1

This was the third worried day since Wandering Winnie, Little Jim Foote's white-faced Hereford calf, had disappeared. Though almost everybody in Sugar Creek territory had looked all over everywhere for her, nobody had seen hide nor hair of her. And as far as we knew, nobody had even heard her high-pitched, trembling bawl.

Different ideas as to what could have happened to the cutest little calf a boy ever owned had been talked about and worried over by all six members of the Sugar Creek Gang and by our six sets of parents. My own parents were doing maybe as much or more worrying than the Foote family.

As I said about a hundred words above this paragraph, today was the third worried day since Winnie had dropped out of sight. It was also the beginning of the third night. In a little while now, the Theodore Collins family, which is ours, would be in bed—just as soon as we couldn't stand it to stay up any longer.

Charlotte Ann, my little sister, had already been carried to her bed in the downstairs bedroom just off the living room, where Mom and Dad and I still were. Mom was working on a crossword puzzle, and I was lying on the floor

piecing together a picture puzzle of a cowboy at a rodeo. The cowboy was trying to rope a scared-half-to-death calf. Dad was lounging in his favorite chair, reading the part of the newspaper Mom didn't have.

All of a sudden she interrupted my thoughts, saying, "Maybe we're all worrying too much about Winnie. Maybe she's already been found and is in some farmer's corral somewhere. If we wait long enough, somebody will phone for them to come and get her."

Dad, who must have been dozing, came to with a start and yawned a lazy answer. "Leave her alone, and she'll come home and bring her tail behind her"—which any boy knows is what somebody in a poem had said to somebody named Little Bo-Peep, who had lost her sheep: "Leave them alone, and they'll come home, bringing their tails behind them."

It was almost ridiculous—Dad's quoting a line of poetry like that at a time like that, because right that second I was on my hands and knees on the floor by the north window, looking under the library table for the part of the picture puzzle that had on it the rodeo calf's hindquarters. In fact, that last part of the calf was the very last piece of my puzzle. As soon as I could find it and slip it into place, the picture would be finished.

"What," Mom said to Dad from her rocker on the other side of the hanging lamp he was reading and dozing under, "is a word of seven

letters meaning forever? Its first letter is *e,* and the last letter is *l.*"

Dad yawned another long, lazy yawn and mumbled, "What are the other five letters?" Then he folded his paper, unfolded his long, lazy legs, stood up, stretched, and said, "How in the world can you stay awake long enough to worry your way through a crossword puzzle?"

"I've got it! I've got it!" Mom exclaimed cheerfully and proudly. "The other five letters are *t-e-r-n-a.* The whole word is *eternal.*"

Dad, not looking where I was lying, stumbled over part of me but managed to keep from falling *ker-ploppety-wham* onto the floor by catching himself against the bedroom doorpost. He sighed a disgusted sigh down at me, saying, "What on earth are you doing down there on the floor! Why aren't you in bed?"

Looking at my picture puzzle, which Dad's slippered feet had scattered in every direction there was, I answered, "Nothing. Nothing at all. But I was looking for half a lost calf."

It seemed a good time for us to get ready to go to bed. When anybody is so tired that he is cranky-sleepy, he might lose his temper on somebody. And we had a rule in our family that everybody had to go to bed forgiven to everybody else.

Because, ever since I was little, I'd been giving Mom a good-night kiss just to show her I liked her, even when I was sometimes too tired to know for sure whether I did, I reached out my freckled left cheek for her to kiss. Looking

at Dad, I gave him a shrug of both shoulders—which is a good enough good night for a father who has scattered his son's picture puzzle all over—and in a little while I was on my way upstairs to my room.

The window of that upstairs room, as you may remember, looks south out over the iron pitcher pump at the end of the board walk, over the garden to old Red Addie's apartment hog house, and beyond it to Little Jim's folks' farm. And over there was an empty corral with a whole calf missing, which calf might never come home again and bring her tail behind her.

I was too tired to say very much of a good-night prayer to God, but I knew that the One who made boys understood a boy's tired mind well enough not to expect him to stay on his knees beside his bed very long. Besides, anybody knows it's not how long anybody prays that counts with God, or what kind of words he uses, but whether he has honest-to-goodness love in his heart for his folks and for the Savior, who had first loved him enough to die for him. That was the most important thing my parents had taught me.

