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SUGAR CREEK GANG
The **SWAMP**
ROBBER

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It was the laziest day I ever saw and so hot it would have made any boy want to go fishing or swimming—or maybe both. I don't think I was ever so glad in my life that school was out, because just as soon as I saw those big fat fishing worms being turned up by Dad's plow when he was breaking the garden, I knew what I wanted to do. What I *had* to do, in fact, or the whole day would be spoiled.

Right away I laid my rake down—I was raking the yard—and went out behind our garage to a barrellful of empty tin cans that we'd pretty soon have to haul away to the dump down along Sugar Creek. I threw a handful of dirt into a can and started dropping in the biggest, juiciest worms I could find—the kind that would make any fish go so crazy with hunger he'd risk getting caught rather than let the worm wriggle around on the hook all by itself.

It made me think of that time I sneaked into Mom's pantry and filled my pockets full of cookies, and had my mouth full too, just as Mom came hurrying down from upstairs where she'd been making the beds. She took one look at me, called out sharply, "William Jasper Collins!" and made a dive for me. She caught me too and—but that's a story I don't tell any-

body. I was just little then and didn't know any better, but after that I made up my mind I'd never take any more cookies without asking first.

I've got the best mom in the world, don't think I haven't. I guess punishing me hurt her worse than it did me. That night when I'd said my prayers and been tucked into bed, she hugged me awfully tight.

But as I said, that was when I was little, not more than seven years old. Now I say my prayers by myself, climb into bed in the dark, and just call, "Good night!" down the stairs. I wouldn't let Mom know for all the world that I kind of miss being tucked in, but I do.

Well, pretty soon I had that bait can almost full of worms. I was thinking how hot it was here in the garden and how cool it would be down at the river and how Roy Gilbert and I would just lie there in the new green grass and watch the lazy specks of foam floating along on the water. And every now and then our bobbbers would start acting funny, moving around in circles and ducking under the water like tiny diving birds, and our string of fish would get longer and longer with rock bass and chub and—

"Jasper!"

Dad's big voice was just like a finger being poked into a great big beautiful soap bubble. It burst my dream all to nothing. And when Dad called me Jasper instead of Bill, I knew he didn't like what I was doing.

I set the bait can down in the deep furrow and answered innocently, “What?”

“What are you up to?” he demanded roughly. He had the horse’s reins slipped around his shoulders, and his hands were gripping the plow handles real tight. I could tell, because his sleeves were rolled up and the muscles on his arms were like great big ropes. My dad was awful strong—or maybe I should say *very* strong. My folks are having a hard time teaching me to use the right words. It’s awful hard to quit using the wrong ones, you know.

I didn’t know what to say to my dad. So I just called back indifferently, “Nothing,” and picked up a clod of dirt to throw at a blackbird that was gobbling up some of the worms I had missed.

“Come here!” Dad said, “and bring that can of worms with you!”

My heart went *flop*. I couldn’t fool Dad in anything, and I knew better than to try. But I could see the whole day being spoiled. Just think of all those fish swimming around on the bottom of the creek, hungry for nice, wriggling worms. And just think of how Dad liked to eat fish when they were all cleaned and rolled in cornmeal and fried crisp and brown the way Mom can fry them. I decided to remind him how good fish would taste for supper that night. I picked up the can and walked across the garden to where he was waiting.

Dad could always read my mind just like I could read a book. (I was in the fifth grade in

school, you know.) He had turned around and was sitting on the crosspiece between the plow handles. His big brownish-red eyebrows were down. I stood there holding the can of worms in both hands.

The horses were so hot that white lather was all over them. They'd been sweating so much there was lather where the harness rubbed their sides, and you could smell the sweat. Sweat was trickling down Dad's face too. I guess there never had been a hotter spring day. Little heat waves were dancing all over the garden.

I kept looking down at my toes, which were digging themselves into the cool, newly turned earth, and Dad kept glaring at my can of worms. I hadn't really done anything wrong, hadn't exactly planned or even thought anything wrong. Except maybe I was wishing I didn't have to rake the yard and was hating rakes, hoes, garden-making, and all the work. I guess you'd call it being lazy. Maybe it was.

"Well?" Dad demanded.

Then I saw his snow-white teeth gleaming under his red-brown mustache and the twinkle in his eye. It was like a cool dive into Sugar Creek on a smothering hot day. Whenever I saw Dad's teeth shining under his mustache, I knew everything was all right.

"Bill Collins," he said, and I felt better than ever—even though his voice was still gruff. "I want you to take that garden rake, clean it off, and put it away in the toolhouse. Then get your long cane fishing pole and go down to the river

—you and Roy Gilbert or some of the boys—and fish and fish and wade in the branch until you get over that terrible case of spring fever. And don't come back until you've caught all the fish that'll bite! You've had a hard school year—with your arithmetic, geography, and science—and you need a rest!”

At first I couldn't believe he meant it. But when he reached out, put his arm around my shoulder, gave me a half hug, and said, “I was a boy once too,” I believed him without trying.

You should have seen me carry that long cane fishing pole in one hand and the can of worms in the other, running straight toward the river where I knew Roy'd be waiting for me. For the night before we'd laid our plans to meet there at two o'clock, if we could.

But I never dreamed so many things could happen all in one day, or that before I'd get back home again Roy and I would have been scared almost to death, or that this was going to be the beginning of the most exciting week of my whole life.

SUGAR CREEK GANG
The **KILLER**
BEAR

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It was Dragonfly who first saw the bear—a big, hairy, black thing that looked more like one of my dad’s hogs than anything else.

None of us boys had ever seen an honest-to-goodness wild bear, although we’d all been to the zoo and the circus and had watched bears juggling rope balls and doing different kinds of acrobatic stunts. Naturally we had read a lot of bear stories, having borrowed books from our school and public libraries. But we had never dreamed that a bear story would happen to us, the kind of story that would make any boy’s hair stand right up on end.

Perhaps I’d better explain right away that when I say “us” I mean the Sugar Creek Gang, which is the name of our gang of six boys. We have crazy names as nearly all boys do—that is, all of us except me. I am just plain Bill, which is short for William, which name I don’t like. My middle name is Jasper. I don’t like that either.

Dragonfly’s real name is Roy Gilbert, but we call him Dragonfly because he is always seeing important things first. His eyes grow big when he does, making him look a little like a dragonfly or a walleyed pike.

Then there is Big Jim, the leader of our gang, who has been a Boy Scout; and Little Jim,

the grandest fellow you ever saw and as good as a million dollars worth of gold. Little Jim is my very best friend, except for Poetry. Poetry is the name we've given to Leslie Thompson because he knows maybe a hundred poems by heart and is always quoting one of them, much to Circus's disgust. Circus is our acrobat. He can juggle baseballs better than any trained bear and is always climbing trees and acting like a monkey and looking like one. He is almost as mischievous as Poetry, although I don't think anybody could be *that* mischievous. Poetry is big, almost as big around as a barrel.

That's all of us: Big Jim, our leader; Little Jim, the best Christian any boy ever saw; Poetry, whose voice is squawky like a duck with a bad cold; Dragonfly, whose eyes are as keen as a hawk's. And Circus, whose dad was always getting drunk. Circus has four sisters, one of them only about a month old, just one day younger than my own little sister, Charlotte Ann, who really ought to belong to our gang too because she's so great. But she can't because she's too little and especially because she's a girl, and girls don't usually belong to a boys' club.

Let me see—oh, yes! I ought to tell you that Poetry has a tent in his backyard, where our gang sometimes has our meetings—when we don't have them at the spring or the big sycamore tree or on top of the hill on the east side of the woods, where there are a big rock and a big patch of wild strawberries.

Well, I'd better get busy telling you about

the bear. When we first saw her, she was way down along Sugar Creek, right out in the middle of the swamp. She'd been wallowing in the mud, the way black bears do in the summertime when it's terribly hot. That's why I told you the bear looked like one of my dad's big black hogs.

Dragonfly had come over to my house right after lunch that day. And because it was so terribly hot, my dad and mom decided we could go swimming—except that we had to wait an hour first because it's dangerous to go in swimming right after a meal. You might get cramps, which is kind of like “local paralysis,” and you can't move your legs, and you might drown. Maybe I'm going to be a doctor someday. That's how I happen to know the medical names for some of these things.

“Whew!” I said when I'd finished eating. “It's *terribly* hot!” Then I said, “May I be excused, please?” That is what you're supposed to say when you leave the table before the others do.

“Certainly,” Dad said.

But Mom said, “I'm sorry, Billy, but I'll have to have help with the dishes today. It's wash day, you know.”

I looked at all those dirty dishes on the table—the plates and cups and saucers and my big blue-and-white mug out of which I drank milk three times a day. And when I saw all the forks and knives and spoons and a big stack of other dishes, it actually hurt way down inside of me. I'd a whole lot rather be dunking myself in the

old swimming hole in Sugar Creek than sloshing soapy water over dirty dishes—*hot* water at that! On a terribly hot day!

Then I happened to think how much my mom loved me and how hard she had to work all the time to keep our clothes clean—and the house—and prepare the meals and take care of Charlotte Ann, and how very tired she looked.

So I just made myself smile and say cheerfully, “Sure! I’ll help you! I can’t go swimming for an hour anyway!”

There was another reason that I wanted to help Mom, which I can’t take time to tell you now. But when I’d been in the other room, looking at Charlotte Ann and watching her drink her milk out of a bottle, I’d heard Dad say to Mom, “There’s a little secret I want to tell you about Bill when I get a chance. You know . . .”

Then he told her something I’d told him that very morning—a secret that was the most important secret of my whole life. But I think I’ll let you guess what it was.

Pretty soon the dishes were finished and Dragonfly was there, and in a jiffy he and I—both barefoot and with our overalls rolled up so our toes wouldn’t get caught in the cuffs and send us sprawling head over heels—went scuttling like wild things across the road, over the old rail fence, and through the woods to the spring, where we knew the gang would be waiting for us.

In ten or fifteen minutes we all were there—all except Little Jim, who took piano lessons

and had to practice a whole hour every day, a half hour in the morning and a half hour right after the noon meal.

He had taken lessons last summer too and could play a lot of things. Someday maybe he'd be a famous concert pianist. He knew the names of nearly all the famous musicians, such as Bach and Beethoven and Wagner. He even knew stories about different ones. Little Jim's mother was a wonderful musician, and she played the piano in our church on Sundays.

Did you ever hear a flock of blackbirds in the autumn, getting ready to fly south for the winter? Their voices are all raspy from chirping so much, and they seem to be squawking to the leaves of the trees to look out because pretty soon Jack Frost'll get 'em and they'll all have to die and be buried in a white grave.

Well, when our gang gets together after we've been separated for a while, we're almost as noisy as a hundred blackbirds. Blackbirds are what the winged notes on Little Jim's music sheets look like. They almost make a fellow dizzy to even think of trying to play them.

Pretty soon Little Jim was there, carrying the stick that he had cut from an ash limb. He nearly always carried a stick. He came running down the hill with his straw hat in one hand and his stick in the other, his short legs pumping like a boy's in a bicycle race and with the dark curls on his head shining in the sun.

And then we were all running as fast as we could toward the swimming hole.

“Last one in’s a bear’s tail,” Circus cried over his shoulder. He was the fastest runner of all of us. He had his shirt off even before he got there, taking it off on the run. He was the first one in, all right, and I was the last. I was a little slow on purpose because I didn’t want Little Jim to be the bear’s tail.

“Bears don’t have tails,” Poetry yelled to Circus.

“Neither do cows jump over moons,” Circus yelled back.

That started Poetry off:

“Hey, diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon.”

Circus made a dive for Poetry, caught him around the neck, ducked him a couple of times, and said, quoting a poem himself:

“This is the cow with the crumpled horn,
That tossed the dog, that worried the cat,
That caught the rat, that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.”

Poetry looked disgusted at being called a cow, not being able to help it because he was so big.

Well, we had water fights and diving and swimming contests until we were cooled off. Then we dressed and started looking for different kinds of shells. All of us were collecting shells for a hobby that summer.

I don't know how we got to talking about bears, but we did. And I'll have to admit I felt kind of creepy when Dragonfly told us a true story about how a bear once caught and buried a man alive. We were down along the edge of the swamp, lying in the grass, right close to the big hollow sycamore tree, resting and thinking about how we'd caught a bank robber there just one month before.

"It happened away out West along the Colorado River," Dragonfly said. "First, the bear—it was a great big grizzly—caught and buried a colt. Grizzly bears cache their food, you know, like dogs do a bone. Then they come back later and dig it up and eat it. Well, when the owner of the colt found out where it was buried, he tried to shoot the bear.

"Old Grizzly just rushed at him and knocked him down. The man's gun barrel hit his own head and knocked him unconscious. Then old Grizzly, thinking the man was dead, picked him up and buried him right beside the colt.

"Then the bear dug up the colt, ate some of it for dinner, and went away. Of course, the man wasn't buried very deep, and he could still breathe. Pretty soon he came to and dug his way out and hurried away before the bear decided it was time for supper.

"That's a true story," Dragonfly said as he finished.

"But there aren't any bears around here, so we don't need to be afraid," Big Jim said, looking at Little Jim, who was holding on to his

stick with both hands as if he was beginning to be scared.

“Not any grizzly bears,” I said, “because they don’t live in this part of America.” I’d been reading about bears in a book in my dad’s library. My dad had the most interesting books for a boy to read.

Soon we began to feel hot again, and we decided to follow the old footpath that leads through the swamp. It was nearly always cool there. Little springs came out of the hillside and oozed their way through the mud, making it cool even on the hottest days.

We were still thinking about bears—anyway, I was, and Little Jim was holding on to his stick very tight—when suddenly Dragonfly said, “Pssst!”

³
SUGAR CREEK GANG

The **WINTER
RESCUE**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

Beginning to write a story is something like diving under a cold shower—or taking the first plunge into Sugar Creek when the water’s cold. It’s hard to get started. But after I’m in, paragraph deep, and my thoughts are splashing around a little, it certainly feels great. My words go swimming and diving and having a good time—in ink, of course, because I always use a pen when I write.

So, hurrah! Here I am, already started, trudging along faster than anything on a brand new Sugar Creek Gang story. Does it ever feel good to be writing again!

In just a minute I’ll explain what I mean by “trudging.” That is, I’ll explain it when I’m telling you about the last time our gang went in swimming before school started that fall.

That was kind of a sad day for us—that last Saturday. Especially for Little Jim, and I’ll have to tell you about it even though I don’t like to write about sad things.

Hm, I wonder how many miles the point of a boy’s pen travels while he’s writing a long story like this one’s going to be. Hundreds and hundreds of miles, I guess, although I never figured it up. Not liking arithmetic very well is the main reason.

Well, none of us boys wanted school to begin, even though we knew every boy ought to have an education if he wanted to amount to anything. But at last that wonderful summer was over, and we knew there wasn't any way to get out of it. Going to school is like starting to swim too. After you get in, it's fun, and it's good for you. It washes all the ignorance off a boy and makes him feel good.

It was Saturday, the last Saturday of our summer, and it was noon at our house. I took the last bite of my three-cornered piece of black-berry pie and chewed it as long as I could because it tasted so good I hated to swallow it. Then I looked across the table at my dad's bushy blackish-red eyebrows to see if he was going to say no when I asked him if I could go swimming.

Charlotte Ann, my three-month-old, black-haired baby sister, was in her blue-and-white bassinet, kind of half lying down and half sitting up like a baby bird in a nest full of pillows. She was smiling as if she was happier than anything and was gurgling and drooling, which means she was making bubbles of saliva tumble out of her soft little lips. And her arms and legs were going like four windmills whirling all at once. Her pretty little ears looked like the halves of dried peaches, which somebody had glued onto the side of her head.

She's getting prettier all the time, I thought. *If only she doesn't get red hair like mine.* I could see that someday maybe there'd be freckles on her

nose, and I felt sorry for her because I had freckles myself and didn't like them. In fact, there were freckles all over my face.

Dad's big eyebrows were halfway between up and down, and Mom was busy eating her pie and smiling back at Charlotte Ann. In fact, Dad was looking at Charlotte Ann too, as if Bill Collins—that's my name—wasn't even important anymore. I had had to take second place at our house ever since Charlotte Ann was born. That's what a boy has to do when a new baby comes to his house to live.

