetson cowboy hat.

Now, I had saved money that summer toward a new suit I would need in the fall, but I had decided that I needed a pair of cowboy boots and a cowboy hat worse—a whole lot worse. And I was sure that I needed them right now.

Both Mom and Dad had said no and meant it the first time. But I wanted that hat and those boots so much that I thought it was worth taking a chance on getting into trouble. That very week I'd said in a tone of voice that my parents called fussy, "Dragonfly's parents like their son. They want him to look like a Westerner. My parents want me to wear overalls and go barefoot and stay home!"

I had to miss my supper dessert that day and go to bed without getting to listen to the Lone Ranger program.

That was pretty hard on me because for a week or more I myself had been the Lone Ranger. I rode my big white stallion, Silver, over our farm and up and down the creek, cap-

turing rustlers, saving stagecoach passengers from getting robbed, bringing law and order to the whole territory, and ordering around my imaginary faithful Indian companion, Tonto, as if he was a real person.

It seemed that Dragonfly was to blame for my half-mad spell even more than my parents. If he hadn't been wearing his fancy boots and his swept-brim hat, I wouldn't have wanted a hat and a pair of boots like them. I was mad at my folks, but I was madder at Dragonfly.

The weather that day was hot, hot, hot. The sun poured down yellow heat all over everything and everybody, making all our tempers quick, our muscles lazy, and our minds—mine especially—a little more stubborn.

Every few minutes that sultry morning, a whirlwind would spiral from the direction of the south pasture, sweep across the barnyard, and lose itself in the cornfield. Whenever I could, if the stormy little spiral came anywhere near where I was working—or was supposed to be working—I'd leave whatever I was doing, make a barefoot beeline for it, toss myself into it, and go zigzagging along with it whichever way it went. Sometimes it seemed to go in every direction at the same time.

One of the most pleasant experiences a boy ever has is to go racing and dodging along, trying to stay in the eye of a whirlwind, enjoying the wind fanning his face. Sometimes I get dust in my eyes and can't see and have to let the happy little spiral go whirling on without me.

The gang meeting was supposed to be at half past one that afternoon in the shade of the Snatzerpazooka Tree. That's the little river birch that grows at the edge of Dragonfly's father's cornfield near the sandy beach of our swimming hole. We had named that friendly little river birch Snatzerpazooka right after we'd had a Western-style necktie party there and strung up a ridiculous-looking scarecrow from its overhanging branch to keep the crows from eating up the new shoots of corn. Snatzerpazooka was the name we'd given the scarecrow.

I was surprised at how easy it was for me to leave our house that afternoon without having to do the dishes. I am maybe one of the best dishwashers and dryers in the whole neighborhood from having had so much experience doing them. Sometimes I even do them without being told to.

"Run along to your meeting," Dad ordered me from under his reddish brown mustache. "Your mother and I have some important things to discuss. Things you might not be interested in." Dad's right eye winked in Mom's direction.

I couldn't let myself worry about whether or not they really wanted me to stay and help with the dishes and were just pretending they didn't. It looked like a good time to be excused from the table and get started for the Snatzerpazooka Tree.

Pretty soon I was just outside the east screen

door, going kind of slowly, since it would be easier to be stopped if I wasn't going so fast.

"Hi, there!" I said to Mixy, our black-and-white house cat, stooping to give her a few friendly strokes just as I heard Dad say to Mom, "It didn't work that time."

Her answer wasn't easy to hear, because the radio with the noon news program was on in the living room and my mind was listening to both at the same time.

The newscaster was racing along about somebody who had escaped from jail somewhere. He was armed and should be considered extremely dangerous. I didn't pay much attention, because it was the kind of news we were getting used to. Whoever the fugitive from justice was, he wouldn't be anybody around Sugar Creek. And besides, whoever he was, the jail he had broken out of was probably a long way from here.

Hearing the news did give me an idea, though. Dad's order to run along to the meeting was like unlocking the Collins family jail and letting his boy out.

In a few minutes my bare feet had carried me past the hammock swinging under the plum tree and all the way across the grassy lawn to the high rope swing under the walnut tree near the front gate and our mailbox.

It was too early to meet the gang. It was also too hot to run, and I was half angry at my folks for wanting me gone so they could talk about something I wasn't supposed to hear. Besides,

any minute now they might wake up to the fact that their prisoner had escaped, and Dad's voice would sail out across the yard, lasso me, and drag me back. I might as well hang around a while and wait for his gruff-voiced lariat to come flying through the air with the greatest of ease.