One of the very few things I prayed for before I clambered into bed was that Little Jim wouldn't have too hurt a heart because of his lost, strayed, or stolen white-faced, white-eyelashed calf.

And that—my last thoughts being about Wandering Winnie—is maybe why I had a

crazy, mixed-up dream, the like of which I had never dreamed before in all my half-long life.

Honestly, that dream was so real it scared me half to death. It also seemed it wasn't a dream but was the actual truth. In fact, right in the middle of my dream, I dreamed that I woke up, and the rest of the dream seemed to be happening for sure.

I guess maybe the half calf I'd lost on the floor of our living room was part of the reason I dreamed what I did. Maybe the other reason was that on the way to the stairs, which was through the kitchen, I had stopped to eat the second half of a piece of peach pie that I had left over from supper and which Mom had promised me I could have for a bedtime snack.

Right in the middle of eating that very tasty piece of peach pie, I heard the radio going in the living room, and somebody's voice galloping along about all the things that were happening "in the world and here at home."

That was one of the last things Dad did every night—listen to the news, some of which was full of excitement and some of it not.

Just as I tucked the last bite of my piece of peach pie into my mouth and was starting upstairs to tuck myself into bed, I heard the news reporter say, "This program is being brought to you by the Kangaroo Sales Pavilion of Tippecanoe County. Remember—Saturday at one o'clock, thirty head of sheep, seventeen Hereford calves, fifty-three shoats, and . . ."

On the way to the top of the stairs, where

the moonlight was streaming in through the south window, I was still enjoying the taste of peach pie and was thinking what a good pie maker Mom was.

It took me only a few fumbling minutes to get undressed. When I finished my bedtime prayer, I yawned one of Dad's kind of long, lazy, noisy yawns, flopped over into bed, pulled Mom's nice fresh-air-smelling sheet over me, sighed a sleepy sigh, and started to sail off in a wooden shoe.

Did you ever have in your school reader the poem called "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod"? We'd had to learn it by heart when I was in the fourth grade. And it seemed that nearly every night, when I was getting into bed, a part of the poem would start yawning its way through my mind.

That very interesting poem tells about Wynken, Blynken, and Nod's getting into a big wooden shoe and sailing off on "a river of crystal light into a sea of dew." When the old moon saw them sailing along, he called out to them, asking where they were going and what they were looking for. And they answered, "We have come to fish for the herring fish that live in this beautiful sea."

Anyway, the writer of the poem—somebody I had never heard of, named Eugene Field—explained in the last verse of the poem that "Wynken and Blynken were two little eyes and Nod was a little head," and the wooden shoe was a trundle bed—whatever that was.

Anyway, after memorizing the poem, I'd always thought of going to sleep as sailing off in a wooden shoe.

In seconds, I'd climbed into my own wooden shoe and taken off. And that's when my crazy, mixed-up dream began spinning round and round in my mind.

First, I saw myself standing in our living room, looking into the long mirror on the wall above the library table, under which, as you already know, I had been looking for half a lost calf. All of a sudden then, while I was combing my red hair, I was seeing in the mirror not a red-haired, freckle-faced boy but a hornless, white-faced Hereford with long white eyelashes.

Quicker than a firefly's fleeting flash, in my dream I was over at Little Jim's place, and I was a red-haired heifer named Wandering Winnie, standing at the Footes' corral gate.

Racing toward me from behind was a cowboy on a pinto pony, swinging a lasso. And as calves do at a rodeo, I whirled and started to run like four-footed lightning to get away from him.

Then, in another fleeting flash, I wasn't a calf anymore but was Theodore Collins's only son. And the cowboy had turned into a masked rider, whose horse was big and black and had thundering hoofs.

"Help! Help! Help!" I yelled as I ran.

And then that masked rider's rope settled over my head and shoulders, the black horse skidded to a dusty four-footed stop by the iron

pitcher pump on our farm. And right then in the dream, the big black horse whirled and started to run, dragging me head-and-shoulders-and-face-and-neck-and-ears-first across a whole barnyard full of peach pies.