I sighed, thinking about how hot it was and looking over the top of a stack of dirty dishes in the sink by the window. I was wishing I was outdoors running through the woods toward the spring, where I knew Dragonfly, Poetry, Circus, Big Jim, and Little Jim would be waiting for me and where old Sugar Creek would be almost screaming for us to come and jump into it.

The creek wanted to prove to us its water was still warm enough to swim in, even if it was going to be fall pretty soon. Then it would be winter, and Sugar Creek would have a cold, sad face until the spring rains came and washed it again and the sun melted its ice coat and made it happy. Say, if I were old Sugar Creek, about the only time I could ever be happy would be when a gang of boys was swimming in my warm, sparkling water.

I looked away from the window without seeing the dishes and was looking at the little Scottish terrier design on Charlotte Ann's bassinet

when I said, “Look at her wave her arms and legs, Dad! I’ll bet she could swim without even having to learn how.”

My dad could read my thoughts just like I could read an electric sign on a city store. You should have seen his big eyebrows drop like a grassy ledge caving in along Sugar Creek. “Those aren’t swimming movements,” he said, taking a last bite of pie. “Those are movements a boy’s hands make when he is doing the dishes.”

That’s why I was the last one of our gang to get to the spring that day.

It seemed to take almost an hour to wash those dishes. While I was doing them, I looked down at Charlotte Ann, who was still making spit bubbles. Her lips were like two red rose petals all wet with dew, and I thought, *Go on, little innocent child, and have your play! Someday you’ll grow up, and then you’ll have to work!* And for a minute I was mad at her for not growing faster.

But pretty soon the dishes were all done and set away, and I was feeling happy again. I made a dive for my straw hat, which was on the floor in a corner where I wasn’t supposed to put it. Mom always wanted me to hang it up. A jiffy later I was outside, my bare feet carrying me lickety-sizzle down the path through the woods to the spring.

I tell you, it was great to be with the gang again. Maybe I’d better tell you about our gang just in case you may not have read my other Sugar Creek Gang stories—although it seems

everybody in the world ought to know about us, with all the newspaper publicity we got after Little Jim killed that fierce old mother bear. If he hadn't, she might have ripped him all to pieces with her horrible teeth and claws or maybe hugged him to death the way bears do.

Well, this was our gang: Big Jim, our leader, who was so big he had actually shaved his fuzzy mustache once and who had been a Scout; Little Jim, a great little guy with blue eyes like Charlotte Ann's and the best Christian in the world; Circus, our acrobat, who right that very minute was sitting on the first limb of a maple sapling looking like a chimpanzee; Poetry, who was short and globular—which means “round, like a globe”—and who knew 101 poems by heart; Dragonfly, whose eyes were very large like a dragonfly's eyes—he could see better than the rest of us; and me, Bill Collins.

The new member of our gang was there too, Little Jim's pet bear, the little black baby bear whose savage mother got killed in my last story. That brown-nosed bear was the cutest, most awkward little fellow you ever saw. He could already do a half dozen tricks. We had named him Triangle because there was a three-cornered white spot on his chest like black baby bears sometimes have.

Little Jim had put a new leather collar on Triangle's neck with the word *Triangle* engraved on it. And Little Jim's favorite Bible verse was right below that: “Train up a child in the way

he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.”

I never saw anybody in my life who was a better Christian than Little Jim, and he wasn't ashamed of being one either. In fact, he was proud of it.

Poetry had made up a good poem about Triangle, which started like this:

Black little, bad little, brown-nosed bear,
Frowzy little fellow with a tail that isn't there.

Bears really don't have tails except for a stubby little stump that looks kind of like a dog's tail that has been cut off. Only Triangle's tail didn't stand straight up the way a tail does on a happy dog. It hung down the way a sheep's tail does.

No girls belonged to our gang. None of us boys liked girls very well. Girls are such funny things, always scared of mice and screaming whenever they see a spider or something. Circus *did* have a kind of nice ordinary-looking sister whom I'd made up my mind I was going to kill a spider for as soon as I got a chance—which I didn't get until school started that fall.

But we decided to let Little Jim's bear belong. Bears aren't afraid of mice. They even eat them. Triangle liked mice, frogs, fish, ants, bees and their honey, blackberry pie, and things like that. We couldn't let him eat too much honey or other sweet things at one time, though, or he'd have gotten sick.

You should have seen that little fellow swim! He was as playful as a kitten in the water. And he was only about three times as big as a big tomcat, although he was growing fast.

Well, there we were, all of us barefoot, knowing that next Monday we'd have to wear shoes all day at school and feeling sad because of it. All of a sudden, Circus—who, as I told you, was sitting on the first limb of a maple sapling—let out a war whoop, slid down the tree, and started running toward the swimming hole, yelling back over his shoulder, "Last one in's a bear's tail!"

In less than a jiffy all the gang was running right after him as fast as they could go—all except Little Jim and Triangle and me. That mischievous little rascal of a bear had evidently made up his mind he didn't want to go in swimming, because he wouldn't even get up when Little Jim told him to. He just lay there in the sun as though he was too lazy or sleepy to move.

I caught hold of the chain that was fastened to his collar, and both of us pulled and scolded until Triangle growled a disgusted sort of growl and whined lazily. That made Little Jim decide to give him a switching with a little willow switch, which is what you have to do with baby bears when they won't obey you.

That switching helped a little, like punishment does a boy for a while, and soon we were on our way to the swimming hole. I noticed when we were half pulling the little bear along behind us that the collar around his neck was a

bit too loose and maybe we'd better tighten it another notch. But Little Jim said he thought that'd be too tight and might choke Triangle. Besides, the collar was locked on, and the key was at Little Jim's house almost a quarter of a mile away.

Then we were at the swimming hole. Because Triangle was still stubborn and didn't want to go into the water and was cross when we threw him in and wouldn't do any of his tricks for us, Little Jim decided to tie him to an ash sapling up on the bank.

"Smarty," Little Jim said. "I'm going to tie you up behind this big stump so you can't even watch us. That's your punishment for not cooperating," which was a word our teacher uses on our report cards. When we don't obey her or join the others in their play or work, she gives us a check mark in the square that says, "Does not cooperate." (That fall there was only one of the Sugar Creek Gang who had a check mark there, but I won't tell you which one of us it was because I don't think my parents would want anybody to know.)

Each one of our gang had his favorite swimming style. Little Jim used the breaststroke, which made him look like a white frog swimming in the water. Circus used the crawl stroke. In fact, most of us did. That's the kind of stroke many fast swimmers use. But Poetry, being an expert swimmer, had a newfangled stroke called the "trudgen." He just lay facedown in the water, rolled his barrel-like body from side to side, and

swung his arms in long, overarm movements, each arm taking turns. His feet under the water worked like my mom's big silver-colored scissors do when they're cutting out a new dress for Charlotte Ann.

All the time I was in swimming I kept thinking about little brown-nosed Triangle up there on the bank behind the stump, and I thought, *What if the little fellow should slip the collar over his head and run away?* There was a big cornfield right there beyond the stump, and a baby bear might get lost in a cornfield, not having any mother to take care of him. And pretty soon it'd be fall and then winter. Or what if somebody who wanted to steal him and sell him to the zoo should sneak up and slip the collar off his neck and carry him away?

More than an hour later we sort of came to ourselves and realized we'd better get dressed to go home. Tomorrow would be Sunday, and we'd have to polish our shoes and do some extra chores on Saturday so we wouldn't have to do them Sunday. As I told you in my last book, all of our gang went to church and Sunday school. We felt sorry for any boy who didn't want to go and for all the kids whose parents didn't think a boy's soul was as important as the rest of him.

Imagine a boy going to school five days a week to learn reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, and other important things and then not go to church just once a week to learn about the Bible, which is the most impor-

tant book in the world. It tells you how to be saved, which is even more important than being educated.

Well, Dragonfly got dressed first and ran up the bank toward the old stump to untie Triangle, with Little Jim and me right at his already-dirty bare heels. All of a sudden Dragonfly stopped dead in his tracks and cried, "Hey! He's *gone!* Triangle's *gone!* Somebody's stolen him!"

⁴
SUGAR CREEK GANG
The **LOST**
CAMPERS

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

There was a big flood in Sugar Creek that spring. Do you remember the time we went to see Old Man Paddler at his cabin in the hills? I guess there never was a snowstorm like that one either. It snowed and snowed and kept on snowing nearly all winter, and that's the reason there was such a big flood in Sugar Creek when all that snow melted.

But if there hadn't been a flood in which Little Jim and I almost got drowned, then later on in the summer—when the gang was up north on our camping trip—maybe Poetry and Dragonfly and I all three *would* have drowned. Poetry and Dragonfly and Little Jim are the names of some of the boys in our gang. I'll introduce you to them in a minute. So before I can tell you about the tangled-up adventures we had up north, I'll have to give you a chapter or two on the famous Sugar Creek flood.

You see, all that snow melting and running across the fields and down the hills into Sugar Creek made him angry. After he woke up out of his long winter's sleep, he got out of bed (creek bed) and ran wild all over the country. His fierce brown water sighed and hissed and boiled and roared and spread out over the cornfields and the swamp and the bayou like a

savage octopus reaching out his long, brown water-fingers. He caught pigs and cows and logs and even barns and whirled them all downstream, turned them over and over, and smashed them against rocks and cliffs.

Well, a boy isn't always to blame for all the trouble he gets into. Certainly Little Jim and I weren't to blame for there being so much snow that winter, and we couldn't help it that it rained so hard and so much in the spring and caused the flood that was actually the worst flood in the history of Sugar Creek.

Although maybe I *shouldn't* have put Little Jim into a big washtub and towed him out through the shallow water to his dad's hog house, which was standing in water about two feet deep. But Little Jim's kitten was up on the top of the hog house, meowing like everything, and it looked like the water might get higher. Maybe the kitten—which was a very cute blue-and-white one with an all-white face and a half-white tail—would be drowned, we thought, so we decided to rescue it before the water crept up any higher. And we might just as well have a lot of fun while we were doing it.

Even a boy knows better than to make a raft and float on it out into a mad creek, and we wouldn't have tried to do such a silly thing, but what we did do turned out to be almost as dangerous. You see, Little Jim's dad's low, flat-roofed hog house was standing in very quiet water that had backed up from the bayou into their barnyard. It didn't look a bit dangerous

to do what we decided to do. In fact, it wasn't, when we started to go out to where the kitten was. And it wouldn't have been at all, if the dike way up along Sugar Creek hadn't broken and let loose a wall of water about three feet high. It came rushing upon us and—but that's getting ahead of the story.

Let me introduce the gang first, in case you've never heard about us. There were just six of us up until the time Tom Till joined, and when he joined that made the number seven, which is a perfect number.

First, and best, in our gang was Little Jim, a good-looking kid with shining blue eyes, and a great little Christian. For a while he had about all the religion there was in the Sugar Creek Gang, until the rest of us woke up to the fact that to be a Christian didn't mean that you had to be sad and wear a long face or be a girl. And we found out that Jesus Himself was a boy once, just our size, and He liked boys even better than our parents do.

Then there was Big Jim, our leader, who had a baby-sized mustache that looked like the fuzz that grows on a baby pigeon. He was the best fighter in the county, and he'd licked the stuffings out of Tom Till's big brother, Bob. Did I tell you the Till boys' dad wasn't a Christian?—that being the reason Tom and Bob didn't know anything about the Bible and were as mean as an angry old setting hen when you try to break up her nest.

Big Jim and Little Jim weren't brothers but

were just friends, liking each other maybe better than any of us liked the rest of us. Unless it was the way I liked Poetry, which is the name of the barrel-shaped member of our gang, who knows 101 poems by heart and is always quoting one and who has a mind that is like a detective's. Poetry had a squawky voice like a young rooster learning to crow, and he growled half bass and half soprano when he tried to sing in church.

Then there was Circus, our acrobat, who turned handsprings and somersaults and liked to climb trees better than a healthy boy likes to eat strawberries. Circus's dad had been an alcoholic, you know, but something happened to him, which the pastor of our church called being "born again," and after that he was the grandest man a boy could ever have for a father. Except, of course, my own dad, who must have been the best man in the world or my mom wouldn't have picked him out to marry.

Boy oh boy! You ought to meet my brownish-gray-haired mom and my neat baby sister, Charlotte Ann. Mom isn't exactly pretty like Little Jim's mom, but she's got the nicest face I ever saw. Even when she isn't saying a word to me, I can feel her face saying nice things to me and Dad and Charlotte Ann, kind of like wireless telegraphy or something.

Let me see—where was I? Oh, yes. I was telling you about the gang. Dragonfly's the only one I haven't mentioned. He's the pop-eyed one of the gang. He has eyes that make me think

of a walleyed pike and especially of a dragonfly, which has two great big eyes that are almost as large as its head, which of course Dragonfly's aren't. But they're big anyway, and his nose doesn't point straight out the way a boy's nose ought to but turns south right at the end. But after you've played with him a few times and know what a great guy he is, you forget all about him being as homely as a mud fence, and you like him a lot. Well, that's us: Big Jim and Little Jim, and Poetry and Circus, and Dragonfly and red-haired me, Bill Collins. Maybe I ought to tell you that I have a fiery temper that sometimes goes off just like a firecracker and is always getting me into trouble.

And now, here goes the story of the flood that was the worst flood in the history of Sugar Creek. Even Old Man Paddler, the kind, white-whiskered old man who lives up in the hills and was one of the pioneers of the Sugar Creek territory, can't remember any flood that was worse.

That old man knows so many important things, and he can tell some of the most exciting tales of the Sugar Creek of long ago. Maybe someday I'll see if I can coax him into writing about the terrible blizzard of 1880 and of the old trapper whom the Indians got jealous of because he caught so many more beavers than they did. They shot him through the heart with an arrow one morning while he was setting his traps. Old Man Paddler has told us boys that story many times.

Well, after we'd saved the old man's life

that cold, snowy day, which I told you about in my last book, *The Winter Rescue*, and after my dad and Circus's dad and a lot of other men had waded through the storm up into the hills to get us—and after we finally got home safely the next day—it began to snow and snow, and all the roads were blocked, and we had to actually dig a tunnel through the big drift next to our barn before we could get in.

After a while, though, a nice long while in which Charlotte Ann kept on growing and learning to say “Daddy” and to sit up without being propped with a pillow, spring began to come. First, there'd be a nice warm day, then a cold one, then rain and more rain, and a warm day again. Then one day in late March, old Sugar Creek started to wake up from his long winter's nap.

About a week before the actual flood, when the creek was still frozen, our gang was standing on the big bridge that goes across the deepest and widest part, looking down at the dirty, snow-covered, slushy-looking ice. And all of a sudden we heard a deep rumbling roar that started right under the bridge and thundered all the way up the creek toward the spring, sounding like an angry thunderclap with a long noisy tail dragging itself across the sky.

Little Jim cried out as though someone had hurt him. “What *is* that?” He looked as if he was afraid, which he is sometimes.

And Big Jim said, “*That?* That's the ice cracking. It's breaking up, and in a few days maybe

it'll all break and crack up into a million pieces and go growling downstream, and when it does, it'll be something to look at! See those big ugly scars on that old elm tree over there? Away up high almost to the first limb? That's where the ice crashed against it last year. See where the paint is knocked off the bridge abutment down there? The ice was clear up there last year."

Crash! Roar-r-r-r-zzzz! The ice was breaking up all right because it was a warm day and all the snow was melting too.

We stayed there watching Sugar Creek's frozen old face, and I thought about all the nice fish that were down under there. And I was wondering if maybe the radio report was right, that it was going to rain for a week beginning that very night, and what'd happen to the little fishies who got lost from their parents and in the swift current were whirled away downstream to some other part of the country.

Well, the radio was right. It began to rain that night, and it kept right on. The ice melted and broke and began to float downstream. It gathered itself into great chunks of different sizes and shapes and looked like a million giant-sized ice cubes out of somebody's refrigerator, only they acted as though they were alive. The brown water of Sugar Creek pushed them from beneath and squeezed its way out through the cracks between pieces and ran over the top, churning and boiling and grinding and cracking and roaring and sizzling and fussing like an old setting hen.

I tell you, it was a great sight to see and great to listen to, and we had the feeling all the time that something was going to happen.