In a flash I was standing on the board seat of the swing, pumping myself higher and higher before sitting down to "let the old cat die." That is what a boy does when he quits pumping and lets the swing coast to a stop by itself.

While I was enjoying the breeze in my face, the flapping of my shirt sleeves, and the rush of wind in my ears, I was quoting to myself a poem we had learned in school. It was by Robert Louis Stevenson, who had also written *Treasure Island.*

> *How do you like to go up in a swing,*
> *Up in the air so blue?*
> *Oh, I do think it the pleasantest thing*
> *Ever a child can do!*

I was still letting the old cat die—it was half dead already—and my voice was singsonging along on the second stanza of the poem, when I was interrupted by a long-tailed sneeze not far away.

I knew whose sneeze it was. There wasn't another boy in the world that could sneeze like that. Only Dragonfly Roy Gilbert could do it. Anytime, any day, anywhere around Sugar Creek you could expect to hear him let out a

long-tailed sneeze with some ridiculous word or half-dozen words mixed up in it. One of his favorite sneezes was "Kersnatzerpazooka!"

Dragonfly was especially proud of his sneezing, except in hay fever season, when he had to do too much of it. This summer, though, as you already know, he was going to the Rockies to get away from ragweed pollen.

Maybe I ought to tell you that being interrupted is one of my pet peeves. I don't like having my thoughts interrupted when I'm in my world of imagination, dreaming about something a boy likes to dream about. In fact, it's sometimes a lot more fun to dream about doing things than it is to actually do them.

I certainly didn't enjoy being exploded back into such an ordinary world as it was that day, especially when I might get called in to do a stack of dishes. I wanted to go on swinging to the tune of the dying cat, quoting the poem all the way to its end. Just in case you've never read it or heard anybody read it, this is the way the rest of it goes.

Up in the air and over the wall,
Till I can see so wide,
Rivers and trees and cattle and all
Over the countryside—

Till I look down on the garden green,
Down on the roof so brown—
Up in the air I go flying again,
Up in the air and down!

As I said, Dragonfly's ridiculous sneeze interrupted me in the middle of the second stanza.

I looked in the direction it seemed the sneeze had come from and saw across the road, standing beside our washtub birdbath in the shade of the elderberry bush that grew there, a spindle-legged, crooked-nosed boy, Dragonfly himself. I could hardly see his face, though, for the broad-brimmed cowboy hat he was wearing. His jeans made his legs look even skinnier than they were, which is what jeans sometimes do to people.

Half angry because of the interruption and because of who it was, I started to yell out to him the rest of the verse I was in the middle of.

I didn't get very far, because he interrupted me again to boast, "I'm going to ride on the longest chairlift in the world when I get out West, clear up to the top of Ajax Mountain! We can look out over thousands of square miles of mountains! The people below us will look like ants and the cars like toy cars!"

"Oh yeah!" I yelled back across the dusty road to him. My dying cat came to life again as my temper and I both went higher and higher.

"Yeah!" he called back in a bragging voice.

It was the *way* he said what he said that stirred up my pet peeve, not just my being interrupted two or three times. I was used to all the members of the gang bragging a little, doing it just for fun, the way most boys do. But this seemed different. After all, he needn't act

so uppity just because of his fancy boots and hat.

Besides, our rope swing was the highest in the whole Sugar Creek territory, and you could see a long way when you were up in the air on it!

"Hey!" I exclaimed to him all of a sudden. "*Don't empty out that water!* That's for the birds!"

I was really mad now. That washtub had been left there on purpose. I kept it filled with clean water for the birds to bathe in and for them to get their drinking water, so we'd have more birds in the neighborhood and they wouldn't have to fly way down to the spring or to the creek every time they were thirsty.

But do you know what? That sneezy little guy had swept off his wide-brimmed hat, plunged it into the tub of water, and lifted it out with its crown filled to the brim! "Here, Silver!" I heard him say. "Have a drink! You're plumb tuckered out after that wild ride across the prairie from Dodge!"

And in my mind I saw what was going on in his. He was imagining himself to be one of the most popular cowboys of the Old West, the Lone Ranger himself, and was giving his white horse, Silver, a drink.

Anybody who knows even a little about a Western cowboy probably knows that his hat and his boots are the most important part of his clothes. He's not too particular about what he wears between his head and his feet. He buys an extrafine hat with a stiff brim so it

won't flop in his eyes in the wind and blind him when he is in danger. He chooses an extrawide brim so he'll have it for a sunshade when it's hot, and it makes a good umbrella when it rains or sleets or snows. He also uses his hat to carry water to his horse from a creek or water hole.