"*Help! Help! Help! Help!*" I kept on yelling. I couldn't get my breath. Also I couldn't turn over in bed, where suddenly it seemed I was, in my own upstairs room being choked half to death. I was screaming, but I couldn't scream very loud.

Well, right that crazy, mixed-up second, there was a voice coming out of somewhere up the stairway. It was my mother calling, "Bill Collins! What on earth are you yelling about up there? You having a nightmare or something?"

It seemed I was still out in our barnyard, being dragged headfirst through a thousand peach pies, while I was also still in bed, trying to turn over and wake up and couldn't.

Right away, though, I *did* wake up on account of my father's thundery voice joining in with Mom's worried one and ordering me to go back to sleep. Also he ordered me to turn over, as I was probably on my back—which I was and which most people are when they are having what is called a nightmare.

I made myself turn over, and pretty soon, without knowing I was going to do it, I set sail again for the land of Nod, and the next thing I knew, it was morning.

* * *

It was one of the most sunshiny mornings I ever woke up in. And the smell of bacon and eggs frying downstairs in our kitchen made me hungry—not for peach pie, though, which for some reason, it seemed, maybe I wouldn't want any more of for a long time. I wanted something salty instead.

Even while I was shoving myself into my shirt and jeans, I was looking out the south window to the grassy barnyard, where Dad, carrying our three-gallon milk pail, was coming toward the pitcher pump. Mixy, our black-and-white mother cat, was following along with him, meowing up at him and at the milk pail all the way.

At the pump, Dad stopped, lifted the pail out of Mixy's reach, and, shading his eyes, looked toward the sky. Then he called to Mom, who was maybe standing in the kitchen doorway right below my window, "Turkey buzzards are all over up there! Must be something dead somewhere!"

I stooped low, so that I could see under the overhanging leaves of the ivy that sprawled across the upper one-third of my window, and looked out and up toward where Dad had been looking. And what to my wondering eyes should appear but seven or eight wide-winged birds sailing like Wynken, Blynken, and Nod in a sea of dew—except that there probably wasn't any dew that high up in the sky on a sunshiny day.

I knew from the different buzzards I had

seen on the ground at different times, gobbling down dead rats or mice—or a possum or coon or skunk some hunter had caught and skinned—that buzzards were what Dad called "carrion eaters."

Did you ever see a buzzard up close, maybe only fifty feet away? If you ever get a chance to see one on the ground, you will notice that he is twenty or so inches long from his ugly head at the top of his long, naked, wrinkled, scrawny neck to the tip of his tail. And if while you are watching him, he decides it's time to take off on a trip to the sky again, you'd see that his wingspread is maybe as much as six feet—as far from the tip of one black-feathered wing to the other as my tallish father is tall.

A turkey buzzard is the biggest, most awkward bird in the whole territory. He is also one of the most important. Many a time I had looked straight up into the straight-up sky and seen one of those big black vultures soaring in a silent circle, sometimes so high above the fields or woods that he would look as if he was maybe only ten inches from wingtip to wingtip.

Then, all of a sudden, he would come shooting down in a long slant and land with an awkward *ploppety-plop-plop, ker-flop-flop-flop* away out in the field or maybe even close by.

In less than three minutes, another buzzard and then another and still another—as many sometimes as five—would land *plop* at the same place like black-winged arrows. And I knew they had come slanting down out of the

sky to do what their Creator had made them for in the first place—to have breakfast or dinner or supper on a dead carcass of some kind. It could be a rat or a mouse or a possum or coon or skunk or even a horse or cow that had happened to die or get killed. So turkey buzzards were as important as any birds in the whole Sugar Creek territory.

"Don't you boys ever kill one of them," Dad had ordered the gang one day when he was also talking to us about being careful never to kill owls, because they were helpful to farmers by eating cutworms and mice. "A buzzard," he explained to us, "is one of nature's scavengers. Its business is to clean up the country and not allow any germ-breeding dead animals to smell up the clean, fresh country air and spread sickness or disease of any kind.

"Seagulls are scavengers, too," Dad went on.

But we didn't know anything about seagulls, there not being any in our territory, and nobody in the gang ever saw a seagull.