And something did happen—not that day but soon after that, on a Saturday. I had gone over to Little Jim’s house on an errand for Mom, although she and I had just made up an errand so I’d have a good excuse to go over there.

You see, Little Jim’s pet bear had had to be sold to the zoo. It was getting too big to be a pet and was sometimes very cross and might get angry someday and hurt somebody. Little Jim’s parents had bought a blue-and-white kitten for him so that he wouldn’t be so lonesome. As I told you, the kitten’s face was all white, and it had a half-white tail, making it about the prettiest kitten I ever saw.

I had on my hip-high rubber boots when I came sloshing into Little Jim’s backyard about two o’clock that afternoon, just as he was finishing practicing his piano lesson, which was a hard piece by somebody named Liszt.

The sun was shining down very hot for a spring day. I could hear Sugar Creek sighing about a fourth of a mile down the road, and I wished we could go down there and watch the flood. But our parents wouldn’t let us stand on the bridge anymore, because it wasn’t safe. Some bridges farther up the creek had actually been washed out.

The water had filled up the old swamp and the bayou that was on Little Jim’s dad’s farm,

backing way up into their barnyard and making their straw stack look like a big brownish-yellow island in a dirty brown lake.

Little Jim finished his piano lesson and came out to where I was.

“Hi, Little Jim,” I said, and he said, “Hi, Bill.”

He still had a sad expression on his face because he didn’t have any baby bear to play with.

“I came over to borrow some baking soda,” I said. “How’s the new kitten today? Where is he? I want to see him. Boy, it sure is a pretty day. Wish we could go down and watch the flood.”

He grinned at all the different things I had said, and he sighed and mumbled, “I’d rather have my bear back.”

“You could have a bare back if you tore your shirt on a barbed wire,” I said, trying to be funny and not being.

And just then I saw his little blue-and-white cat out in their barnyard on top of the hog house. It was a brand new hog house about four feet high and had a board floor, Little Jim told me. He knew because his dad and he had built it themselves. They hadn’t even set it up on its foundation yet.

The kitten looked lonesome. How it got up there we didn’t know, unless it had been trying to catch a mouse and the water had crept up on it unawares. Anyway, there it was, and it was meowing like everything and looking like a boy feels when he’s lost.

It looked like a rescue job for lifeguards, which all of a sudden Little Jim and I decided we were.

“Let’s go out and get him,” I said.

There really wasn’t any danger, for the water wasn’t moving. It had backed up from the bayou and was just standing there making a big dirty lake in their barnyard.

“We ought to have a boat,” I said, looking around for something that might be good to ride in.

It was Little Jim’s idea, not mine, to get his mom’s washtub. It wouldn’t be big enough for two of us, but it would hold Little Jim, and I had on boots anyway and could pull him. Then when we got there, we could put the kitten in the tub too, and I could pull them both back to shore, the “shore” being the side of a little hill right close to the barn.

It didn’t take us more than a jiffy to get the tub and to get Little Jim squatted down in the middle of it and me on the other end of a long rope, pulling him out to the hog house.

Squash, squash, slop, splash went my big rubber boots, and Little Jim floated along behind me, grinning and holding onto the sides of the tub with both hands and with his teeth shut tight, trying not to act scared.

“Where’s your dad?” I asked when we were halfway out to the kitten, which was meowing even worse than before.

“He and Big Jim’s daddy are up at the other end of the bayou piling up sacks of sand,”

Little Jim said, “so the water won’t break over and flood our cornfield. Because if it does, it’ll wash out all the wheat Dad sowed between the rows last fall.”

Well, we didn’t know very much about floods, except that when we were little we’d heard about one on the Ohio River. But anyway, we were having a lot of fun, so we went on out through the muddy water toward the hog house.

Pretty soon we were there, and Little Jim and I climbed up on top of it and sat there in the sun, pretending we were on an enchanted island and were pirates. Then we were shipwrecked sailors.

We put the cute little fuzzy kitten in the tub and pushed it out into the water—the tub, I mean—with the kitten in it. Kitty didn’t seem to mind that, so we left him there while we told stories we’d read in books and talked about our coming camping trip up north and how much fun we’d have and a lot of things. I tied the end of the rope around my leg so Kitty wouldn’t drift away.

And all the time, *time* was passing, and the snow up in the hills was melting, and all the little rivers and branches that ran into Sugar Creek kept on emptying themselves. And all the time, the men were up there at the head of the bayou stacking big sacks of sand on the levee that protected Little Jim’s dad’s field from the flood.

Then, just as time does when a boy is having a lot of fun, two whole hours went past, and

all of a sudden Little Jim said, "Look, Bill! The water's getting higher! It's almost—*look out!*" And then he began to scream, "We're moving! We're—" He turned as white as a piece of typewriter paper, and he grabbed hold of me so tight his nails dug into my arm.

I believed it and didn't believe it both at the same time. I looked down at the water, which was certainly a lot higher than it had been. The back side of the hog house was sliding down deeper. I knew what had happened. That back end was set right at the edge of a little hill, and the water had crept up and washed the dirt away from underneath it. And quick as a flash I knew we were in for it.

I looked toward the river and the bayou, and there was a big log spinning toward us. The dark, swirling, muddy water was carrying cornstalks and tree branches and pieces of wood and all kinds of debris, and the log was headed toward us.

Straight toward us, faster and faster! It looked as if all of Sugar Creek was running over the cornfield below us and that it had picked up all the woodpiles in the country and was carrying them away.

Little Jim held onto me, and I held onto him, and we both held onto the roof of the hog house, knowing that if the hog house slid down the hill a little farther, it'd turn over or slide right out into the current, and we'd be carried away. I tell you I was scared, *so* scared that I was numb all over and couldn't think straight.

Then, with a terrible grinding roar, that big log crashed into the side of our hog house. And that was the only thing that was needed to break it loose and start it moving. In seconds there we were, floating away, twisting around and around but *not* turning over! And we were being carried down toward the big bridge where Sugar Creek was the maddest of all.

“We—we’re *g-gone!*” Little Jim said, his teeth chattering. And then that little fellow, because he was a wonderful Christian, said, “It’s better for us to d-drown than it would be for Little Tom Till or Big B-Bob, ’cause th-they’re not saved.”

Imagine that! He knew that if we’d drowned right there we would have gone straight to heaven! And that’s a lot more than a lot of the smartest people in the world know.

5
SUGAR CREEK GANG
The **CHICAGO**
ADVENTURE

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PRESS
CHICAGO

1

Roaring along through the sky 5,000 feet high—which is almost a mile—and at 400 miles an hour was the most thrilling experience of my life up to that time.

Well, come to think of it, I guess riding on the waves of a mad lake, with nothing to hold me up except a life-preserver vest, was really the most thrilling as well as the craziest. As I told you in my last story about the Sugar Creek Gang, being tossed around by those big angry waves was like being scared half to death riding on a Tilt-A-Whirl at a county fair.

I had thought maybe an airplane ride would be even worse. It wasn't at all, but, boy, oh boy, was it different!

Of course none of us thought that Dragonfly, who is the balloon-eyed member of our gang, would get a bad case of vertigo and have to have the stewardess give him first aid to bring him back to normal again. In fact, the pilot actually had to come down to a lower altitude before Dragonfly was all right.

That's getting too far ahead of the story though, and I'll have to wait a chapter or two before I explain what vertigo means.

I'm going to be a doctor when I grow up, you know, and that's why I'm learning the names

of all the medical terms I can while I'm little, which I'm not actually anymore. I'm already ten and three-fourths years old and have red hair and—but it wouldn't be fair to tell you about myself before introducing the rest of the gang.

The Sugar Creek Gang is the most important gang in the whole country, maybe. Anyway, we have more twisted-up adventures than most anybody else in the world, and so far they have all come out all right.

Maybe I'd better take time right now to introduce the members of the gang to you—and to explain why we were taking an airplane ride and where to.

You remember that Circus, who is our acrobat and who also has an acrobatic voice that can climb the musical scale even better than he can climb a tree, had been invited to a big Chicago church to sing over the radio on Thanksgiving Day. Well, the date was changed, and he was going to sing at what is called a youth rally on Labor Day weekend in September instead, and all the gang was going with him.

Little Jim, the littlest and the grandest guy in the gang, and maybe in the whole world, had to go with him to accompany him on the piano anyway, he being an expert pianist. So, of course, we all wanted to go along, and our parents had said we could—that is, they had *finally* said we could.

It took my brownish-gray-haired mom quite a while to make up her mind to let me go, and I had to wash dishes every noon for all the rest of

the summer just to show my appreciation. I even had to do them as if I liked to—while I didn't, although I was beginning to have sense enough not to say so.

The day Mom finally made up her mind was one of the hottest days we'd had that year. I actually never had felt such *tired* weather in all my life. You could lie right down after eating a dinner of fried chicken, noodles, buttered mashed potatoes, and raspberry shortcake, and go to sleep in less than a minute. You could stay asleep all the way through dishwashing time—that is, if Mom didn't get tired of waiting for you to come and help, and call you.

You could even sleep better if you knew that, after the dishes were done, there were potatoes to hoe and beans to pick. But if you happened to be going swimming, or if there was going to be a gang meeting, you weren't even sleepy.

That afternoon there were beans to be picked, so as soon as I had finished my shortcake, I asked to be excused. Dad said yes and let me get up and go into our living room, which was the coolest room in the house, and lie down on the floor until Mom had the dishes ready.

Mom's floor was always clean, but even at that she always made me lay a paper on it before I could put a pillow down to sleep on. I hadn't any more than lain down, it seemed, when her voice came sizzling in from the kitchen and woke me up.

I didn't like to wake up any more than I did any other time. I'd been dreaming the craziest dream. Anyway, it seemed crazy at the time, and anybody would have laughed at it. I never realized, while I was dreaming, that something was going to happen almost like that in real life after we got to Chicago.

I dreamed that I was already a doctor and that I was in a hospital with a lot of nurses in white all around. Also, all around and overhead, airplane engines were droning. One of the members of the Sugar Creek Gang had eaten too much raspberry shortcake and had a stomachache, and the only thing that would help him was for me, the doctor, to give him a blood transfusion. In my dream I was pouring raspberry juice into one of the veins of his arm through a little tin funnel, and he was crying and saying, "I don't like to wash dishes! I don't want to!"

That was when Mom called me to wake up and come to help her.

I woke up halfway at first, and I was as cross as anything, which any doctor will tell you is natural for anybody when he gets waked up without wanting to be.

But my dad, who is a Christian and knows the Bible from A to Z—and not only says he is a Christian, but actually acts like one at home as well as in church—he says the Bible says, "Be angry, and yet do not sin." And that means if somebody or something makes you angry, you

ought to tie up your anger, the way people do a mad bull, and not let it run wild.

Dad says a boy's temper under control is like a fire in a stove, useful for many things. But when it isn't controlled, it's like a fire in a hay-mow or a forest. Some people actually die many years sooner than they ought to because they get mad so many times and stay mad so long it makes them sick.

Maybe my dad tells me these things especially because I'm red-haired and maybe am too quick-tempered. He says if I don't lose my temper all the time, but keep it under control, it'll help me do many important things while I'm growing up.

So, as angry as I was for being waked up and for having to do dishes, I tied up my anger as quick as I could. I didn't say a word or grumble or anything. I didn't even frown.

By the way, do you know how many muscles of your face have to work to make a fierce-looking frown? Maybe you wouldn't believe it, but it actually takes sixty-five, our teacher says. And it takes only thirteen muscles to make a smile. So it's a waste of energy to go around frowning when you're already tired and lazy.

While on the way from the living room to the kitchen to help Mom, I remembered something Dad had told me one day when I was going around our barnyard with a big scowl on my very freckled face. This is what he said: "Bill Collins, you're making the same face while you're

a boy that you'll have to look at in the mirror all the rest of your life."

That had made me scowl deeper than ever, and I went toward the barn still scowling but not saying anything. The minute I got into the barn, though, I took out of my pocket a little round mirror that I was carrying and looked at myself. And because I was angry, I scowled and scowled and made a fierce face and stuck out my tongue at myself and hated myself for a while.

Then I saw a big, long brown rat dart across the barn floor, and in a flash I was chasing after it and calling old Mixy-cat to come and do her work and see to it that there weren't so many live rats around the Collins family's barn.

What Dad had said didn't soak in at all until one day Mom told me almost the same thing, only in different words.

My mom has the kindest face I ever saw, and her forehead is very smooth, without any deep creases in it—either going across it or running up and down. Just for fun one day I asked her if she'd been ironing it, it was so smooth, and do you know what she said?

She said, "I've been ironing it all my life. I've kept the frowns and wrinkles off ever since I was a little girl, so the muscles that make frowns and wrinkles won't have a chance to grow"—which they will if they get too much exercise.

So it would be better for even a girl to be cheerful while she's little enough to be still

growing, so she'll have a face like my mom's when she gets big.

Well, I thought all those thoughts even before I was halfway to the kitchen. On the way, I stepped into our downstairs bedroom for a half jiffy to look at Charlotte Ann. She was my one-year-old baby sister and had pretty brownish-red curls and several small freckles on her nose. She was supposed to be sleeping and wasn't. She was lying there holding a toy in one hand and shaking it and trying to take it apart to see what made it rattle.

I stood looking down at her pretty pink cheeks, and her brownish-red hair, and her chubby little fists, and at the kind of disgusted pucker on her forehead because the toy wouldn't come apart.

"Listen, Charlotte Ann," I said, scowling at her, "you're making the same kind of face now you'll have to look at in the mirror all the rest of your life. You've got to think pretty thoughts if you want to have a pretty face."

Then I went out into the kitchen and washed my hands with soap, which is what you're supposed to do before you dry dishes, or else maybe Mom will have to wash the dishes over again and the drying towel too.

I still felt cranky, but I kept thinking about the airplane trip the gang was going to take to Chicago—all the gang except me, so far—so I kept my fire in the stove. I knew that pretty soon my parents would have to decide something, and I kept on hoping it would be "Yes."

My mom had been teaching me to sing tenor, and sometimes on Sunday nights, when she'd play the organ in our front room, she and Dad and I would sing trios, which helped to make us all like each other better. So while we were doing dishes that noon, Mom and I started singing different songs we used in school and also some of the gospel songs we used in church. And the next thing we knew, the dishes were done and put away, and I was free to go and pick beans if I wanted to, or if I didn't want to.

I was wishing I could run lickety-sizzle out across our yard, through the gate, across the dusty gravel road, and vault over the rail fence on the other side. I'd fly down the path through the woods, down the hill past the big birch tree to the spring, where the gang was supposed to meet at two o'clock, if they could. Sometimes we couldn't because most of us had to work some of the time. Today was one of the days I couldn't.

As soon as I'd finished the last dish, which was our big long platter that had had the fried chicken on it, I went back into our bathroom. I looked past my ordinary-looking face and saw my dad's reflection in the mirror. He was standing outside our bathroom window, which was closed tight to keep out some of the terrific heat that was outdoors. Standing right beside him was Old Man Paddler.

For those of you who've never heard of Old Man Paddler, I'd better say that he's one of the

best friends the Sugar Creek Gang ever had or ever will have. He lives up in the hills above Sugar Creek and likes kids, and he has put us boys into his will, which he says he's already made.

He and my dad were standing there talking, and the old man's gnarled hands were gesturing around in a sort of circle, and he was moving them up and down and pointing toward the sky.

Right away I guessed he was talking about the airplane trip to Chicago. I could see his long white whiskers bobbing up and down the way a man's whiskers do when he's talking. All of a sudden, he and Dad reached out and shook hands and then started walking toward the porch.

All of another sudden a great thrill came running and jumped *kersmack* into the middle of my heart. I was so happy it began to hurt inside terribly, because somehow I knew that I was going to get to go with the rest of the gang.

And just that minute, as Dad was opening the screen door to our kitchen to let Old Man Paddler in first, Dad said, "All right, we'll let him go!"

My hands weren't even dry when I left that bathroom. In fact, I hardly saw the towel that slipped from the rack where I'd tossed it up in too big a hurry. I wanted to make a dive for that old man's whiskers and hug him. Instead, I just stood there trembling and seeing myself sailing along through the air with big white clouds all

around our airplane and the earth away down below.