Getting his hands wet must have started a tickling in Dragonfly's nose, because right away he let out another long-tailed sneeze. This time the tail was a trembling neigh, sounding like a worried horse crying across the woods to another horse.

Ever since Dragonfly had found out he was going to get to go to the Rockies for the hay fever season and his mother had bought him that fine Stetson, he'd been strutting around in his also-new, high-heeled, pointy-toed cowboy boots. Watching him that week, anybody could have seen that cowboy boots were meant for show-off and for riding more than for comfort. They certainly weren't meant for running, and they weren't easy to walk in.

Imagine an ordinary man or boy wearing high-heeled shoes! Of course, a rider has to have high-heeled, pointed-toed shoes. They fit better in the stirrups, and the high heels keep his feet from going on through. What if a rider should accidentally get thrown off his horse when one foot was clear through the stirrup? He'd be dragged head down and maybe lose his life.

But it wasn't any use to stay mad at Dragon-

fly. It seemed a waste of bad temper I might need some other time. His imaginary horse couldn't drink much water anyway. So I killed the old cat's ninth life, swung out of the swing, and crossed the road to where he was still talking to my horse, Silver.

Pretty soon Dragonfly and I were on the way to the gang meeting.

We stopped for a few minutes at the bottom of Bumblebee Hill where the Little Jim Tree grows. "Here," I said to him, "is where Little Jim killed the bear."

"Whoa, Silver! Whoa! You big restless critter, you! Stand still!"

I could see Dragonfly was having a lot of fun pretending he was the famous masked marshal of the Old West. Because, as I've already told you, it would have been a waste of bad temper for me to stay really angry with him, I made a dive for his horse's bridle, went through an acrobatic struggle to stop him from rearing and plunging, and quickly tied his reins to the trunk of the Little Jim Tree.

But in my mind's eye I was seeing again the fierce old mother bear that had been killed here when Little Jim had accidentally rammed the muzzle of Big Jim's rifle down her throat and pulled the trigger. He had saved his own life and maybe the rest of our lives also. That was why we'd named the tree the Little Jim Tree.

Because it was getting close to the time we were supposed to meet the gang at the Snatzerpazooka Tree down by the swimming hole, I

got a bright idea. I quickly rolled to my feet from where I'd been lying in the grass, made a dive for Silver's reins, untied them from the tree, and sprang into the saddle.

With a "Hi-yo, Silver!" I started off on a wild gallop for the bayou rail fence, with Dragonfly racing along behind me and yelling, "Come back here with my horse! After him, Tonto! Shoot him down!"

Tonto shot a few times with Dragonfly's saucy voice making him do it, but I knew Tonto and I were supposed to be good friends, so I didn't let any of his imaginary bullets hit me and tumble me off my big white stallion.

It took us only a little while to get to the river birch, where the scarecrow was still hanging, swinging in the breeze and looking like a bedraggled skeleton wearing dirty, faded, ragged clothes. His matted floor-mop hair still covered his face, and he looked pretty fierce.

We'd been panting there only a few minutes, resting on the long, mashed-down bluegrass, before I heard flying footsteps coming up the path from the spring. It was Poetry first, the barrel-shaped member of the gang. Right behind him were Circus, our acrobat, and Little Jim himself with his mouselike face and his tattered straw hat. The second Little Jim got there, I noticed that he had beads of perspiration standing out all over his forehead.

He stopped, looked down at us, grinned, and reached his forefinger to his forehead. Leaning over at the same time, he wiped off all

the drops of sweat. The wind blew some of the salty drops onto my face.

Soon Big Jim, carrying a flashlight and a roll of burlap gunnysacks, came swinging along from the direction of the bayou, and we were ready for our important meeting. It was important because—well, because. I'll tell you why in just a minute.

Big Jim had an air of mystery about him. The jaw muscles below his earlobes were working the way they always do when he is thinking hard about something important. I wished he'd hurry up and start the meeting.

We were lying in the grass in several different directions and also tumbling around—all except Dragonfly, who was trying to hang his still-wet hat on the cross arm of the scarecrow so that it could dry.

Dragonfly was disgruntled about something. I could tell by the expression on his face. I found out why when he mumbled, "Whoever said to water your horse by letting him drink out of your cowboy hat ought to be horsewhipped." Then he plopped himself down on the ground, winced, and took off both new high-heeled cowboy boots.