Well, because I was hungry, I quick finished shoving myself into my clothes and in a few minutes was downstairs.

At the breakfast table, Dad looked across at me, studying my face with a question mark in his eye, and asked, "What was your nightmare about last night?"

"It wasn't a nightmare," I answered, trying to be funny and maybe not being. "It was a night calf!"

It seemed all right to tell my folks what I

had dreamed, which I did. We also talked to each other about different things. It was a happy breakfast for the whole family except Charlotte Ann, my little sister, who wasn't in a good humor for a change.

And do you know what? My dream wasn't so crazy after all. Right that very minute, Dad reached up and turned on the radio, which was on the mantel beside our striking clock, just in time for us to hear the announcer say, "The Montgomery County sheriff's office reported late yesterday that two more calves were stolen in the area. The rustlers drove the calves out a gate near the Stonebergers' barn and down the lane to a parked truck where they were loaded on. This is the second case of livestock rustling in the county. Eighteen head of hogs were taken from the George Ranger's ranch last week . . ."

The news reporter went on then about something else, which gave my grayish brown haired Mom a chance to cut in and say, "Whatever is the world coming to—people stealing cattle and hogs right in front of your eyes on your back doorstep!"

Dad's answer wasn't exactly a surprise. It was what any boy who goes to church is supposed to know anyway, and it was: "The world isn't coming to anything, Mother. The world without God, which most of it still is, is already bad. The Bible says in Romans three twenty-three . . ."

And then the phone rang. Dad quick left the table to go answer it and started talking to

somebody about a Farm Bureau meeting where he was going to make a speech about nitrogen and alfalfa roots—stuff like that.

When he came back, my deep-voiced, bushy-eyebrowed father was frowning a little about something somebody had said to him. Then he and Mom agreed with each other a while on what the Bible says about people's hearts and what is the matter with them.

My mind was on the news I'd just heard on the radio about rustlers having stolen two more calves right in front of our eyes on our own back doorstep. And it seemed maybe my mind was on the trail of an idea that would explain what had really happened to Little Jim's Wandering Winnie, so I didn't listen very well to what Mom and Dad were talking about.

But after breakfast, while I was out in the garden with the Ebenezer onions, the black-seeded Simpson lettuce, and the Scarlet Globe radishes, I was chewing over with my mind's teeth some of the words Dad had come back from the telephone with. Those words, word for word from the New Testament, were: "Out of the heart come . . . evil thoughts, murders . . . thefts, false witness . . ."

"The stealing of those calves was in somebody's heart first," I remembered he had said to Mom. "Then it was in the mind, and then he acted it out in his life. What can you expect from a sour crab apple tree but that it will bear sour crab apples?"

As I sliced away with my hoe, thinking

about something Dad had once told me—that I could keep the big weeds out of the garden by chopping them out while they were still little—I moved into the history section of my mind to the morning just three days ago when Little Jim had first missed his cute little white-faced baby beef.

But before I tell you what I thought and why, I'd maybe better let you know that, in the afternoon of the day I was living in right then, the Gang was going to have a very important meeting down at the spring near the leaning linden tree not far from the Black Widow Stump. I certainly didn't even dream what a lot of mystery we were going to stumble onto or that we'd find a clue that would shoot us, like six arrows out of a bow, into the exciting and dangerous adventure of finding out what had really happened to Wandering Winnie.

Boy oh boy, I can hardly wait till I get started into the first paragraph of that part of this story. What happened was *so* different from anything else that had ever happened to us in all six of our exciting lives.

Boy oh boy!

2

In case you are wondering how come Little Jim's white-faced baby beef was named Wandering Winnie, you might just as well wonder also how come she had quite a few other names.

Little Jim called her Wandering Winnie because she was always wandering away from their farm. Dragonfly, the dragonfly-like-eyed member of our gang, called her Winnie the Pooh, after a character in a children's book by that name. Poetry, the barrel-shaped, detective-minded member, who reads more books than any of us, had named her Little Dogie, explaining that "in the Old West, cowboys had a saying that a dogie was a calf whose mother was dead and his father had run off with another cow"—something like that.