Pretty soon we were all in the living room, where it was cooler than in the kitchen, and were all sitting on different chairs. I had my bare feet twisted around and underneath my chair and fastened onto the rounds and was rocking back and forth, noticing that with every rock the chair crept sideways a little over the rug.

It was kind of like a meeting of some sort at first, with all of us sitting quiet. Then Dad cleared his throat and said in his big voice, "Well, Bill, Mr. Paddler has persuaded us to let him invest a little money in you. He wants to pay your way to Chicago by airplane. His nephew, Barry Boyland, has agreed to come and be chaperone to the whole Sugar Creek Gang."

There was a twinkle in the old man's eyes, several of them in Dad's, and also some in Mom's. Dad finished by saying that the beans could be picked later in the day when it was cooler, and that I really ought to meet with the gang today, if I wanted to, and—

As quick as I could, after I'd courteously thanked the kind, trembling-voiced old man, I was out of the house, running through the heat waves, toward our front gate. I frisked across the road, stirring up a lot of dust, and vaulted over the rail fence. Then I went like greased lightning toward the spring, imagining myself to be an airplane and trying to make a noise

like one, wishing I *was* one, and almost bursting to tell the news to the rest of the gang.

My dad's last words were ringing in my ears as I flew through the woods, with my voice droning like an airplane. This is what he said while we were still in the living room: "Of course, Bill, we shall expect you to keep your eyes open and learn a lot of things while you're there. Make it an educational trip as well as a pleasure trip."

My own answer was very quick. "Sure," I said, already halfway across the room to the door.

I remembered my promise later, though—and kept it too, when I wrote a letter to my parents from Chicago.

Zzzzz-rrrrrr! On my way to the spring!

SUGAR CREEK GANG
The **SECRET**
HIDEOUT

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

If I hadn't been the janitor of our little one-room red brick schoolhouse, I don't suppose I would have cared so much when Poetry's wet pet lamb walked around all over the floor with his muddy feet.

Lambs, you know, are not supposed to go to school, and even though the Sugar Creek Gang knew that, they thought they'd like to see what it was like to have one come in spite of the fact that it was, as a certain poem says, "against the rule."

It certainly made the children laugh and play—and it also made some of them cry and work, especially me. That is, I had to mop the floor, and I had to stay in at recess to do it, with Poetry and all the rest of the gang helping me. It took longer to get the floor clean than it should have, because the lamb accidentally turned over a pail of sudsy water, and it scattered itself in every direction there was.

Maybe before I tell you what the teacher said about the lamb at school, I'd better explain why it was there, and who I mean when I say "Poetry," and also when I say "The Sugar Creek Gang," because maybe you've never heard about us. Then you'll understand that we really weren't trying to get ourselves into trouble

when we took that innocent lamb to school that Monday morning.

The idea had first come to us when we were having our gang meeting the second Saturday after school started. We held our meeting in an abandoned graveyard away up on the other side of Bumblebee Hill, which is the nickname for Strawberry Hill that we'd given it after we'd killed a bear and later fought a tough town gang there. In fact, the bumblebees helped us lick that tough, swearing bunch of boys.

As I said, the second Saturday after school started, we had our gang meeting in that spooky old cemetery, which they didn't bury people in anymore. And that was the time we decided to let Poetry's lamb follow him to school the very next Monday morning.

Right after dinner that Saturday, after I'd dried the dishes and Mom and Dad had both said I didn't have to work that afternoon, I made a dive for our kitchen door. I stopped outside only long enough to keep the door from slamming, so it wouldn't wake up my little one-year-old baby sister, Charlotte Ann. Then like a wild deer, I galloped out across our grassy yard, passed the big walnut tree with the high swing in it, swished across the road past our tin mailbox, which had on it *Theodore Collins*, my Dad's name. And then I touched one hand on the top rail of the fence, vaulted over, and ran.

Ran, I tell you, straight down the path through the woods that leads to the spring. At the biggest tree I swerved to the right and fol-

lowed another path, which had been made by boys' feet. Soon, gasping and panting and swinging my straw hat, I was at the bottom of Bumblebee Hill, where the gang was supposed to meet first.

We all had a spooky feeling about meeting in that graveyard because there were so many stories in the world about graveyards having ghosts in them. So we'd planned to all go there together, and if there *were* any ghosts, we could—well, we could all run away together anyway.

I'd stopped to get rid of some of my extra breath, always having too much after running like that, when I heard a noise of underbrush crashing and breaking and a heavy body running.

I looked up, and there lumbering toward me was my best friend, Leslie Thompson, whose nickname is Poetry. Right that same minute he saw me, and he began to quote between puffs one of his more than one hundred memorized poems. It was about the wind, which I guess his heavy breathing had reminded him of. It went like this:

I saw you toss the kites on high
And blow the birds about the sky;
And all around I heard you pass
Like ladies' skirts across the grass—
O wind, a-blowing all day long!
O wind, that sings so loud a song!

That was one of my favorite poems.

Pretty soon Poetry and I were lying in the long mashed-down grass, watching the white clouds hanging in the lazy blue sky and listening to each other catch his breath.

He started quoting the second verse, getting about halfway through when he was very suddenly interrupted by somebody's spraying water in his face with a squirt gun.

Even I was half mad for a minute, because some of the water spattered in *my* face. Besides, I'd been sort of dreaming about the wind that Poetry's poem was describing, and nobody likes to have his thoughts interrupted.

Poetry had just been saying:

“I saw the different things you did,
But always, you, yourself, you hid;
I felt you push, I heard you call,
I could not see yourself at all . . .”

Then he started to gasp and sputter and get red in the face and roll over and sit up and say something, and from the bushes behind us there came a squawky voice, imitating Poetry's. It said:

“The rain is raining all around,
It rains on field and tree;
It rains on umbrellas here,
And on the ships at sea.”

I knew right away which one of the Sugar Creek Gang it was, because he was the only one

of us who was more disgusted than the rest of us with Poetry's poetry. He was always quoting one of them himself just to make it seem ridiculous. Even if I hadn't heard his voice and seen his brown hair on his hatless head, his blue eyes, and monkeylike face, I'd have known it was Circus.

He came cartwheeling toward us in grand style, just like an acrobat on a county fair stage, only better.

The next minute Circus and Poetry and I were all in a tangled-up scramble like a bunch of boys in a football game. Poetry especially was grunting and trying to unroll himself from the rest of us. In fact, our six pairs of legs and arms, making twelve altogether, sort of looked like a lot of fishing worms in a knot.

We hadn't any more than unscrambled ourselves when there came more running feet in our direction, and in another minute we were four instead of three. This time it was a spindle-legged little guy with very large, bulging eyes and a nose that was crooked at the end. His actual name was Roy Gilbert, but we called him Dragonfly, because his eyes were enormous—almost too big for his little head, which a *real* dragonfly's eyes are, but which, of course, Dragonfly's eyes weren't.

That little chattering, pop-eyed member of our gang was always seeing things before the rest of us were, and sometimes he saw things that really weren't there at all. He was right though, when he saw that big savage bear, which

we killed and which I told you about in one of the other Sugar Creek Gang stories. He was also right the time he saw that bank robber, whom we helped capture. On top of that, Dragonfly was also right when he saw the ghost running—or flying or something—in that same old cemetery one night.

But that's almost telling you a secret that I'm saving until another chapter and which didn't happen until after Poetry's innocent lamb had followed him to school.

Anyway, pretty soon Big Jim, the leader of our gang, came swishing down the path. He stopped in the shade of the bushes beside us and started catching his breath like the rest of us. I couldn't help but notice that the little fuzzy mustache he had shaved off just before we had taken our trip to Chicago was still off, with not even a sign of its having begun to grow again. In fact, it hadn't been long enough to shave in the first place. Big Jim was a great leader, I tell you—a fierce fighter and as strong as anything. His hands were calloused from hard work, which he even *liked* to do.

Each one of us lay in a different direction, chattering away and waiting for the rest to come.

Little Jim, our smallest, was nearly always late because he had to practice his piano lesson right after the noon meal each Saturday. He was getting to be a great player, his mom being the best musician in all Sugar Creek territory.

Pretty soon I heard somebody coming. I looked around a corner of the elder bush I was

lying under, and it was Little Jim, just poking along, barefoot, his new, clean blue denim overalls rolled up halfway to his knees and his half-worn-out brown straw hat on backward and his little mouselike face looking very content. He was carrying an ash stick about three feet long, with stripes on it, the stripes having been made with his pocketknife by cutting off the bark, so that it looked like a big three-foot-long piece of stick candy.

“Hi, Little Jim!” different ones of us called to him.

He kept on doing what he was doing, which was knocking off the tops of different weeds with his stick, not paying any attention to us. Then he stooped and rolled up his right over-all leg, which had just come down. While he was still stooped over, he grunted, “Hi, everybody.” Then he straightened up and grinned.

Little Jim flopped himself down beside us just in time to get up with us, for at that same minute from the other direction came little red-haired, freckled-faced Tom Till, the new member of our gang. Fiery-tempered Tom was a great guy even if his big brother, Bob, had caused us, especially Big Jim, a lot of trouble.

Anyway, the minute Little Jim and Tom got there, we scrambled to our different-sized bare feet and started up Bumblebee Hill to the cemetery and—you can believe this or not—to run into another mystery, which I’ll tell you about as soon as I get to it.

Writing a story, you know, is like building a

tall building. If you put the top on first, without any good foundation, the house will fall down. So I have to save the top of the story, which is the mystery, for later. And the mystery is the ghost that Dragonfly saw one very dark night.

“Here we go,” Big Jim called to us, unfolding his long legs and rambling up the hill with the rest of us scurrying after him. Suddenly he stopped, looked back at us, and with a strange expression on his mustacheless face said, “Anybody afraid?”

And we yelled a big noisy “No!”—all except Dragonfly, whose mother was what is called a superstitious person and actually believed in such things as ghosts. She even believed that if a black cat ran across the road in front of you, it meant you were going to have bad luck.

Anyway, when Dragonfly didn’t act as though he was glad we were going up to have our meeting in the old cemetery, I knew the reason, and I felt sorry for him.

“Come on, fraidy-cat!” I said and grabbed him by the arm.

Poetry grabbed him by the other arm, and away we went to make plans that were going to make some of the schoolchildren laugh and play and some of them cry and work.

We certainly didn’t know, when we started up that hill for our first fall gang meeting, that the whole fall was going to be filled with exciting adventures. One especially was going to make my fiery red hair stand on end and scare me and the rest of the gang half to death.

7
SUGAR CREEK GANG
The **MYSTERY**
CAVE

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

The things that happened to the Sugar Creek Gang that dark night we all went hunting with Circus's dad's big, long-bodied, long-nosed, long-tongued, long-voiced dogs would make any boy want them to happen all over again, even if some of them were rather spooky and dangerous.

Let me tell you about our hunting trip right this minute—that is, as soon as I get to it. As you probably know, Circus is the name of the acrobat in our gang. His dad, Dan Browne, makes his living in the wintertime by hunting and trapping—catching animals whose fur is used to keep people warm and to trim hats and collars for women's coats.

Anyway, the Sugar Creek Gang were all invited by Circus's dad to go hunting with him that Friday night. We expected to have a lot of fun, walking by the light of kerosene lanterns through the dark woods along the creek, listening to the mournful bawling of the hounds on the trail of—well, most anything, such as raccoons, possums, and even skunks. We also all hoped we might run into another bear. Remember the one Little Jim killed in one of the other stories about the gang?

Friday night finally came, which is the best

night for a boy to be up late, because there isn't any school on Saturday and he can sleep late in the morning if he wants to. And if his parents want him to, which some parents sometimes don't.

Right after chores were done at our farm—we did them in the dark by lantern light as we always do in the late fall and winter—the Collins family, which is ours, ate a great supper of raw-fried potatoes and milk and cheese and cold apple pie and different things. Boy, it was good!

I looked across the table at my baby sister, Charlotte Ann, who was half sitting and half sliding down in her high chair. Her eyes were half shut, and her little round brown head was bobbing like the bobber on a boy's fishing line when he is getting a nibble, just before he gets a bite and *kerplunk* it goes all the way under and the fun begins. Just that minute Charlotte Ann's round brown head went down a long way, and my grayish-brown-haired mom, who has a very kind face and the same kind of heart, stood up, untied the cord that held Charlotte Ann in the chair, lifted her carefully, and took her into the bedroom to put her into her crib, which I knew had a Scottish terrier design on its side.

I felt proud to think that I knew nearly every kind of dog there was in the world, certainly all the different kinds there were in Sugar Creek, which is a very important part of the world. I even knew the dogs by name, but

for some reason we had never had a dog in the Collins family.

Well, for a minute Dad and I were alone, and the way he looked at me made me wonder if I had done anything wrong, or if maybe I was going to and he was going to tell me *not* to.

“Well, Son,” he said, looking at me with his blue eyes, which were buried under his big, blackish-red, bushy eyebrows. His teeth were shining under his reddish-brown mustache, though, and when his teeth are shining like that so I can see them, it is sort of like a dog wagging his tail. That meant he liked me, and there wasn’t going to be any trouble. Yet trouble can happen mighty quick in a family if there is a boy in it who likes to do what he likes to do, which I did.

“What?” I said.

Dad’s voice was deep, as it always is, like a bullfrog’s voice along Sugar Creek at night, as he said, “I’m sorry, Bill, to have to announce that—” He stopped and looked long at me.

All of a sudden my heart felt as if some wicked magician had changed it into a lump of lead. What was he going to announce? What was he waiting for, and what had I done wrong, or what was I *about* to do that I shouldn’t?

Just that minute, while Dad’s sentence was still hanging like a heavy weight of some kind about to drop on my head, Mom came in from having tucked Charlotte Ann into bed. “I’ll fix a nice lunch for you to take along in your

school lunch pail, Bill. Apple pie, warm cocoa, sandwiches, and—”

My dad must have been thinking about what he was going to say and not hearing Mom at all. He went on with his sentence by saying, “Sorry to have to announce that Dr. Mellen called up this afternoon and said he would be ready for you to get your teeth filled tomorrow morning at eight. I tried to arrange some other time for you, but we had to take that or wait another week, so you’ll have to be home and in bed a little after eleven.

“I’ve made arrangements for Dan Browne to leave you and Little Jim at Old Man Paddler’s cabin, where Little Jim’s daddy will pick you up. Little Jim’s piano lesson is at nine in the morning anyway, so his mother—”

Well, that was that. Little Jim and I couldn’t stay out in the woods as late as the rest of the gang. My heart was not only lead but hot lead, because I didn’t like to go to a dentist and have my teeth filled, and I didn’t want to come home till the rest of the gang did.

I felt sad and must have looked sadder.

“What’s the matter?” Mom said. “Don’t you like apple pie and cocoa and sandwiches?”

I was thinking about a cavity I had in one of my best teeth, and I was thinking about how I would look with a little piece of shining gold in one of my front teeth, so I said to Dad, “What kind of filling?”

And Mom said, “Roast beef and salad dressing.”

And Dad said, “Gold, maybe, for one and porcelain for the others.”

And Mom exclaimed, “*What* in the—” and stopped just as we heard the sound of steps on our front porch, and I saw the flashing of a lantern outside the window and heard different kinds of voices at different pitches. I knew the gang was coming.

In a minute I was out of my chair and into my red crossbarred mackinaw, with my red corduroy cap pulled on tight. I was making a dive for the door when Dad’s deep voice stopped me by saying, “You forgot your manners again.”

So I said, “I mean, excuse me, please. Where’s my lunch, Mom?” Maybe I didn’t have any manners at all for a minute.

My lunch wasn’t ready, so I went outside and waited for it and for the rest of the gang to come. Our house was the place where they had all agreed to meet.

I say the *rest* of the gang because only two were there: Poetry, our barrel-shaped member, who knows 101 poems by heart, and Dragonfly, the spindly-legged member, whose eyes are too large for his head and whose nose is crooked at the bottom.

Dragonfly’s teeth are also too large and *will* be until his face and head grow some more. And he is sometimes “seeing” things that are not there. The very minute I saw Dragonfly with his big dragonflylike eyes shining in the lantern light, I knew that something new and different was going to happen on our hunting

trip—nothing to *worry* about, of course, but just to *wonder* about. I had enough to worry me by thinking of the dentist and the next morning at eight o'clock.