"Too hot to wear high boots?" I asked, admiring the very pretty leather. I still wished I had a pair, but I was glad I could feel the fresh air on my already too-hot bare feet.

He shook his head no but sighed the way my dad does when he takes *his* shoes off after or before supper to rest his feet.

"Feet hurt?" I sort of whispered to Dragonfly, hoping they did but trying not to be angry at him anymore.

It was when I saw the small blister on his right heel that my temper fire almost went out. Whenever I see anybody in pain, it always hurts my heart and makes me want to stop the pain if I can. Someday, maybe, I'll be a doctor. I was thinking that when Big Jim called the meeting to order.

As soon as we were as quiet as we usually are at a gang meeting, Big Jim said to us grimly, "You guys get set for a lot of hard work. We have to do something not a one of us'll want to do."

"What?" a chorus of voices asked him.

And he answered, "We have to go up into the hills and dig up a dead dog and bury it over again."

"Why?" I asked, knowing what dog he meant. It was my cousin Wally's dog, Alexander the Coppersmith, who had gotten killed in a wildcat fight.

"Because," Big Jim said, "I just met Old Man Paddler down at the mouth of the cave, and he said so. He said the very first time there's a flash flood up there in the hills, that canyon will have a rush of water and Alexander'll get washed out and carried down the canyon to the creek. He would like us to dig him up and bury him in Old Tom the Trapper's dog cemetery. Do you think your cousin Wally would care if we moved Alexander's remains to

a better place and gave him a more honorable burial?" Big Jim asked.

"I don't know. Maybe not. But he kind of wanted him to stay there right where he fell in battle," I answered.

"How're you going to carry a dug-up dog?" Little Jim asked.

"In one of these." Big Jim showed us the roll of burlap bags he had brought.

We all had sober faces, remembering how Little Jim could easily have lost his life when the wildcat had made a savage, spread-clawed leap toward him, away up there on a ledge of the canyon wall. Little Jim was saved only because Wally's dog had met the wildcat in midair before he could reach Little Jim.

"I move we do it," Little Jim said, and in a few seconds we had all voted yes.

"We'll use Old Man Paddler's spade and shovel," Big Jim announced.

The meeting was soon over, and we were on our way to exhume the body of one of the finest dogs there ever was, in order to bury it in a better place. We didn't have any idea that we would also revive an old mystery that had almost been forgotten around Sugar Creek.

2

We were untangling ourselves from our lying down positions and getting ready to start toward the old sycamore tree and the cave. We would go through it to the basement of Old Man Paddler's cabin—to get his spade and shovel, to go still farther up into the hills, to dig up the body of Alexander the Coppersmith, to take it to the haunted house, and to bury it under the big sugar maple tree in the fenced place we all knew as Old Tom the Trapper's dog cemetery. While we were getting ready to start to do all that, something happened.

It wasn't very important, and it only took a few seconds for it, but it shows you what kind of weather it really was that day. And the weather had a lot to do with the most important part of our sensational adventure.

As I've already told you, it was the kind of day when every now and then a whirlwind would come along out of almost nowhere. Then, after a few minutes of swirling leaves and dust, it'd be gone, and nature would settle down again to a stifling hot day.

Well, suddenly, while Dragonfly's new Stetson cowboy hat was drying on the left shoulder of the scarecrow swinging from the overhang-

ing branch of the Snatzerpazooka Tree, there came spinning toward us from the direction of the bayou one of the biggest whirlwinds I'd ever seen. At the top of its cone, which reached high into the sky, were more dust and dry leaves and what looked like feathers and other things than you could shake a stick at.

The cornfield it was driving across was making a lot of noise. Its thousands of blades were tossing like a green lake in a windstorm. It was such a pretty sight it almost hurt my heart to see it. Nature around Sugar Creek can make a boy feel like that maybe a dozen times a day.

In almost nothing flat, the whirlwind was where we were. It whammed into the Snatzerpazooka Tree, shaking its branches and whipping Snatzerpazooka into an excited jiggling. Before you could have said, "Jack Robinson Crusoe," Dragonfly's drying Stetson was off the cross arm and gone.

I saw it leave the shoulder of the scarecrow even while I was holding onto my own straw hat to keep it from blowing off. I caught a glimpse of it sailing like a flying saucer out across the sky toward the creek, saw it land in the water, and saw also the ordinarily quiet face of Sugar Creek churning and tossing as the whirlwind went storming on over it to the other side.

No sooner was Dragonfly's hat off and on its way toward the creek than our spindle-legged little sneezer was on his way after it. In another couple of seconds, he'd land in the water himself with a splash.