You see, Little Dogie, Wandering Winnie, and Winnie the Pooh was an honest-to-goodness orphaned calf. Her mother had died about a week after Winnie had been born, and that made the calf a "dogie." Little Jim had bottle-fed Winnie until she was old enough to eat grass and bran shorts and other calf food.

Well, almost as soon as Winnie was a dogie old enough to run and gambol about Little Jim's barnyard, she had taken on a very bad

habit. Having a wandering spirit in her heart, she was always running away from home.

Winnie never went very far, though. Most always it was over to our place. Sometimes as often as twice a week, when I would go out to our south pasture to drive Lady MacBeth, our Holstein milk cow, into her corral for Dad to milk her, I would find Little Jim's dogie lying in the shade of the elderberry bushes along the fencerow by Lady MacBeth.

Both of them would be lazily chewing their cuds, as if it was the pleasantest thing ever a cow and a calf could do. A black-and-white Holstein who didn't have a calf of her own and a white-faced Hereford who didn't have any mother would be lying side by side, doing nothing except maybe just liking each other. Mom, trying to defend Little Dogie, said that was very important even to a human being—just liking and being liked by somebody.

I guess maybe Mom felt that way about animals and people because in the Sugar Creek cemetery, not far from the church we all went to, there was a small tombstone that had on it the name of a baby sister I had never seen. She was born before I was and died when she was still little.

Mom had maybe one of the tenderest hearts for babies anybody ever saw.

Nearly every time I saw a contented cow lying on her side with her head up, chewing away, her eyes half closed as though she was almost asleep, I was reminded of a poem Poetry

was always quoting. It had a line that ran: "Cows lie down upon their sides when they would go to sleep . . ."

Did you ever stop to think of all the different ways animals go to sleep? Our Mixy cat makes three or four turns round and round and settles down in a semicircle. Our old red rooster flies up to a tree branch or onto a roost in the chicken house and stands all night on one leg. A horse hangs its head and stands still all night in a stall.

And Lady MacBeth lies down on her side and spends all night chewing the food she has taken all day to eat too fast. Actually she swallows backwards every few minutes, doing it maybe a thousand times a night, and then the next day she starts in all over again. A cow is what is called a "ruminant," and all ruminants have two stomachs, one to eat into and the other to digest with.

One morning when I found Winnie lying on her side with Lady MacBeth, she had a cut over her left eye that was still bleeding a little and which she'd probably got when she came through the barbed-wire fence into our pasture.

Even as sorry as I felt for Winnie, I enjoyed running to our house, getting a special germ-killing salve we kept in the medicine cabinet, and dressing the wound, since I'm maybe going to be a doctor someday,

"You dumb little dogie!" I said to her in a playful scold. "Don't you ever let me catch you getting cut on that barbed wire again!"

Then I patted her on her hornless head and phoned Little Jim to come and get his cute little calf.

Just to be sure she wouldn't get cut again, I went down to our lane fence to the place where Winnie had been squeezing through and wrapped the barbed wire with a strip of burlap I tore from one of the gunnysacks we had in the barn.

Well, while I was in the history section of my mind out in our garden with the Ebenezer onions, the black-seeded Simpson lettuce, and the Scarlet Globe radishes, I was remembering that morning just three days ago when Little Dogie—Wandering Winnie the Pooh—had disappeared.

Little Jim had come pedaling over to our house on his bike, bringing with him a three-foot-long, yellow-barked willow switch, planning to do with the switch what I knew he'd done a half-dozen other times that summer—drive his white-faced, long-eyelashed, dumb dogie back home to her corral again.

That morning, three days ago, Lady MacBeth was already in *her* corral, already milked. She was waiting for me to turn her out to pasture again, where she would eat all day, so she could chew all night, so she could make white milk and yellow butter out of the brown bran and green grass she would eat.

The Collins family was at the breakfast table at the time, eating pancakes and sausage and stuff.

Hearing a noise out at our front gate, I looked across the table past Mom's grayish brown hair and through the screened side door of our kitchen. I saw Little Jim leaning his bike against the walnut tree just inside the gate. Then he went scooting across the lawn toward our barnyard and the pasture bars, carrying the willow switch. Even from as far away as I was, I could see the little guy had a very set face, as though his temper was up and he couldn't wait to explode it on Winnie.