I had no sooner gotten outside than there was a whimpering sound at my knees. Looking down, I saw a tan long-muzzled dog with curly rough hair. It was sniffing at my boots to see if it liked me enough to wag its stumpy tail at me, which it did, only it didn't waste much time on me, because right that minute our black-and-white cat, Mixy, came arching her back along the side of the porch, looking for somebody's legs to rub up against. She and that tan dog saw and smelled each other at the same time.

The next thing I knew, a streak of brown and a streak of black-and-white were cutting a terribly fast hole through the dark on the way to our barn.

Dragonfly let out a yell. "Hey, Jeep! Leave that cat alone!" It was Dragonfly's new dog, which his parents had bought for him somewhere.

Just then Poetry's squawky, ducklike voice began quoting one of his poems. It sounded funny, and his round face looked funnier in the light of his lantern, which he was holding close, trying to see what was happening to the cat—or maybe to the dog, because old Mixy cat was a fierce fighter if a dog ever caught up with her. The poem went:

Hey! diddle, diddle,

The cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon.
The little dog laughed
To see such sport,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

“The dog ran away with the *cat*, you mean,”
I said.

Just then we heard a banging out in the barnyard, which sounded as if one of our cows had tried to jump over the moon and hadn't been able to make it on account of the barn or a hog house being in the way.

“You *certainly* aren't going to take that Airedale along with us on our hunting trip!” I said to Dragonfly.

“I *certainly* am!” he replied. Then he added, “And why not?”

It was Poetry who answered squawkily, “'Cause any dog that is nervous like that and goes shooting like a torpedo after a cat wouldn't be worth a picayune on a hunting trip. He'd have the hounds off the trail half the time, barking at rabbits in a brush pile or up the wrong tree or chasing somebody's house cat.”

“What's a *picayune*?” Dragonfly wanted to know.

And because I'd had the word in spelling that week and had looked it up, I said, “A picayune is 'a person or a thing of trifling value.'”

Well, that little spindly-legged guy was peeved on account of what Poetry had said about his Airedale. He said saucily, “Here,

Picayune, give me that lantern a minute, and I'll go out and save the cat's life."

He snatched the lantern, which Poetry let him have, and started off to the barn *lickety-sizzle*, leaving Poetry and me alone in the dark, with the light from the house shining out across the porch on Poetry's green corduroy cap and his brown leather jacket.

The light also shone on his round face and his very big feet. Poetry had the longest feet in all the Sugar Creek Gang. He was wearing leather boots with rubbers on them to keep his feet dry because it was muddy in places and there would be plenty of wet grass and leaves and maybe puddles to walk and run in on our hunting trip.

The weather was just right for hunting, though, because when the ground is damp like that, the hounds can smell better, and the coons and possums and things leave their scent on the leaves and grass or wherever they walk or run or climb.

I had learned all that from my dad and from Circus himself. Besides, any boy on a farm knows these things.

Just that minute we heard galloping hoofs and a snorting horse. And then Circus came riding into our lane and up to our back door. The minute his pony slid to a quick stop, Circus kicked his feet out of the stirrups. In a split second he was standing on his hands on the saddle with his medium-sized feet balanced in the air, before he swung himself out over the

pony's heaving side and landed on the boardwalk beside Poetry and me.

"Hello, gang," he said. "Where's everybody?"

"I'm right here!" a new voice called from the path that ran through our orchard. Looking behind me, I saw a flashlight bobbing back and forth like the pendulum on our kitchen clock. It was two people, a tallish boy with his cap on sideways, and a short-legged little guy with his cap on backwards and with the bill turned up. It was Big Jim and Little Jim. Both were wearing rubber boots, and all of us were wearing mittens or gloves.

That was all of the original Sugar Creek Gang except for Dragonfly, who just that minute came galloping up from the barn, swinging Poetry's lantern. His Airedale dog was beside him and in front of him and behind him at almost the same time. The light of the lantern made so many shadows in different directions that Dragonfly looked like three boys with four dogs jumping around him.

There was one other member of our gang, Little Tom Till, who lived across the creek a half mile or so away and whose big brother, Bob, had caused us so much trouble. Tom Till had red hair and freckles like mine and wasn't ashamed of it. He and I didn't have any more fights, because I'd found out he was a better guy on the *inside* than showed on the *outside*, as lots of red-haired, freckled-faced people are—including maybe me, some of the time.

Just as I was wondering if red-haired Tom

was coming, Little Jim, who is my best friend in the whole gang except for maybe Poetry or Dragonfly, sidled over to me and, tugging at my arm, started to tell me something.

I leaned over and listened, and he said, “Tom Till’s daddy is gone again, and nobody knows where. My daddy says we’d better—we’d better—”

“Anybody seen anything of Tom?” Big Jim wanted to know. Big Jim and Big Bob Till had been terrible enemies for a year or two, you know, but weren’t anymore although they still didn’t like each other very well and maybe never would. Big Jim was kindhearted though, and he was especially kind to Little Tom.

Big Jim’s question stopped Little Jim from telling me the rest of what he was about to tell me.

“Tom can’t come,” Little Jim said.

Little Jim, I’d better explain, wasn’t Big Jim’s brother. They just happened to have the same first name.

Then Little Jim tugged at my arm again, and I leaned over again, and he started to finish his sentence again, and it was, “John Till is in trouble with the police, and Daddy says we’d better—we’d better—”

Just that second our back door swung open wide, and the light came splashing out across the porch and into all our faces. And my mom called, “Your lunch is ready, Bill! Oh, hello, everybody! They’re all here, Dad!” she called back into our house.

My big strong dad came out onto the porch and looked us over with eyes that were almost buried under his bushy brows. He said, "Well, gang, have a good time. I'm sorry I can't go along, but I have some letters to write. When you get to Seneth Paddler's cabin up in the hills, tell him I'll be around to see him about Palm Tree Island tomorrow sometime."

"We'd better get going," Circus said. "Dad told me to tell you all to hurry up. That's why he sent me over—to tell you to step on the gas. The hounds are almost crazy to get started, and it may either rain or clear off or turn cold, and if it turns cold and freezes, they can't trail very well."

That was that, and Little Jim still hadn't told me what his dad wanted him to tell me—or us.

In a few minutes we were ready. Little Jim was riding on the pony behind Circus, and the rest of us were scrambling along behind. Dragonfly's crazy Airedale shuffled along all around and in between us. Dad's last words were ringing in my ears, "Don't forget, Bill, to tell Seneth Paddler I'll be over to see him tomorrow about Palm Tree Island."

That didn't interest us much except that we all knew that Old Man Paddler, who is one of the greatest old men that ever lived, had probably asked my father to send some money down there to some missionaries. Old Man Paddler was much interested in things like that.

Just then Dragonfly's Airedale darted in

between my legs on his awkward way across the road to give chase to a rabbit. I stumbled over him and over myself and went down into a small puddle.

“That crazy *dog!*” I exclaimed from somewhere in the center of the road. “What on earth do you want him to go along for?”

“That’s what I say!” Poetry huffed from beside me. And—would you believe it?—he was getting up off the ground at the same time I was.

“He’s a wonderful dog,” Dragonfly said defensively. “Just you wait and see. He’ll maybe catch a bear or a lion or maybe save somebody’s life or something. I read a story once about—”

“Hurry *up*, you guys!” Circus called back to us from his pony, and we did, all of us starting to run to try to keep up with him.

Poetry, puffing along beside me, said between puffs, “I just know that curly-haired mongrel is going to get us into trouble.”

“He’s *not* a mongrel!” Dragonfly exclaimed behind us. “He’s a purebred Airedale.”

“He’s a *picayune!*” I told Dragonfly. “He’s a thing of trifling value.”

“He’s a *person!*” Dragonfly cried. “Here, Jeep! Here, Jeep!” he called. “Come back here and leave that rabbit alone! We’re going *coon* hunting!”

Pretty soon we came in sight of Circus’s sort of old-looking house, where there was a light in an upstairs window with somebody moving

about, maybe turning down the covers for some of Circus's many sisters who lived there. He was the only boy.

Circus's dad and Big Jim's dad's hired hand, who lived close by, were there waiting for us with two more kerosene lanterns and a long, powerful flashlight and one long rifle. Tied close to the woodshed were two big, sad-faced, long-nosed, long-eared, long-bodied hounds, one a rusty red and the other a kind of blue-and-gray. They were leaping and trembling and acting like wild things, trying to get loose so they could go where they wanted to go.

Circus put his pony away in the barn, came back to where we were, and in less than three minutes we were on our way.

His dad, who had on a sheep-lined brown coat and high boots—as also did Big Jim's dad's hired man—went over to the dogs, scolded them so they would be quiet, and unsnapped their leashes. You should have seen them go, just like two streaks of greased lightning, out across the yard and over the fence and straight for Sugar Creek.

Maybe the dogs smelled something out there and knew just where to go, for we hadn't been following along behind them more than a half minute when one of the dogs—Old Bawler, the gray-and-blue one—let out a wild, long, sad bawl that sounded like a loon and a woman crying for help and running at the same time:

“Whooo . . . whooo . . .”

Then Old Sol, the red-and-rusty hound,

took up the cry, and his voice was deep and hollow as though it was coming through a hollow log in a cave and he was in a lot of trouble:

“*WHOOO . . . WHOOO . . .*”

“It’s a coon!” Circus cried, and so did his dad and almost all of us, each one trying to be first to tell the other one what we thought it was.

“It’s headed straight for Sugar Creek! Come on! Everybody!”

And away we went—lanterns, boots, boys, Dragonfly, Jeep, all running, *sloshety-crunchety*, *slippety-sizzle*, through the woods, over logs, up and down little hills, around brush piles and briar patches, panting and feeling fine and excited and wondering if it was a coon or a fox or what.

8
SUGAR CREEK GANG

**PALM TREE
MANHUNT**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It was the snowiest day I had ever seen when Poetry came over to my house pulling his sled after him. He was wading along in his boots down our road. Snowflakes as big as pullets' eggs were falling all around him. As soon as I saw him, I knew that he had something important to tell me. I stepped out onto our back porch with my head bare, and Mom called and told me to come in and get my cap on or I'd catch my death of cold.

Poetry waved his arm and yelled, "Hey! Bill!"

"What?" I yelled back out across the snow to him.

"Wait just a minute!" He came puffing up to our front gate, lifted the latch, and shoved the gate open, pushing hard against the snow that had drifted there. Then he came on through, pulling his sled after him.

While he was wading up to our back porch, I went into the house to get my fur-lined cap. I pulled on my boots and all the different clothes Mom said I had to wear or I'd catch my death of cold. Then I opened the door and went out into the snowflakes, which were still as big as pullets' eggs and were coming down like goose feathers. It was as if a big airplane full of

feathers had burst up there in the sky somewhere.

The first thing I did was to scoop up a handful of nice fresh, clean, soft snow and make it into a ball the size of a baseball and throw it *whizzety-sizzle* out across the barnyard at our old black-and-white cat. She'd been sitting and mewling like everything on the side of the barn where there wasn't so much snow, acting as if she was disgusted with the weather, even though it wasn't very cold.

I didn't have the least idea what the snowball was going to do. In fact, I'd have been shocked if I had known it was going to fly so high—or that, the very minute it got to the corner of the barn, the boy who had just moved into our neighborhood was going to come dashing around in time to get socked *kersquash* on the top of his brand-new bright red cap.

Certainly I didn't know that brand-new boy had a temper as fiery as mine or that he was a fierce fighter and was bigger than I was, and older, and was a bully—because I'd never seen him.

But the minute I saw what was going to happen, I felt a funny tingling sensation go zippering up my spine to the roots of my red hair, and I knew there was going to be trouble.

Dad had told me there was a new family moving into the house down beyond the mouth of the branch and that they had a boy who might want to join the Sugar Creek Gang. I hadn't liked the idea very well. Any new boy

in our neighborhood nearly always meant that *somebody* in our gang wouldn't like him, and there was bound to be some kind of an interesting fight before we found out whether he was going to run the gang or was just going to try to.

But there he was—running head-on into my innocent snowball! Well, when you don't do a thing on purpose, you don't feel very guilty for having done it.

I don't think I ever saw a snowball fly faster than that one did—and I don't think I ever missed my mark so far in my life. Anyway, the thing happened. The next thing I knew, that snowball, which I'd made as hard almost as a baseball, crashed *wham-thud* right on the top of that new boy's head, and the snowball and the red cap landed in a snowdrift, which the wind had piled high at the corner of the barn.

And that's how the Sugar Creek Gang came to find out right away whether the new guy was going to be friendly or not—and he wasn't.

There he was, standing, looking astonished and funny and mad and surprised and everything else. He let out a yell and six or seven swear words, which made me angry right away because Dad had taught me not to swear. That new guy's swearing made me so mad I was ready to fight even before I knew I was going to have to.

And I *had* to. I mean I really did or else get the stuffings knocked out of me.

He swung around quick and made a dive

for his cap in the snowdrift. He shook it out like a dog shaking a rat, while our old black-and-white cat made a dive for the barn door at the same time. Then that guy made a snowball quicker than you can say “Jack Robinson Crusoe and his man Friday.” He swung back his right arm and threw that snowball straight at my head. Before I could duck, I’d been hit *ker-squash-wham-thud* myself and was seeing stars. I was also feeling the cold air on my head as my cap flew off. I made a dive for it, shook it out, and had it back on in half a jiffy.

Well, that cold snowball was too hot for me, so I yelled back, “You big lummoX! I didn’t aim to hit you. I was throwing that snowball at our old cat!”

But he didn’t get it straight! He yelled back at me, “I’m not a big lummoX, and I’m not an old cat!”

And without intending to—being a little mixed up in my mind because of being half angry—I yelled back at him, “You are too!” And the fight was on.

He started on the run toward me, scooping up snow and throwing snowballs at me on the way. And I was doing the same thing to him. He was calling me a redhead, and I was calling him a big lummoX. And pretty soon he threw a snowball that hit me before it left his hand, which means he hit me with his fist! And then I was seeing red stars and fighting like everything and rolling in the snow, and so was he. I didn’t even remember Poetry was there until I

heard him saying, “Atta boy, Bill! Let him have it!”

Then I woke up to the fact that I was having a fight and that Dad had told me I was not to have any more fights—anyway, not to start any. I could fight only if the other guy started it.

Even while I was washing that new boy’s ears with snow and smearing his face with more snow, I couldn’t remember which one of us had started the fight. Then I thought I heard Dad call from the house or from somewhere, and that’s how I happened to lose the fight. The next thing I knew I was plunging headfirst into a drift. Then I was down under that guy and couldn’t breathe and was trying to yell and was choking and smothering, and I couldn’t turn over or anything. For a minute it seemed like a million years before I could get my breath again. I’d been hit right in the stomach just before I went down, and there just wasn’t any wind left in me, and I couldn’t breathe anyway. So I gave up without even knowing I was giving up, and the fight was over for a while.

Just then Mom came out and stood on our back porch and called, “Boys, I’ve just finished baking a blackberry pie. Would you like some?”

Well, Poetry heard that before any of the rest of us did. He yelled back, “Sure!”

9
SUGAR CREEK GANG
ONE
STORMY DAY

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

The trouble the Sugar Creek Gang had with our new teacher started the very first day we started to school again after Christmas vacation. As you maybe know, we all had flown down to Palm Tree Island and came back to find that, while we were gone, our pretty lady teacher had gotten married and had resigned from being teacher. We were going to have a *man* teacher instead to finish out the year. Imagine that! A *man* teacher for the Sugar Creek School, when all we'd ever had had been *lady* teachers whom we'd all liked. We were all plenty mad. Plenty!

We might not have had all the trouble, though, if it hadn't been for Shorty Long, the new tough guy who had moved into the neighborhood and who was just starting at our school.

As I said, the trouble started the very first day. Just before eight o'clock that morning, I was flying around in our house like a chicken with its head off, looking for my cap and mittens and asking Mom if my lunch box was ready. Mom was trying to keep Charlotte Ann, my baby sister, quiet so she and I could hear each other; Dad was in the living room trying to listen to the morning news on the radio; and

Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of our gang, was out by the big walnut tree near our front gate, whistling and yelling for me to hurry up or we'd be late; and I couldn't find my arithmetic book—which are all the reasons that I wasn't in a very good humor to start off to school.