"Hey!" I yelled after him. "Watch where you're going!"

But he didn't. He kept on like a baseball fielder after a high fly, running backward and sideways and forward.

It was all over in a few seconds. He was in and down and under and up, sputtering and spitting water, while the rest of us howled at how funny it was. The hot-tempered, extra-large whirlwind was already busy stirring up new excitement among the willows on the other side of the creek.

Well, the way that worked-up little guy stormed out into the excited water, grabbed up his Stetson, and started back as wet as a drowned rat and sneezing was almost funnier than when he had first landed in the water.

That showed what kind of weather it was and also how much Dragonfly thought of his new hat. He was so proud of it. I couldn't blame him in a way, because it was a very pretty hat. And in spite of its making his small face look still smaller, it did make him look like a Westerner—or, as Dad said when he saw it, "like an Easterner gone Western."

Dragonfly had his hat, but he looked worried when he came splashing back to where we were. Not a one of us needed to ask him why, because we knew.

I guess we all had mothers that worried about their sons and couldn't help it, since that is the way mothers are made. But Dragonfly had been having a hard time growing up be-

cause his very nice mother worried *too much* about him, or so it seemed to us.

Sometimes when he would even accidentally do some foolhardy thing such as he'd just done, he'd get a licking with his mother's sharp tongue. And yet, as my own mother once said, "Mrs. Gilbert is one of the finest mothers in the whole Sugar Creek territory. She's just impulsive. She's always sorry afterward when she has punished him unjustly. She's such a likeable person most of the time."

And then my kind of wonderful mother said something that was good for even a boy to know: "We mothers have to learn that we're supposed to mother our sons, not smother them with too much supervision."

I wasn't sure what she meant, but it sounded as if she liked Dragonfly's nervous mother in spite of the many mistakes she made because of her nerves.

Dragonfly was shivering now, standing under the Snatzerpazooka Tree, holding his wet hat, sniffling a little, too, and trying to get over his temper. All the angry feeling I'd had toward him for being so uppity about his fancy hat and cowboy boots was washed away.

He picked up his boots and with a sob in his voice said, "What'll I do! My mother will—" He stopped. I could see he liked his worrywart mother a lot and didn't want to say anything unkind about her. He finished what he had started to say, but I could tell it wasn't really what he'd started to say. "My mother will feel

bad. She used her egg money to get me these new jeans."

Without thinking, I spoke up. "You're about my size. You can wear one of my shirts and a pair of my jeans till yours dry. It'll only take a jiffy to get them. Come on, everybody! Follow me!" And I was off on the run toward our house.

It didn't take long to get there because I was riding Silver at the time—not letting anybody know it—and the gang behind me was a mob of rustlers on ordinary horses trying to catch up with me to hang me from the nearest tree.

I left the gang at the walnut tree swing, where Poetry and Circus started waking up one of my old dead cat's nine lives. They were standing up right away, facing each other, and pumping hard to swing high.

Quickly I went into the house, through the kitchen, and into the back bedroom to the wardrobe. I was reaching for a shirt and a pair of jeans from the carefully ironed, folded, and mended supply that Mom kept there on a shelf, when I heard a woman's step and a rustling dress behind me.

Right away Mom started asking questions about why and what for and for whom. I guess it must have seemed odd to her that a son who already had on all the clothes a boy could stand on such a sultry day should want another shirt and another pair of jeans.

There were so many questions so fast that,

spying a palm-leaf fan on the dresser, I picked it up and started fanning myself and sighing and saying, "Excuse me, I feel smothered. Mothers are supposed to mother their sons, not smother them."

I got as mischievous a grin on my face as I could to show her I wasn't giving her a calling down, which a boy should never do to his mother for two reasons. The first reason is that a boy's father nearly always finds out and pretty soon smothers the boy with a beech switch. The second reason is that there is a verse in the Bible that says, "Honor your father and your mother," and nobody can honor his mother by being smart-alecky with her.

Anyway, as soon as Mom found out why and what for and for whom and how long, she picked out a pair of jeans and a shirt as nearly like the ones Dragonfly had on as she could find. Since he was only a little smaller than I was, the clothes fit pretty well.

"Don't you worry one little bit," Mom crooned to Dragonfly, who in spite of the hot day was shivering from being so wet. "With this sunshine and wind, your clothes will be dry in a little while. I'll have them ironed and ready for you by the time you get back."

We had to tell her what we were going to do up in the hills and at the haunted house, because I was her boy, and she could always work or rest better if she knew where I was and why.