In the middle of the barnyard, Little Jim stopped, looked toward the south pasture, and let out two or three long cow calls, which any farm boy knows sound like *"Swoo-ooo-ook! Sw-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-ook!"*

I was pretty soon out of my place without being excused, which is impolite to do, and was out the side door, letting it slam behind me—and shouldn't have or it might wake up Charlotte Ann. In a barefoot flash I was hurrying down the board walk and past the iron pitcher pump to where Little Jim was.

His set face was flushed from having pedaled so hard, his eyebrows were down, and he was as angry as I had ever seen him. He nearly always doesn't get angry at anything.

As soon as I reached the center of the barnyard, where Little Jim was, I said to him, "'S'-matter? How come you're yelling like that at nothing?"

"I'm not yelling at nothing!" Little Jim Foote disagreed crossly. "It's Wandering Win-

nie the Pooh. That dumb dogie has run away again, and when I find her I'm going to give her a switching she'll never forget as long as she lives! You seen anything of her?"

I hadn't, of course, and neither had anybody else at our house. When I said so, Little Jim asked, "Where on earth can she be?"

What he said next got mixed up in my mind with something that was happening out by our garden gate right then—something I'd seen and heard happen maybe a hundred times that spring and summer. Old Red, our Rhode Island Red rooster, had just flown up to the top of the gatepost and was arching his long, proud neck, standing on tiptoe and getting ready to crow.

Hardly realizing what I was doing, I quickly stooped, grabbed up a roundish stone from the ground, and slung it toward the post. Even while that small round stone was flying through the air with the greatest of ease, Old Red was in the middle of his proud *"Cock-a-doodle-doo."*

Wham! The stone landed with a thud against the locust post just below Old Red's yellow legs, interrupting his ordinarily long, squawking *cock-a-doodle,* stopping it before it was half done, and scaring the early morning daylights out of him.

Old Red made a jump straight up, his wings flapping and his voice complaining, and came down *ker-floppety-plop* on the other side of the garden fence in the middle of the Ebenezers.

But Old Red wasn't any more scared right

then than I was. *What*—my stirred-up worry yelled at me inside me—*what if either of my parents comes to at the kitchen table and comes storming out to see what on earth is going on and why?*

Little Jim had already finished saying what he had started to say. I had heard his words without hearing them, but I did remember them later.

Quicker than a crash of thunder, I was off with an explosion of fast-running feet, galloping toward the garden gate with Little Jim's words flying along with me. Those worried words had been: "What I can't understand is how Winnie got out! We had the gate shut tight all night, and it was still shut this morning when I went out to feed her!"

Well, when you are in a garden, zigzagging after a scared rooster who is running wild all over the black-seeded Simpson lettuce, acting as crazy as a chicken with its head cut off, which you are going to have for dinner—the chicken, I mean, not the head—when your mind and muscles are as busy as mine were, you hardly notice anything strange in what Little Jim said, something that had a mystery in it.

All the noise I was making at the garden gate and, especially, the noise Old Red was making were like the noise Santa Claus's reindeer made in the "Night Before Christmas" when "out on the lawn there arose such a clatter, I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter."

"You," I thundered at Mom's favorite Rhode Island Red, "stay *out* of the garden!"

Little Jim's temper was still up as he hurried back to the walnut tree to his bicycle. He was maybe fifty yards up the road on the way to Dragonfly's house to see if Winnie was there, before what he'd said came to life in my mind. The words I all of a sudden remembered were "We had the gate shut tight all night, and it was still shut this morning when I went out to feed her."

I should have guessed *cattle rustlers* right then, but I didn't. Instead I had to let three days pass by and have a dream about a cowboy lassoing me and dragging me across the barnyard, before all the different ideas came to a crossroads in my head. And it seemed maybe there had been honest-to-goodness-for-sure cattle rustlers in the neighborhood and that Winnie the Pooh had been rustled right out of Little Jim's corral and taken off to a sales pavilion or somewhere, nobody knew where.