So it was the easiest thing in the world for me to get mad quick, when, about ten or maybe fifteen minutes later, we met Shorty Long, the new tough guy who'd moved into our neighborhood, down at the end of the lane.

Anyway, pretty soon I was out of our house, slamming the door after me and dashing out through the snow path I'd shoveled that morning myself, toward Poetry, who was at the gate, waiting.

I wasn't any farther than twenty noisy steps away from the house when I heard the kitchen door open behind me, and my dad's big voice thundered out after me and said, "*Jasper!*" which is my middle name and which I don't like. My whole name is William Jasper Collins, but I'd rather be called just plain "Bill," because that is what the gang calls me. And besides, Dad never called me Jasper except when I had done something wrong or he thought I had. So when he thundered after me, "*Jasper!*" I stopped dead in my tracks and looked back.

Dad's big bushy, reddish-blackish eyebrows were down, and his jaw was hard-looking, and I knew right away I'd done something wrong.

"What?" I called back to him, starting to-

ward the gate again. "I've got to hurry, or I'll be late."

"Come back and shut the door *decently!*" Dad said, and when he says things like that to me *like* that, I nearly always obey him quick or wish I had.

I was halfway back to the door when Poetry squawked from the gate, saying, "Hurry up, Bill!" which I did.

I dashed back to our kitchen door and had started to shut it decently, when Dad stopped me and said, "Remember now, Son, you boys behave yourselves today. Mr. Black is a fine man, and you'll like him all right just as soon as you get used to him!"

"We won't," I said. I'd already made up my mind I *wasn't* going to like him because he was a *man* teacher, because we'd never had a man at Sugar Creek School, and also because we had all liked our pretty lady teacher so well that we didn't want anybody else!

"What do you mean, you *won't*?" Dad said, still holding the door open so that I couldn't shut it decently. "You mean you won't behave yourselves?"

"I'll be *late!*" I said. "I've got to go—Poetry's *waiting* for me!"

My dad raised his voice all of a sudden and yelled to Poetry, "Hold your horses, Leslie Thompson"—which is Poetry's real name. "The first bell hasn't rung yet!"

And it hadn't. When it *did* ring, there

would still be a half hour for us to get to school, which didn't start until half past eight.

But we all liked to get there early on a Monday morning, though, so that we could see each other, none of us having seen all of us for two or three days. We might meet some of the gang on the way—Circus, our acrobat; Big Jim, our leader; Little Jim, the best Christian in the gang; pop-eyed Dragonfly; and maybe Little Tom Till, the new member. Tom's big brother, Bob, had caused us a lot of trouble last year, but he'd quit school and had gone away to a city and was working in a factory.

You know, about every year we had some new boy move into our neighborhood, and nearly always we had trouble with him until he found out whether he was going to get to run the gang or was just going to *try* to, and always it turned out that he only *tried* to. Also, we always had to decide whether the new guy was going to be a member of the gang—and sometimes he couldn't be.

"Jasper Collins!" my dad said to me, still holding our back door open so that I couldn't shut it decently—and also holding onto my collar with his other hand—"you're not going another inch until you promise me you'll treat Mr. Black decently. Promise me that!"

Just that second my mom's voice called from some part of our house and said, "For land's sake, shut the door! We can't heat up the whole farm!"

“I can’t!” I yelled back to her. “Dad won’t let me!”

Well, that certainly didn’t make my dad feel very good, and I shouldn’t have said it, because it was being sarcastic. Anyway, Dad tightened his grip on my collar and kind of jerked me back and said to me under his breath so that Poetry wouldn’t hear, “We’ll settle this tonight when you get home.”

“Can I go now, then?” I said.

And he said, “Yes”—still under his breath—“I can’t very well correct you while Poetry is here.” And that is one reason I liked my parents—they never gave me a hard calling down when we had company but always waited till later.

The very second my dad let me loose, I shot away from our back door like a rock shooting out of a boy’s sling, straight for Poetry and the front gate. I got to where Poetry was holding the gate open for me just as I heard my dad shut our back door decently.

Poetry and I were already talking and listening to each other and being terribly glad to be together again, when our kitchen door opened again and Dad’s big voice thundered after me, “*Bill!*”

“What?” I yelled, and he yelled back to me, “Shut that *gate!*” which I ran back and did without saying anything.

A jiffy later Poetry and I were swishing through the snow toward Sugar Creek School—not knowing it was the beginning of a

very exciting day and also the beginning of a lot of new trouble for the Sugar Creek Gang.

We were *ker-squashing* along through the snow, making our own path with our feet—there hadn't been any cars or sleighs on our road yet that morning because ours wasn't an arterial road—when Poetry said all of a sudden, “My pop says we've got to like the new teacher.”

“My dad told me the same thing,” I said and sighed, knowing it was going to be hard to like somebody I already didn't like.

Well, we soon came to the north road, where we saw, coming across the Sugar Creek bridge, two boys and a lot of girls. Right away I knew the girls were Circus's sisters. One of them was named Lucille and was maybe the nicest girl in all of Sugar Creek School and was just my age, and she wasn't afraid of spiders and mice and things, and sometimes she smiled at me across the schoolroom. And walking right beside Lucille on the other side of Circus was another guy, and it was Shorty Long, the new boy who'd moved into our neighborhood and whom I didn't like!

“Look!” Poetry said to me. “Shorty Long is carrying two lunch boxes!”

“He's big enough to *need* two,” I said and didn't like him even worse.

“Looks like it's Lucille's lunch box,” Poetry said, and the very minute he said it I knew what he meant . . .

Almost right away I wondered if there was

maybe going to be another fight between Shorty Long and me—I'd had a fierce one just before the Sugar Creek Gang had flown down to Palm Tree Island.

Well, Shorty Long raised his voice and yelled to us something in that crazy new language he'd started us all to talking, which Dragonfly liked so well, and which is called "Openglopish"—which you talk by just putting an "op" in front of all the vowel sounds in your words.

So this is what Shorty Long yelled to us: "Hopi, Bopill! Hopi, Popo-opetrophy!"—which is Openglopish for "Hi, Bill! Hi, Poetry!"

I really think I would have liked the language if Shorty Long hadn't been the one to start it in the Sugar Creek neighborhood.

Before I knew what I was going to say, I said, looking at Lucille's red lunch box in Shorty Long's left hand, "Keep still. Talk English! Don't call me 'Bopill'! Take that other syllable off!"

Even as far away as I was, I thought I saw his red face turn redder, and then he yelled to me and said, "All right, if you don't want to be a good sport, I'll take it off. From now on you're just plain 'Pill.' *Pill* as in *caterpillar*."

And that started the fuse on my fiery temper to burning very fast. I saw red, and Lucille's red lunch box didn't help any. Besides, I was already mad from having all that trouble with my dad. Besides that, also I'd always carried Lucille's lunch box myself when Big Jim was

along and he carried our new minister's daughter's lunch box at the same time.

In fact, it was Big Jim's being especially polite to Sylvia, our minister's daughter, that got me started being kind to a girl myself—girls belonging to the human race, also.

"I'll carry your box for you," I said to Circus's sister and started to reach for it.

But Shorty Long interrupted my hand and said loftily, "Don't disturb the lady!" Then he swung around quick and shoved me terribly hard with his shoulder and walked on beside Lucille.

At the same minute, my boots got tangled up in each other, and I found myself going down a deep ditch backward and sideways and headfirst all at the same time into a big snowdrift—which was the beginning of the fight.

Just as I was trying to untangle myself from myself and struggle to my feet, I heard a couple of yells coming from different directions. I looked up to see Little Jim and Dragonfly running across from the woods. And at the same time, I also heard a girl's fierce voice saying, "*You* can't carry my lunch box! I'll carry it myself!"

I looked up from my snowdrift just in time to see Shorty Long whirl around with the red lunch box in his hand and hold it out so that Circus's sister couldn't reach it. I also looked just in time to see a pair of flying feet, which looked like Dragonfly's, make a dive for Shorty Long, and then there were three of us in that

big snowdrift at the same time. Also at the same time, I heard a lunch box go *squash* with the sound of a glass and maybe a spoon or a fork or something inside, and that was that.

Well, all I had to do was to turn over on my stomach, and I was on top of Shorty Long. And being mad, I felt as strong as the village blacksmith whose "muscles on his brawny arms were strong as iron bands." So I yelled and grunted to Shorty Long between short pants of breath, "You will forget to wash your face in the morning, will you! Doesn't your mother teach you to wash your face before you go to school? Shame on you!" All of a sudden I remembered I'd forgotten to wash mine.

Right away I was scooping up handfuls of snow and washing Shorty's Long's face and neck and saying to him, "I'll teach you to throw an innocent girl's lunch box around like that."

Boy, oh, boy, I tell you, I felt fine on top of Shorty Long, imagining how everybody up on the road was watching and feeling proud of me. Even Circus's sister would be proud of me, a *little* guy licking the stuffings out of a great big lummoX like Shorty Long! Why, I was hardly half as big as he was, and I was licking him in a fight right in front of everybody! It felt good!

Just that minute the school bell rang, and I knew we all ought to get going if we wanted to get to school ahead of time and sort of look at the teacher, and maybe I ought to clean out my desk a little too, not having done it the day before our Christmas vacation had begun.

So I jerked myself loose from Shorty Long, scrambled to my feet, shook my cap, knocked off some of the snow, and climbed back up into the road again, where I thought everybody had been standing watching the fight. I guess maybe I really expected them to say something about the wonderful fight I'd won, but would you believe it? The girls and Poetry had walked on up the road. I looked for the red lunch box and also for mine. But the red one wasn't anywhere around. Then I saw it, swinging back and forth in Circus's sister's hand, about fifty feet up the road.

"I'll carry it for you," I said when I caught up with the rest of the crowd.

And would you believe *this*? It was the most disgusting thing that ever happened, and it made me mad all over the inside of me. That girl I'd made a fool out of myself to be a hero for didn't even appreciate all I'd done, not even the fact that I'd given some of my life's blood for her (which I had, for my nose was bleeding a little, and for the first time I noticed my jaw hurt too, where Shorty Long must have hit me).

She looked at me as if I was so much chaff blowing out of a threshing machine and said, "Can't you live one day without getting into a fight? I think Shorty Long is nice."

Well, that spoiled my day. In fact, it looked as if it had spoiled my whole life maybe.

"All right, Smarty," I said, "you can work your own arithmetic problems this year."

And I walked behind them and on the other side of the road all the rest of the way to our red brick schoolhouse, which with its two front windows and its one door between them, and the little roofless porch, looked sort of like a red-faced boy's face, with a scowl on it.

"'S'matter?" I heard somebody say beside me, and it was Little Jim, swishing along, carrying his stick in one hand and his own lunch box in the other.

"Nothing," I said, but I felt better right away. Little Jim could do that to a guy—make him feel better just by asking, "'S'matter?" which he always did when I was bothered about something.

"Dad says we have to *like* Mr. Black, the new teacher," Little Jim said and struck hard at a chokecherry shrub that was growing close to the road, knocking snow off of it. Some of the cold snow hit me in the hot face and felt good.

I didn't say anything. Little Jim's mentioning his dad made me think of mine, and I remembered that he'd said, "We'll settle it tonight," so I kept on walking along, not saying anything else—not even wanting to say anything else and knowing my whole day was ruined.

The next thing Little Jim said didn't help me feel any better, either. He said, "We found out last night that Shorty Long's first name is 'William.'"

He struck at another chokecherry shrub, which scattered some more snow in my face,

and I said, “*What?* Why—that’s my first name! How’d you find out? Who told you?”

“*His* mom told *my* mom,” Little Jim said. “She went to church with us last night, you know.”

I’d seen Mrs. Long last night while she sat in our little church with the Foote family—Little Jim’s last name is Foote. As you know, Little Jim’s mom is the pianist in our church and is maybe the best player in all Sugar Creek territory. Also Little Jim’s parents are always looking for somebody to take to church and are what my dad calls “soul winners”—that is, they are always trying to get somebody to become Christians.

“Mom wants to get Shorty Long’s mom saved,” Little Jim said.

He was socking every chokecherry shrub we came to, and I was getting madder and madder at Shorty Long for spoiling my whole day. Also I was holding my nose tight with my handkerchief to help it stop bleeding.

“Is Shorty Long’s *pop* saved?” I asked.

Little Jim socked a tall snow-covered mullein stalk with his stick, knocking off the snow and some brown seeds at the same time, so hard that what he said came out of his small mouth as if he had thrown his words at me very hard. “Nope! And he’s mad at some of the Sugar Creek Gang for being mean to his boy. He’s told our new teacher we’re a gang of roughnecks and to look out for us!”

“Did Shorty Long’s mom tell your mom that?” I asked.

Little Jim said, “Yep, last night in our car—”

Then Little Jim stopped with his stick in the air and looked over and up at me and sort of whispered, “Shorty Long won’t go to church because his pop won’t. Maybe his parents’ll get a divorce, Mom said, if they don’t get saved first.”

“A divorce?” I said. “What for?”

“’Cause William’s pop is too mean, and swears so much at his mom, and doesn’t want her to go to church.”

I could hear Dragonfly and Shorty Long talking behind me. They were talking that crazy Openglopish language, just chattering back and forth as if they were the very best of friends.

“But they don’t call him *Bill*,” Little Jim said, talking again about Shorty Long’s first name. “They call him *William*.”

All this time Dragonfly and Shorty Long were getting closer and closer behind us, and I could hear the crazy words they were tossing back and forth to each other like two boys throwing softballs.

Just that minute Shorty Long said in Open-glopish, “Mopistoper Blopock opis gropeat. OpI’ll bopet hope gopives Bopill Copollopins opa dopetopentopioPON topodopay.” And I knew exactly what he had said. It was “Mr. Black is great. I’ll bet he gives Bill Collins a detention today.”

I pressed my lips together tight and kept still, making up my mind at the same time that I *wasn’t* going to get any detention.

We all hurried on toward the schoolhouse. The minute I got there I went straight to the iron pump near the big maple tree and put cold water on my face and nose, washing off some of the good red blood I'd shed for a worthless girl. The cold water helped to make my nose stop bleeding. I also rinsed out my handkerchief, being especially glad Mom had made me take two with me, which she nearly always does in the wintertime just in case I catch a cold or something, which I sometimes do.

While I was washing my face, Poetry came over and watched me and said, "You certainly licked the stuffings out of William Long."

"Thanks," I said. "But what'd they ever give him that crazy name for?"

And before the day was over, I wished that *my* name hadn't been William, either. In fact, before the morning had hardly gotten started, I was into trouble with Mr. Black. And it all happened on account of Shorty Long and I having the same first name. I even hate to tell you what happened, but it's all a part of the story. So here goes.

First thing, though, before school took up we all got together in the school woodshed and held a special gang meeting. I told the gang what Little Jim told me that his mom said Shorty Long's mom said about what Shorty Long's mean pop told Mr. Black about the Sugar Creek Gang being a bunch of roughnecks.

Then we all voted that we wouldn't *be* that.

We were going to prove to our new teacher that we weren't.

Just before the last bell rang, Big Jim gave us all orders to behave ourselves and said, "If any of us doesn't behave, he'll have to be called in and stand trial by the rest of us."

Then the bell rang, and in we went.

10
SUGAR CREEK GANG
The **MYSTERY**
THIEF

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

I was so angry because of the things I'd read in the crazy letter I had in my hand that, when Mom called me to hurry up and come into the house because one of the gang wanted to talk to me on the phone, I couldn't even be glad, the way I usually am. Nearly always when Mom yells for me to come to the phone, I am so pleased I just drop whatever I am doing and run like a Sugar Creek cottontail straight to the house, my heart pounding and my mind imagining all kinds of important things I'll probably hear.

But honestly, that letter was terrible. I took another glance at it and shoved it into my pocket—not that I'd have any trouble remembering it. I wouldn't. I'd probably never forget it as long as I lived—that is, if I lived very long, for that letter, written in the craziest handwriting I ever saw, said that I was a roughneck and that I was to beware! That means to look out for something or somebody. It also sounded as if whoever wrote it was terribly mad at me for something I had done or was supposed to have done.