Dragonfly went into our toolshed to change

clothes, and, while we waited, Mom got an idea. "If you're going to stop at Mr. Paddler's cabin, take these cookies along. *All the way,*" she added with a smile at the gang and an unnecessary look at her only son. "I just baked them yesterday, so they're nice and fresh."

I stared at the frosted cookies, surprised that Mom had baked them yesterday and I hadn't found out about it until right now. Maybe that's why there were so many of them left.

A few seconds later, when Dragonfly came out of the toolshed with a grin on his face, it was as if I was facing a full-length mirror and walking slowly toward myself—except that I had on a broad-brimmed Stetson, was wearing a different face and a pair of fancy, high-heeled cowboy boots, and was carrying a coil of rope. I was also limping a little.

The rope was one I myself had bought out of my allowance a few days before. I had been practicing lassoing different things around the farm.

Dragonfly let out a whoop, swung the rope in a wide circle, and let it fly through the air with the greatest of ease. Its noose settled around the iron pitcher pump. He seemed to want to take the rope along with us, so—since I was trying to get all the way over being jealous of him because of his boots and Stetson—I let him.

I noticed the little guy wince when he limped over to slip the noose off the pump. I remembered the blister on his heel and asked him, "Feet hurt? Your boots too tight, maybe?"

He right away stopped limping and shook his head as much as to say that, even if his foot did hurt, it didn't hurt enough to admit it—not when he was so proud of his new, high-heeled, tooled-leather boots.

I liked the little guy for being brave, but I was remembering one of Dad's favorite quotes, "It's better to have good sense than it is to be brave."

If Dragonfly didn't have good sense for himself, somebody ought to have it for him, I thought. And that's why, just before we left, I went into the house to the drawer where we kept our first-aid kit and took out a small roll of gauze, some tape, and a few Band-Aids. I shoved them into one of my overall pockets. If I couldn't talk any good sense into Dragonfly's stubborn head, maybe the too-tight leather boot could—especially since it would be hard walking in the hills and it was quite a long distance to the haunted house.

Finally we started. It was a nice day even though it was still very sultry. I couldn't help but notice there were a few extralarge white clouds like mountain-sized piles of cotton in the southwest sky above the hills in the direction we were going.

"Look at those thunderheads!" I said to the rest of us. "We'd better get Alexander the Coppersmith dug up and moved. There might be a flash flood even this afternoon!"

"Good idea," Big Jim answered, and we all broke into a run—even Dragonfly, who had to in order to keep up.

It would save us almost a mile to go through the cave to Old Man Paddler's cabin instead of taking the long way around through the woods by the wagon trail. In a little while we were at the hollow sycamore in which I had gotten stuck one time. You've probably read about that in the story *Western Adventure*. I'd had to stay until way into the night and got scared half to death. Talk about a hair-raising experience! But that's another story. I have to stay with this one now.

Soon we were in the cave, working our way along in the light of Big Jim's flashlight, following the narrow passageway, stooping here, turning right or left here or there, getting a little higher all the time, until pretty soon we were at the wooden door that opens into the old man's cellar. He had left it unlocked for us.

The first thing I noticed when we were up the cellar steps and into his kitchen, which was also his living room, was the big map of the world mounted on the wall above his wooden dining table. Sticking in the map in different places were a lot of colored pins—some in Africa, some in India and China and in different other countries.

Just in case you've never been in Old Man Paddler's cabin, I'd better explain that he called the map his "prayer map." I'd been in his house quite a few times when he had other company, and he would always tell whoever was there, "It helps me remember to pray for my missionary friends. These different-colored

pins show me just where they are and with what mission board. I can send up a prayer for them at any time."

The teakettle was singing on the stove, and in an open kettle beside it were chips of sassafras roots boiling. Sassafras tea was what he always made for us when we visited him.

The tea wasn't quite ready, so we looked around to see if there were any chores we could do for him, such as carrying in more firewood, sweeping the pine needles from his porch, or carrying a pail of fresh water from his spring. Little Jim, who, as you maybe know, was more interested in music than any of the rest of us, asked if we could play the old man's musical photograph album.

Old Man Paddler had quite a few of what Mom called antiques, such as a little hand sewing machine, an inkstand with two crystal ink bottles with caps, and a pen rack formed by deer antlers. In the loft upstairs was a hardwood swing cradle with casters so it could be rolled away, and it had very fancy ornamental carving on it. The cradle didn't tip or roll, and when you made it swing, it didn't make any noise.