The morning of that fourth day finally passed at our house, and the Collins family was flying around getting ready to sit down to the noon meal, which was going to be fried chicken, bread and butter, rice pudding, and other stuff Mom had made.

"Don't forget early supper tonight," Mom said. "It's Saturday, you remember, and tomorrow is Sunday. So we go to town early, come home early, go to bed early, get up early, and get to Sunday school on time without rushing."

It seemed I had heard Mom say that maybe a thousand times in my half-long life, so, when all of us were at the table and Dad was getting ready to ask the blessing, I said—and shouldn't have—"Not too long a prayer, Dad. We have to have early supper so we can go to town early, and get home early, so we can go to bed early, and . . ."

Dad's answer was kinder than he maybe felt in his heart. He looked with lowered bushy eyebrows at me and said, "Do I ever pray all the way through to supper time?"

His prayer was long enough to be thankful in words for the food and to ask the Lord to "bless the hands that have prepared it"—meaning Mom's hardworking brown hands. He also prayed for our church's missionary who was working in an orphanage in Korea.

Just before saying, "Amen," at the end of his prayer, Dad thought of something else, which was, "And help us to do what we can about the hungry orphans over there."

To Mom he said, when he finished and before unfolding his napkin and laying it across his lap, "It's like the new Sunday school song says:

'Look all around you, find someone in need;
Help somebody today.'"

As serious as my mind was at the time, it was still hard to keep from thinking a mischievous thought, which right that second popped into

my mind. It was: "How come, Dad, you always pray for the hands that prepare the dinner but never for the hands that dry the dishes after dinner?"

Dad looked at my already busy hands and said, "When they're clean, they don't need anybody to pray for them."

And for some reason I left the table and went outdoors to the washbasin not far from the pitcher pump and scrubbed my hands with soap, as I was supposed to have not forgotten to do in the first place.

Bit by bit and bite by bite, I managed to get Mom's fried chicken dinner into the history section of my life. Pretty soon I would be ready to meet the Gang at the place we had agreed on—near the Black Widow Stump, halfway between that well-known stump and the linden tree that leans out over the hill sloping down to the spring.

With a *swish, swish, swish* and a *scrub, scrub, scrub,* I brushed my teeth for the second time that day, dried the dishes for maybe the thirty-seventh time that month, and pretty soon was on my way.

Out across the grassy yard I loped, past the plum tree, on to and past the walnut tree near the front gate, through the gate and past "Theodore Collins" on our mailbox, and across the road. My bare feet didn't even stop to enjoy the feel of the fluffy white road dust I usually liked to go *plop-plop-plop* in. With a flying leap I

was over the rail fence, sailing over the way I'd seen a deer do it in an Audubon film one night that winter at the Sugar Creek Literary Society.

My shirt sleeves flapped in the wind, and my brown bare feet raced *lickety-sizzle* along the path made by barefoot boys' feet. I ran and ran and ran. A great big blob of happiness was in my heart, because that is almost the pleasantest thing ever a boy could do—to fly along, as I was flying along, toward an afternoon of adventure in a boy's world.

And it is almost the most wonderful feeling ever a boy can have to know you are not running away from something your mother wants you to do, because you have already helped keep her from getting too tired by helping her with the housework.

I guess one thing that made me feel so fine was that this time I had not waited for Mom to ask me to help but had actually volunteered to wash those very discouraged-looking dishes in the sink, which, unless you actually love your mother, is one of the most unpleasant things ever a boy has to do.

As I galloped along the winding path, the new Sunday school song was singing itself in my mind:

Look all around you, find someone in need;
Help somebody today;
Though it be little, a neighborly deed,
Help somebody today.

Many are burdened and weary in heart,
Help somebody today;
Someone the journey to heaven should start,
Help somebody today.

All the way to the Black Widow Stump, my heart was as light as a last year's maple leaf in a whirlwind.

I hadn't any sooner reached our meeting place, plopped myself down in the long, mashed-down bluegrass, and started chewing on the juicy end of a stalk of grass than Poetry came sauntering along the path that borders the bayou. Poetry was one of my almost best friends, the chubbiest one of the gang, the one with the best imagination, and also the most mischievous. His powerful binoculars were hanging by a strap around his neck.