It was a crazy time of the day to get a letter too—just before dark. And it hadn't been brought by our mail carrier either. He came

every morning either in his car or sometimes, in the winter, in a sleigh with bells jingling on his horse's harness. But the letter I held in my pocket had been shoved into our mailbox just a little while ago by some strange-looking man who had sneaked up out of the woods and put it into the box out beside the road, and then had hurried away into the woods again.

"Who is it?" I called to Mom when I reached our kitchen door, ready to dash through to the living room, where I'd make a dive across our nice new rug straight for the phone by the window.

"Wait a minute, Bill Collins!" Mom stopped me with her voice as if I'd been shot. I reached for the broom without even being told to and started sweeping the snow off my boots—I had walked in the deep snow in our yard because I had been reading the crazy letter and hadn't paid any attention to where I was walking.

"Is it Poetry?" I asked her, taking a last two or three quick swipes with the brown-strawed broom. I hoped it was Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of the Sugar Creek Gang, who knew 101 poems by heart and was always quoting one of them at the wrong time. Whenever I was mad or glad or had a secret, Poetry was the first one of our gang of seven boys I wanted to talk to.

Just as I was about to say "Hello" into the telephone, Mom said, "Not more than one minute, Bill. I'm expecting a long-distance call from Wally's father."

I'd forgotten all about my cousin Wally, who lived in the city and had a new baby sister. Mom was going there that night to stay for a few days or a week, and Dad and I were going to "batch it," which means we'd have to do our own cooking and even wash our own dishes while she was away.

We hardly ever had a long-distance phone call at our house, so whenever we did, it seemed very important. Just the same, I didn't like to hear her say for me not to talk too long. Mom and Dad were always saying that whenever one of the gang called me up or I called one of them, which means that we maybe did sometimes talk too long.

Anyway, I grabbed up the phone and said, "Hello!"

Sure enough, it was Poetry, my very best pal, and his ducklike voice on the other end of the line made me feel good all over.

"Hi, there, Bill!" the ducklike voice said. "This is Poetry. I've just made up a poem about our new teacher. Want to hear it?"

I did, and I didn't. As you maybe know, we got a new teacher in our one-room school right after Christmas vacation. His name was Mr. Black, and he was maybe forty years old and had some of his hair gone from the middle of the top of his head. We had all been pretty disappointed when we lost our pretty woman teacher, and none of us felt very glad about a change.

In fact, some of us hadn't behaved our-

selves very well that first day, and I especially had had trouble. On top of that, Dad and I'd had an interesting experience in our woodshed when I got home from school. So I had already made up my mind to be respectful to Mr. Black, the way any decent boy ought to be to his teacher.

I wanted to hear Poetry's poem, of course, but mostly I wanted to tell him about the letter I had in my pocket, which called the Sugar Creek Gang a bunch of roughnecks, which none of us boys was trying to be.

"What's the matter?" Poetry squawked. "Don't you want to hear my poem? What are you so quiet for?"

"I was just thinking," I said.

"About what?"

"Oh, just something," I told him.

"Not too long," Mom said behind me.

"I won't," I said to her.

"Won't what?" Poetry said.

"Won't talk very long. We're getting a long-distance call in a minute, so we can't talk too long."

"Want to hear my new poem?"

"Sure," I said, "but hurry up, because I have something very important to tell you."

I could just imagine how Poetry would gasp when he heard the crazy letter I had in my pocket.

If I hadn't had that experience with Dad in our woodshed, I think I would have laughed at Poetry's poem about our new teacher, which went like this:

“The Sugar Creek Gang had the
strangest of teachers
And ‘Black’ his name was called;
His round red face had the homeliest
features—
He was fat and forty and bald.

“The very first day . . .”

“Can’t you hurry?” Mom said behind me.
“We’re expecting the call right this minute!”

“I’ve got to hurry,” I interrupted Poetry.
“We’re expecting a long-distance call. My cousin
Wally has got a new baby sister and—”

“Oh, all right then,” Poetry said, “if you
don’t think my poem is important—”

“But it is,” I said. “It’s—why, it’s even funny.
But I have something even more important to
quick tell you. It’s about a letter which some-
body just shoved into our—into our—” I sud-
denly sneezed because of the smell of the
sulfur that was in the room after Mom had lit a
match. I always sneezed when somebody lit a
match near me.

“I hope you don’t have a cold,” Poetry said,
“because you’re supposed to come over to my
house and sleep tonight. That’s why I called
you up. Mother says for you to stay at our house
while your mother is away at your cousin
Wally’s house.”

Well, that sounded good. So in spite of the
fact that I wanted to tell Poetry about the letter
in my pocket and also Poetry wanted to finish

his poem about our new teacher, Mr. Black, and also mainly because Mom wanted me to stop talking, I turned and asked her, “Can I stay at Poetry’s house tonight?”

“Certainly,” she said. “I’ve already planned that for you. Now, will you hang up?”

“I’ve got to hang up,” I said to Poetry, “but I’ll be over just as soon as I can. Mom says I can.”

“Bring the letter with you,” he said, “and bring your father’s big long flashlight. There’s something very important we have to do tonight.”

Boy, oh, boy, when Poetry said to bring Dad’s flashlight and that there was something very important we had to do, my imagination started to fly in every direction. Poetry and I had had some of the most exciting experiences at night when I had my dad’s long flashlight with me. Once we’d caught a bank robber who was digging for treasure down by the old sycamore tree not far from Poetry’s house.

“Sure I’ll bring the flashlight,” I said, “and the letter too. It’s the craziest letter I ever read. It says I’m a roughneck and that all the Sugar Creek Gang are roughnecks and—”

“Hey—” Poetry cut in, saying real saucily to somebody, “Hang up! This line is busy!”

Maybe I’d better explain to you that we had what is called a “party line,” and about a half dozen families all used it but had different rings. Anybody who wanted to could listen to anybody he wanted to, just by lifting up his own

telephone receiver. But that is called *eavesdropping* and is considered very impolite and a breach of etiquette and everything.

I knew what Poetry meant, for I'd heard the sound myself. Somebody somewhere had lifted a telephone receiver and was listening to us.

And then Mom came across the room to where I was and said very politely into our telephone, "Hello, Poetry. We'll bring Bill over in the car after a while. He'll have to hang up now because we're waiting for a long-distance call."

I pushed the phone receiver up to Mom's ear, so we could both hear Poetry talk back.

"Surely, Mrs. Collins," he said politely. "I'm sorry I talked so long."

"You boys be good and don't get into any more mischief," Mom said pleasantly.

"We won't, Mrs. Collins," Poetry promised. "And I hope you have a very nice trip. Tell Wally I said hello."

"I will," Mom said. "Will you call your mother to the phone? I've something important to tell her."

"Surely," Poetry said. "So long, Bill. I'll be seeing you pretty soon."

"He's a nice boy," Mom said to me, and I knew by the way she said it that she wasn't angry at me for using what is called a little friendly sarcasm a while ago. That is the easiest way not to have any trouble in a family—if nobody takes anybody too seriously, Dad says.

Boy, oh, boy! I thought. I darted out of our

living room toward the kitchen and was going upstairs to pack my pajamas into my small brown suitcase, when Mom called, “Your pajamas are all ready, Bill, there by the radio.”

Then she started talking to Poetry’s mom, saying different things, which I didn’t pay much attention to, such as “We’re very sorry, Lita.” Lita was Poetry’s mom’s first name. “You know how much we’d like to be there. I’m sure you’ll have a wonderful time. But maybe we can come over for an evening after I get back . . . New babies just don’t wait for neighborhood get-togethers! We know you’ll all have a wonderful time . . . Yes, that’s right . . . Well, look after my boy, and help him keep out of mischief.”

It wasn’t exactly necessary for my mom to say that, but I didn’t get mad at her for saying it because I was already as mad as I could get at whoever had written the crazy note about the gang and me.

I had started to pick up my suitcase by the radio, and Mom was just finishing what she was saying to Poetry’s mom when I heard her say, “I’ve pinned your brooch to Bill’s pajamas. It certainly is beautiful. I wish I had one like it. Maybe when I’m in the city, I can look around in the stores a bit . . . Oh, that’s all right, Lita . . . No, I wouldn’t think of it. I might lose it, and then how would I feel? No, I’ll just send it along with Bill. We’ll bring him over right away . . . Sorry . . . No . . . Well, good-bye . . . What? . . . Oh, yes . . .”

I wasn't paying much attention, except to hear that she was sending something along with me in my suitcase for Mrs. Thompson. I was in a hurry to get to Poetry's house, so I said, "We're waiting for a long-distance call, Mom. Can't you hang up now and—"

Almost right away she hung up, and also almost right away after that the phone rang again, and it was Wally's dad.

After *that*, we all dived into whatever had to be done before Mom and Dad could get going. They actually left the dishes unwashed for a change. Dad adjusted the oil burner in the big stove in our front room, and in almost no time we were all in the car on our way down the already dark road toward Poetry's house.

"I'll be driving back late tonight or else early tomorrow," Dad said, "so you won't need to bother about doing chores. You just go straight to school from Poetry's house in the morning."

"Poetry's mother will fix your lunch for you," Mom said to me.

I was in the backseat of our two-door sedan, with Mom's luggage and my small suitcase beside me. Mom and Charlotte Ann, my little one-year-old baby sister, were in front so they could keep warm near the heater.

It was a beautiful night. Big lazy flakes of snow were falling, and the headlights of the car certainly were pretty as they shone down the road. The snowflakes seemed to come from somewhere out in the dark, dropping down

into the light of the headlights and then disappearing again, sort of like fireflies in the summer along Sugar Creek.

I had Dad's flashlight and was switching it on and off, shooting it out through the back window at the trees in the woods and toward Sugar Creek.

Pretty soon we came to the little lane that leads to Poetry's house.

"You don't need to turn in," I said. "I can walk the rest of the way."

"Maybe we *had* better go right on," Dad said. "You have the flashlight . . ."

"Sure," I said. "I'll just follow the lane." I had on my boots, and it'd only take me a few minutes to get there, I thought. And my suitcase wasn't heavy.

I could see the light in Poetry's front window. They'd fixed up their basement into a nice recreation room, so he and I would play Ping-Pong and maybe checkers and do a lot of interesting things before it would be time to go to bed. And I'd be sure to show him the crazy letter I had in my pocket.

Thinking of that reminded me that I hadn't shown the letter to my parents yet, and I knew I should before they went away. In fact, I had been thinking all along the way that I had better show it to them before they went to Wally's house, so I spoke up. "Want to read the letter I just found in our mailbox?"

"A letter?" Mom said.

We were still stopped at the gate to Poetry's lane.

"If it won't take too long," she said. "We're a long distance from Wally's house right now, and they wanted us to hurry."

"Here it is," I said and started to hand it over the front seat to Mom, snapping on the ceiling light at the same time.

"It's too dark to read without my glasses," she said. "You read it to us with the flashlight."

This is what I read to them:

Dear William Collins:

Your son better treat my boy decent or I'll shake the living daylight out of him. It's a pity a family cant move into a naborhood without a gang of ruffnecks beating up on his boy. I don't know if you are the ones who took my wife to church last night or not, but somebody did while I was away from home and you cant believe a thing she says about me. You mind your own business and I'll mind mine. My wife has enuff high and mity ideas without going to some fancy church to get more. If she would obey her husband like the Bible says, it would do her some good to read the Bible, but she don't. Your boy is the worst ruffneck in the whole Sugar Creek Gang of ruffnecks, so beware.

When I finished reading, both my parents were very quiet, while Charlotte Ann babbled

and wiggled and tried to stand up in Mom's lap and look at me. She was also trying to get her hands on the flashlight and the letter, which I wouldn't let her do.

Then, because Dad was a very good Christian and since talking about prayer or the Bible and things like that was as natural for him as for a boy to talk about slingshots and marbles, he said. "We'll pray for whoever wrote it, and maybe the Lord will change his heart."

But Mom was bothered about that part of the letter that called the Sugar Creek Gang a bunch of roughnecks—and especially the part that called me the worst roughneck in the whole gang. She said, "Are you sure you and Shorty Long haven't been having trouble? Are you sure you have been treating him like a new boy in the neighborhood *ought* to be treated?"

As you maybe know, Shorty hadn't lived long in our neighborhood, and he and I hadn't been getting along at all. We'd had a fight the very first time we met and had had another one that very day. But he had started both of them.

"Of course that letter is from his father," Dad said.

"Answer me," Mom said.

But at that moment Charlotte Ann managed to squirm far enough out of Mom's arms to reach over the front seat and get hold of the letter I had in my hand. She held onto it like a bulldog holding onto another dog's throat—or like a snapping turtle holding onto a barefoot boy's big toe.

“Let loose!” I said to Charlotte Ann. “This letter is very important.” I pried her soft little hand loose, which she didn’t like very well. She started to cry, so I didn’t have a chance to answer Mom.

“Answer me,” Mom said again, getting in her words while Charlotte Ann was taking in a breath right before her next howl. *Such an unearthly noise to make in the night*, I thought. *You’d think we were a bunch of kidnappers or something.*

I answered Mom, though. “Shorty Long and I have had trouble, but I’m trying to act like I ought to.” When I said that, it seemed to me I’d been giving Shorty Long just what a new boy deserved, especially one who needed a good licking by somebody who was big enough to do it. I had proved I was that very day.

Then Dad, who is always giving me good commonsense advice—which is sometimes hard for me to take but good for me—said, “Remember, every boy has a soul, Bill, and that he needs a Savior, and sometimes a boy needs a friend, too, before he will become a Christian.”

“Yes sir,” I said, and I knew he was right, although I wasn’t in a mood right that minute to admit it.

“Well,” Mom said, “we’d better be going on.” Her voice suddenly was very kind and not a bit worried as she said, “I’ll drop you men a card every day I’m gone. Be sure to keep the dishes washed at least once a day, and remember to sweep off the snow before coming into the house on my nice new living room rug.”

I knew Mom was talking to me mostly, because Dad hardly ever needed to be reminded about using the broom on his boots, Mom having already trained him to do it.

I reached over and shook hands with Dad, gave Mom a short kiss, and was about to give Charlotte Ann one when she grabbed hold of my cap and pulled it off, which made me wonder whatever makes baby sisters so ill-mannered anyway.

I got my cap again and was ready to go when Mom said, "There's something in your suitcase for Mrs. Thompson. She knows about it, so be sure to remember to give it to her."

"I will," I said, hardly hearing her, because that didn't seem half as important as the letter I was going to show to Poetry when I got there.

We all said good-bye, I slipped out of the car, and a jiffy later they were gone. Their lights were like a big snowplow pushing back the dark for their car to follow it through. And there I was alone at the side of the road, with the big lazy snowflakes falling all around me and upon me and all of a sudden feeling lonesome.

Then I turned, shining the flashlight around in a circle at the trees in the woods on one side of Poetry's lane and at the bent and twisted cornstalks of the cornfield on the other side. I started down the lane toward Poetry's house, wondering why he hadn't put on his boots and warm clothes and come out to meet me at the gate.

I had the letter and my little suitcase in one hand and the flashlight in the other. I could hardly wait till I got to Poetry's house.

All of a sudden I heard a weird sound out in the woods not far from me. It sounded like a screech owl, and it went *shay-shay-shay-a-a-a*. It scared me stiff and made me want to run. But it was almost an eighth of a mile up the lane yet before I would get to Poetry's house. There really wasn't any sense in my being scared. I'd heard screech owls many a time at night, and they weren't dangerous. Dad says they are the farmers' friends. They eat mice and cutworms and things.

But for some reason, I *was* scared. The woods beside which I was walking was the same woods out of which that strange-looking man in old work clothes had come walking to put that letter in our mailbox. And even though I had the flashlight and could see where I was going, I kept remembering the first and last sentences in the letter, which were: "Your son better treat my boy decent, or I'll shake the living daylight out of him. . . . Your boy is the worst ruffneck in the whole Sugar Creek Gang of ruffnecks, so beware."

The owl let out another moaning, quavering wail. *Shay-shay-shay-a-a-a*. And I actually felt my hair trying to stand on end under my winter cap. That old screech owl must have been in the tree right above me, for it sounded terribly close.

Then, just like that, things began to hap-

pen. A gray shadow shot out from behind an evergreen and made a dash for me. Before I could even scream, which I couldn't have done anyway since I was so scared, somebody's strong hand twisted me around and around and gave me a big shove headfirst into a snow-drift.