But the antique we all liked best was the musical photograph album. It was worth going all the way up to his cabin just to see it and listen to it.

"Surely you can," the old man answered Little Jim. "You know where it is."

I followed Little Jim around behind the

stairway and stood beside him, while I watched him get it. I was thinking that long, long, long ago must have been a very interesting time to live. The album was about a foot long and maybe nine or ten inches wide and five inches high.

Old Mr. Paddler called to us then, saying, "Bring it in here, will you? I want to tell you something special about it, now that you're going to play it."

We carried it carefully and set it on the kitchen table. In the light from the window it was certainly pretty. Its front had artificial flowers on what looked like transparent celluloid. There were red roses in the middle and violets on the side all around. It was also bordered with gold. The album part had a lot of storage places the old man called "cabinets," and in them were pictures of Sarah Paddler, his wife, now in heaven, and his two boys, also in heaven, whose bodies are buried in the cemetery on Bumblebee Hill. There were also pictures of other people who used to live a long time ago around Sugar Creek.

"Here, boys, is what I want you to see." He turned the pages of the album with his gnarled old fingers until he came to the picture of a man with a long beard, hair that reached to his shoulders, and sad—very sad—eyes. "This, boys, is Old Tom the Trapper."

We were in a little huddle around the table, all of us looking at the tintype of Tom the Trapper, which, of course we'd all seen before

maybe a hundred times. My own thoughts were kind of sad as I was reminded of what we'd come to do—exhume the body of Alexander the Coppersmith and rebury it under the big sugar maple tree near the house where Old Tom used to live. It was also where the old trapper himself was buried.

Maybe a hundred times, as I said, we had visited Old Man Paddler, and almost that many times he had told us Old Tom's sad story—how he'd been shot by an Indian arrow. We had acted out the story in a make-believe game many a time.

I always got to play Old Tom and get shot. Then, because I was too heavy to be carried, I would walk all the way to the haunted house with the gang, stretch myself out on the ground under the big tree, and they'd pretend to bury me—sometimes covering me over with autumn leaves and sometimes actually sprinkling dirt in my face, which would always break up the funeral.

"Old Tom used to have an album exactly like this," Old Man Paddler said. He stopped to turn to his stove and take off the kettle of sassafras roots, which were boiling too hard and might boil over.

"My twin brother, Kenneth, and I liked it so well that we used to go over to see him and ask him to let us play it. One Christmas we found a big brown package on our doorstep, and there it was. We thought at first he had given us his, but he hadn't. He'd bought us one just like it.

"Tom would be pleased if he knew what you boys are going to do today," the quavering voice of the old man went on as he poured our six cups of red sassafras tea. "He was a great lover of dogs."

It seemed nice to sit there in the friendly cabin and dream of the long-ago days, though we knew we'd better hurry to get done what we had to do. The musical album had a Swiss music box in it, and the music certainly was sweet. It could play three different tunes. Anybody who has ever heard a Swiss music box knows what they sound like. The air I liked best was the one we all knew by the name of "Silent Night," which nearly everybody in the world knows. It was playing right that second while we finished our tea.

Old Tom's story was different from any we'd ever heard. He wasn't the only living thing the Indians killed that long-ago year. Tom had wakened one morning to start on his trapline and had found both his Dalmatian dogs lying dead, killed by War Face's arrows.

"Terry and Jerry were the most beautiful dogs my brother and I ever saw," we'd heard Old Man Paddler say many times. I could repeat almost word for word that part of the story.

"Old Tom never married and for a long time hadn't had a living relative, so he kept himself from getting lonesome by always having a dog or two around the place.

"The two dogs I remember best were his Dalmatian twins, Jerry and Terry. It was a happy

sight to see him strolling through the woods, playing his mouth organ and with those frisky, happy dogs galloping all around him, running on ahead, stopping to look back and up at him to see where he was going or if he was following.

"Old Tom was never quite the same after they were killed. He buried them close to the house under the sugar maple tree and put up twin markers for them. I think maybe that's why, when Kenneth and I found him with the arrow in his chest and he knew he was mortally wounded, his dying request was that he be buried under the big tree, too."

Old Tom had died before he could finish what he wanted to say. But the Paddler twins had heard his last few gasping words. "You boys—don't forget to serve God all your lives."

There were a few other words, which they couldn't hear, but they heard the word "saved" and something about music.

"I think Tom was trying to quote a Bible verse," Old Man Paddler told us. He quoted for us the verse he thought it was: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

I'd learned that verse in the Sugar Creek Sunday school when I was little. It seemed a whole lot more important now that we knew it was the last thing Old Tom the Trapper had thought just before he died.