I rolled over and up to a sitting position, squinted my sleepy eyes at him, then plopped back again onto the grass. In a minute he was lying there beside me.

While we waited for the rest of the gang, I was wondering if maybe I ought to tell him about my last night's dream and what I thought I knew about what had happened to Winnie the Pooh.

Suddenly Poetry let out an excited gasp and exclaimed, "There's a wild turkey!"

"Wild turkey!" I came to life. "I don't see any turkey. Do you see a turkey?"

"Look!" he said, handing me the binoculars. "Away up there above the Sugar Creek bridge, maybe a mile high."

I looked where he said to look, scanning the sky with his binoculars.

"Buzzard," I said. "That's nothing but a turkey buzzard. I saw half a dozen of them this morning over the south pasture."

As you already maybe know, that was the way a buzzard found his breakfast, dinner, or supper. He just sailed around in a silent circle, his eyes searching the earth far below until he spotted something that looked dead enough to eat. Then he'd come slanting down, land on or near it, and that would be it. So what was special about a turkey buzzard or two sailing around in the sky?

But I had seen something else when I was looking through Poetry's binoculars. "If you want to see something really important," I said to my round friend, "take a look at that big yellow woolpack of clouds hanging above the swamp. You know what that means, don't you—clouds piling up like that in the afternoon northwest?"

"Of course, I know what it means," Poetry answered. "If they come this way and change into umbrella clouds and spread all over the sky, it's going to rain pitchforks and tar babies."

For a few minutes, while the buzzards kept on sailing around so high that without the binoculars they looked like swallows, we bragged a little to each other about the cloud lore we had been studying in a schoolbook the winter before.

Any boy ought to know about cloud forma-

tions so that he can tell whether it is going to rain or not without listening to the radio or looking under a doorstep to see if a rock is wet because of the humidity in the air.

"Another thing," Poetry rolled over in the grass and said with his back turned, "when a cumulus cloud like that is opposite the sun, it is yellowish white, but when it is on the same side as the sun, with the sun behind it, it is dark and has bright edges."

"Is that where they got the song 'There's a Silver Lining'?"

"Sure," Poetry answered, and his squawking, half-and-half voice began croaking away:

"There's a silver lining,
Through the dark cloud shining."

There was nothing exciting to do until the rest of the gang came, which pretty soon they did. We had a business meeting about different things boys have business meetings about, and different ones of us took turns looking through Poetry's binoculars. We also skipped flat stones across Sugar Creek's foam-freckled face and listened to ten thousand or more honeybees buzzing among the sweet-smelling flowers of the leaning linden tree.

We came to with a start when Little Jim, who had the binoculars at the time, cried out, "Hey, you—everybody! Your turkey buzzard is coming down! He's heading straight for the sycamore tree and the mouth of the cave!"

My eyes took a quick leap toward the sky, and Little Jim was right. I saw that big buzzard slanting toward the earth like a long black arrow.

"There's another one!" Circus, our acrobat, exclaimed.

"There's three of them!" Dragonfly shouted, his pop-eyes large and round and excited.

"Five of them, you mean," Big Jim, our fuzzy-mustached leader cried out. "They're all coming down!"

We watched five black-winged rockets drop out of their silent circles down toward the earth in the direction of the sycamore tree, near which is the mouth of the cave and beyond which is the Sugar Creek swamp.

"Something's dead down there," Dragonfly decided and sniffed with his crooked nose. "Smell it?"

His face took on a mussed-up expression, and he let out two quick long-tailed sneezes.

I sniffed too but didn't smell anything except the perfume of the creamy yellow flowers of the leaning linden tree. But I knew Dragonfly had a very keen sense of smell and could sometimes smell things the rest of us couldn't, having what his doctor called "very sensitive olfactory nerves." All of a spine-chilling sudden, a cold fear blew into my mind, and I thought I knew what those sharp-eyed turkey buzzards had spotted from their spaceflight.

They had seen—and maybe smelled too—somebody's dead white-faced heifer!

Wandering Winnie the Pooh! my sad mind

told me, and without waiting for anybody else to say it first, I yelled to us, "Come on, everybody. Let's go see what's dead!"