As soon as we finished our sassafras tea and a frosted cookie apiece, the kind old man yawned and said, "You'll find my spade and shovel out in the toolshed. If I'm asleep when

you bring them back, just clean them good and stand them behind the apple barrel. Help yourself to an apple apiece while you're there—before you go, I mean, and after you get back too." His voice was half-smothered in a sleepy yawn.

Little Jim piped up then. "What became of Old Tom's album when he died?"

For a minute Old Man Paddler got a far-away look in his eyes as if he was remembering something or else had just forgotten something. Then he said, "It was never found. His house had been broken into that same day and a lot of provisions taken. Kenneth and I always supposed maybe War Face or some of his renegade Indians took it. The kind old trapper died intestate too and—"

"What's that? What's intestate?" Little Jim cut in to ask.

I'd never heard the word before myself. The answer surprised me.

"It means he died without making a will saying who should get his things. They never found one, anyway." Old Man Paddler yawned again kind of noisily, which was the same as saying we could hurry along now if we wanted to, because he wanted to take his afternoon nap.

We soon had the spade and shovel and our apple apiece and were on our way. We were as far as the spring where the old man gets his drinking water when he called to us.

His high-pitched, quavering voice stopped us all in our tracks. "You know the spot where

Tom's grave is, boys, and Terry and Jerry are in the southeast corner of the little enclosure—just in case you may have forgotten. You might want to put Alexander in the southwest corner under the elderberry bush!"

He was standing in the doorway of his cabin, holding open the screen. I guess I never did see him standing like that without thinking how much he looked like one of the pictures of Moses I have in my *Child's Story Bible*. His hair was as white as snow, and his long flowing beard covered his chin and chest all the way to his belt.

We thanked him, told him we'd do what he suggested, and again were on our way, hurrying along because it had begun to look more like rain.

We tried to act happier than we were and laughed and joked a little, but all the time I was thinking how my cousin Wally's city-bred dog had given his life to save Little Jim.

That set my mind to daydreaming again. In my imagination I was up in the hills watching the fierce mother wildcat make a savage-tempered, spread-clawed leap for Little Jim's throat. Then I saw Alexander the Coppersmith meet her in midair, head and teeth first. I watched their fierce fight there on the high ledge. Finally both the wildcat and Alexander fell over the edge of the cliff to the rocks below.

And suddenly I was back in history more than nineteen hundred years, looking up at three crosses on a hill. And the Person on the

middle cross was the Savior, dying for the sins of all the people of all the world, to save everybody who wants to be free from sin.

My thoughts were interrupted right then by Poetry. He and I were behind the rest of the gang. "*Psst!* Bill! Stop a minute. I want to show you something!" His tone of voice had an exclamation point in it that seemed to say, as it often does when he stops me like that, "I've just thought of something very important!"

"What?" I answered, stopping and standing stock-still.

"Remember what Old Man Paddler said? How we ought to clean his tools good before we put them away?"

"Sure," I answered. "What of it?" My father had taught me to do that, too. We never put away a spade or a shovel or a hoe or any other farm tool without first being sure it was clean.

"Just this," he said. "See this shovel? The last person who used it put it away without cleaning it."

I was studying the dirty shovel and was about to say, "Maybe the old man forgot," when Poetry suggested, "Wasn't the toolshed door unlocked? Couldn't anybody have sneaked in day or night, borrowed a shovel, and used it and put it back without the old man hearing him? He's hard of hearing, anyway."

"Sure," I said, "but—"

"And couldn't whoever used it have been digging somewhere, burying treasure or stolen money or something?"

Now he was getting, or trying to get, a mystery started in my mind. He had a mind like a detective's anyway. But this wasn't any time to be thinking things like that. We had to dig up a dog's body from a canyon floor and bury it in a dog cemetery under the sugar maple tree near the haunted house.

"Furthermore," Poetry said, with a frown on his forehead, "this yellowish clay on the shovel is not the kind of soil in Old Man Paddler's garden. His is *black*."

He was right, of course, but so what? "He could have been digging sassafras roots with it down along the creek or near the swamp."

Poetry scoffed at the idea. "This clay is the kind that is deep—way down deep. Why would he want to dig so deep? And why would a man who can't stand to put his tools away without cleaning them not clean his shovel?"

"Because maybe he's getting old and forgetful," I suggested.

But Poetry rejected my idea and held onto his.