11
SUGAR CREEK GANG
TEACHER
TROUBLE

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

One tough guy in the Sugar Creek territory was enough to keep us all on the lookout all the time for different kinds of trouble. We'd certainly had plenty with Big Bob Till, who, as you maybe know, was the big brother of Little Tom Till, our newest gang member.

But when a new quick-tempered boy, whose name was Shorty Long, moved into the neighborhood and started coming to our school, and when Shorty and Bob began to pal around together, we never knew whether we'd get through even one day without something happening to start a fight or get one of the gang into trouble with our teacher. On top of that, we had a new teacher, a *man* teacher, who didn't exactly know that most of us tried to behave ourselves most of the time.

Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of our gang, had made up a poem about our new teacher, whom not a one of us liked very well at first because of not *wanting* a new teacher. We'd liked our pretty woman teacher so well. This is the way the poem went:

The Sugar Creek Gang had the worst of
teachers,
And "Black" his name was called.

His round red face had the homeliest
of features;
He was fat and forty and bald.

Poetry was always writing a new poem or quoting one somebody else wrote.

Maybe it was a library book that was to blame for some of the trouble we had in this story, though. I'm not quite sure, but about the minute my pal Poetry and I saw the picture in a book called *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, Poetry had a very mischievous idea come into his mind, which he couldn't get out, no matter how he tried.

This is the way it happened. I was staying at his house one night, and just before we went to sleep we sat up in his big bed for a while, reading and looking at that picture. It was a full-page glossy picture of a man schoolteacher up on the roof of a country schoolhouse, and he was holding a wide board across the top of the chimney. The schoolhouse's only door was open, and a gang of tough-looking boys was tumbling out along with a lot of smoke.

"Have you ever read the story?" I said to Poetry, and he said, "No, have you?" and when I said "No," we both read a part of it. The story was about a teacher whose very bad boys in the school had locked him out of the building. He smoked them out just the way a boy smokes a skunk out of a woodchuck den along Sugar Creek.

That put the idea in Poetry's head and then

into mine, and it stayed there until a week or two after Christmas before it got us into trouble. Then, just like a time bomb going off, suddenly that innocent idea, which an innocent author had written in an innocent library book, exploded.

It was a fine Saturday afternoon at our house with bright sunlight on the snow and the weather just right for coasting. I was standing by our kitchen sink, getting ready to start drying a big stack of dishes, which my mom had just rinsed with steaming hot water out of the teakettle.

I was reaching for a drying towel when Mom said, “Better wash your hands first, Bill,” which I had forgotten to do, as I do once in a while. I washed my hands with soap in our bathroom, came back, grabbed the towel off the rack by the range, and started in carefully wiping the dishes.

I didn’t exactly want to. The clock on the shelf said it was one o’clock, and the gang was supposed to meet on Bumblebee Hill right that very minute with our sleds. We were going to have the time of our lives coasting, and rolling in the snow, and making huge balls and snowmen and everything.

You should have seen those dishes fly—that is, they *started to*!

“Be careful,” Mom said and meant it. “Those are my best dinner plates.”

“I will,” I said, and I was for a while, but my mind wasn’t anywhere near those fancy plates

Mom was washing and I was drying. In fact, I thought there wasn't any sense in washing them anyway, because they weren't the ones we had used that day at all. They'd been standing on the shelf in the cupboard for several months without being used.

"I don't see why we have to wash them," I said, "when they aren't even dirty."

"We're going to have company for dinner tomorrow," Mom explained, "and we *have* to wash them."

"Wash them *before* we use them?" I said. It didn't make sense. Why, that very minute the gang would be hollering and screaming and coasting down the hill and having a wonderful time.

"Certainly," Mom said. "We want them to sparkle so that, when the table is set and the guests come in, they'll see how beautiful they really are. See? Notice how dull this one is?" She held up one that hadn't been washed yet in her hot sudsy water or rinsed in my hot clear water, or wiped and polished with my clean dry towel, which Mom's tea towels always were—Mom being an extraclean housekeeper and couldn't help it because her mother had been that way too. And being that kind of a housekeeper is contagious, like catching measles or smallpox or mumps or something else boys don't like.

For some reason I remembered a part of a book I'd read called *Alice in Wonderland*. It was about a crazy queen who started to cry and say,

“Oh! Oh! My finger’s bleeding!” And when Alice told her to wrap her finger up, the queen said, “Oh no, I haven’t pricked it yet,” meaning it was bleeding *before* she had stuck a needle into it, which was a fairy story and was certainly crazy.

So I said to Mom, “Seems funny to wash dishes *before* they’re dirty—seems like a fairy story, like having your finger start bleeding before you stick a needle in it.” I knew she had read *Alice in Wonderland*, because she’d read it to me herself when I was little.

But Mom was very smart. She said, with a mischievous sound in her voice, “That’s a splendid idea. Let’s pretend this is Bill Collins in Wonderland and get the dishes done right away. Fairy stories are always interesting, don’t you think?”

I didn’t right then, but there wasn’t any use arguing. In fact, Mom said arguing wasn’t ever polite, so I quit and said, “Who’s coming for dinner tomorrow?” I wondered if it might be some of the gang and hoped it would be. I didn’t know a one of the gang who would notice whether the dishes sparkled or not, although most of their moms probably would.

“Oh—a surprise,” she said.

“Who?” I said. “My cousin Wally and his new baby sister?”

Perhaps you know I had a homely, red-haired cousin named Walford, who lived in the city and had a new baby sister. Mom and Dad had been to see the baby, but I hadn’t and

didn't want to. And I certainly didn't exactly want to see Wally, but I *would* like to see his wacky Airedale, and, if Wally *was* coming, I hoped he would bring the wire-haired dog along.

"It's a surprise," Mom said again, and at that minute there was a whistle at our front gate.

I looked over the top of my stack of steaming dishes out through a clear place in the frosted window and saw a broad-faced, barrel-shaped boy. Holding onto a sled rope, he was lifting up the latch on our wide gate with a red-mittened hand.

Another boy was there too. Hardly looking, I could tell that it was Dragonfly, because he is spindle-legged and has large eyes like a dragonfly. He had on a brand-new cap with earmuffs. Dragonfly was forever getting the gang into trouble because he always was doing hare-brained things without thinking. He also was allergic to nearly everything and was always sneezing at the wrong time, for example, just when we were supposed to be quiet. Also he was about the only one in the gang whose mother was superstitious, thinking it was bad luck if a black cat crosses the road in front of you or good luck if you find a horseshoe and hang it above one of the doors in your house.

Just as Poetry had the latch of the wide gate lifted, I saw Dragonfly make a quick move. He stepped with one foot on the iron pipe at the bottom of the gate's frame and gave the gate a

shove. Then he jumped on with the other foot and rode on the gate while it was swinging open. This was something Dad wouldn't let *me* do, and which any boy shouldn't do, because if he keeps on doing it, it will make the gate sag and maybe drag on the ground.

Well, when I saw that, I forgot there was a window between me and the out-of-doors, and also that my mom was beside me, and also that my baby sister, Charlotte Ann, was asleep in the bedroom in her baby bed. Without thinking, I yelled real loud, "Hey, Dragonfly, you crazy goof! Don't do that!"

Right away I remembered Charlotte Ann was in the other room, because Mom told me. And also Charlotte Ann woke up and made the kind of a noise a baby always makes when she wakes up and doesn't want to.

Just that second, the gate Dragonfly was on was as wide open as it could go, and Dragonfly, who didn't have a very good hold with his hands—the gate being icy anyway—slipped off and went sprawling head over heels into a snowdrift in our yard.

It was a funny sight, but not *very* funny, because I heard my dad's great big voice calling from the barn, yelling something and sounding the way he sounds when somebody has done something he shouldn't and is supposed to quit quick or he'd be sorry.

I made a dive for our back door, swung it open, and with one of my mom's good plates still in my hands, and without my cap on, I

rushed out on our back board walk and yelled to Poetry and Dragonfly. "I'll be there in about an hour! I've got to finish tomorrow's dishes first! Better go on down the hill and tell the gang I'll be there in maybe an hour or two," which is what is called sarcasm.

And Poetry yelled, "We'll come and help you!"

But that wasn't a good idea. Our kitchen door was still open, and Mom heard me and also heard Poetry. She said to me, "Bill Collins, come back in here. The very idea! I can't have those boys coming in with all that snow. I've just scrubbed the floor!"

That is why they didn't come in and also why barrel-shaped Poetry and spindle-legged Dragonfly started building a snowman right in our front yard, while they waited for Mom and me to finish.

Pretty soon I was done, though. I grabbed my coat from its hook in the corner of the kitchen and pulled my hat on my red head, with the earmuffs tucked inside. It wasn't a very cold day. In fact, it was warm enough for the snow to pack good for making snowballs and snowmen and everything.

I put on my boots at the door, said good-bye to Mom, and swished out through the snow to Poetry and Dragonfly, grabbing my sled rope, which was right beside our back door. I could already hear the rest of the gang yelling on Bumblebee Hill. The three of us went as fast as we could through our gate.

My dad was standing there, looking at the gate to see if Dragonfly had been too heavy for it, and just as we left, he said, "Never ride on a gate, boys, if you want to live long."

His voice was kind of fierce, the way it sometimes is, and he was looking at Dragonfly. Then he looked at me and winked, and I knew he wasn't mad but still didn't want any boy to be dumb enough to ride on our gate again.

"Yes sir, Mr. Collins," Dragonfly said politely, grabbing his sled rope and starting on the run across the road to a place in the rail fence where I always climbed through on my way to the woods.

"Wait a minute!" Dad said, and we waited.

His big bushy eyebrows were straight across, so I knew he liked us all right. "What?" I said.

He said, "You boys know, of course, that your new teacher, Mr. Black, is going to keep on teaching the Sugar Creek School—that the board can't ask him to resign just because the boys in the school liked their other teacher better."

Imagine my dad saying such a thing, just when we had been thinking about having a lot of fun.

"Yes sir," I said, remembering the beech switches behind the teacher's desk.

"Yes sir," Poetry said politely.

"Yes sir," Dragonfly yelled to him from the rail fence, where he was already halfway through.

We all hurried through the fence, and, yelling and running and panting, dragged our

sleds through the woods to Bumblebee Hill to where the gang was having fun.

We coasted for a long time. Even Little Tom Till, the red-haired, freckled-faced little brother of Big Bob Till, who was Big Jim's worst enemy, was there.

Time flew fast, and all of a sudden Circus, who had rolled a big snowball down the hill, said, "Let's make a snowman—let's make Mr. Black!"

That sounded like fun, so we started in, not knowing that Circus was going to make the most ridiculous-looking snowman I'd ever seen and not knowing something else very exciting, which I'm going to tell you about just as quick as I can.

12
SUGAR CREEK GANG
SCREAMS IN G
THE NIGHT

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

I guess I never did get tired thinking about all the interesting and exciting things that happened to the Sugar Creek Gang when we went camping far up in the North. One of the happiest memories was of the time when Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of our gang, and I were lost out in the forest. While we were trying to get unlost we met a brown-faced Indian boy, whose name was Snow-in-the-Face, and his big brother, whose name was Eagle Eye.

Little Snow-in-the-Face was the cutest little Indian boy I had ever seen. In fact, he was the *first* one I'd ever seen up close. I kept thinking about him and wishing that the whole Sugar Creek Gang could go again up into that wonderful country that everybody calls the Paul Bunyan Playground and see how Snow-in-the-Face was getting along and how his big brother's Indian Sunday school was growing, which, as you know, they were having every Sunday in an old railroad coach they had taken into the forest and fixed up as a church.

I never had any idea that we would get to go back the very next summer. But here I am, telling you about how we happened to get to go, and how quick we started, and all the exciting things that happened on the way and after

we got there—*especially* after we got there. Boy, oh, boy! It was fun—especially that night when we ran *ker-smack* into a kidnapper mystery, and some of us who were mixed up in it were scared almost half to death.

Imagine a very dark night with only enough moonlight to make things look spooky, and strange screaming sounds echoing through the forest and over the lake, and then finding a kidnapped girl all wrapped in an Indian blanket with a handkerchief stuffed into her mouth and—but that’s getting ahead of the story, and I’d better not tell you how that happened until I get to it, because it might spoil the story for you. And I hope you won’t start turning the pages of this book real fast and read the mystery first, because that wouldn’t be fair.

Anyway, this is how we got to go.

Some of us from the Sugar Creek Gang were lying in the long mashed-down grass in a level place not far from where the hill goes down real steep to the spring at the bottom, where my dad is always sending me to get a pail of cold fresh water for us to drink at our house. We were all lying in different directions, talking and laughing and yawning and pretending to be sleepy. Some of us were tumbling around a little and making a nuisance of ourselves to each other. Most of us had long stems of bluegrass in our mouths and were chewing on the ends, and all of us were feeling great. I had my binoculars up to my eyes looking around at different things.

First I watched a red squirrel high up in a big sugar tree, lying flat and lazy on the top of a gray branch as though he was taking a two-o'clock-in-the-afternoon sunbath, which was what time of day it was that Saturday. I had been lying on my back looking up at the squirrel.

Then I rolled over and got onto my knees and focused the binoculars on Sugar Creek. Sugar Creek's face was lazy here, because it was a wide part of the creek, and the water moved very slowly, hardly moving, and was as quiet as Pass Lake had been up in Minnesota in the Paul Bunyan country on a very quiet day. There were little whitish patches of different-shaped specks of foam floating along on the brownish-blue water.

While I was looking at Sugar Creek with its wide, quiet face and dreaming about a big blue-water lake up North, I saw some V-shaped waves coming out across the creek from the opposite shore. The pointed end of the V was coming straight toward the spring and bringing the rest of the V along with it. I knew right away it was a muskrat swimming toward our side of the creek.

As I looked at the brownish muskrat through my binoculars, it seemed very close. I could see its pretty chestnut-brown fur. Its head was broad and sort of blunt, and I knew if I could have seen its tail it would have been about half as long as the muskrat, deeper than it was wide, and that it would have scales on it and only a few scattered hairs. I quickly grabbed

a big rock and threw it as straight and hard as I could right toward the acute angle of the long moving V, which was still coming across the creek toward us.

And would you believe this? I'm not always such a good shot with a rock, but this time that rock went straight toward where the muskrat was headed. And by the time the rock and the muskrat got to the same place, the rock went *kerswishety-splash* right on the broad blunt head of the musquash, which is another and kind of fancy name for a muskrat.

Circus, the acrobat in our gang, was the only one who saw me do what I had done. He yelled out to me in a voice that sounded like a circus barker's voice, "Atta boy, Bill! Boy, oh, boy, that was a great shot! I couldn't have done any better myself!"

"Better than *what?*" nearly all the rest of the gang woke up and asked him at the same time.

"Bill killed an *Ondatra zibethica*," Circus said, which is the Latin name for a muskrat. Circus's dad is a trapper, and Circus has a good animal book in his library. "Socked it in the head with a rock."

Everybody looked out toward Sugar Creek to the place where the rock had socked the *Ondatra* and where the two forks of the V were getting wider and wider, almost disappearing into nothing, the way waves do when they get old enough.

"Look at those waves!" Poetry said, meaning the new waves my big rock had started.

There was a widening circle going out from where it had struck.

“Reminds me of the waves on Pass Lake where we spent our vacation last summer,” Poetry said. “Remember the ones we had a tilt-a-whirl ride on when Eagle Eye’s boat upset and we got separated from it? If we hadn’t had our life vests on we’d have been drowned because it was too far from the shore to swim!”

“Sure,” Dragonfly piped up, “and that’s the reason why every boy in the world who is in a boat on a lake or river ought to wear a life vest, or else there ought to be plenty of life preservers in the boat, just in case.”

“Hey!” Little Jim piped up, squeaking in his mouselike voice. “Your On-onda-something-or-other has come to life away down the creek!”

And sure enough it had. Way down the creek, maybe fifty feet farther, there was another V moving along toward the Sugar Creek bridge, which meant I hadn’t killed the musquash at all but only scared it. Maybe my rock hadn’t even hit it, and it had ducked and swum under water the way *Ondatra zibethicas* do in Sugar Creek and as loons do in Pass Lake in northern Minnesota.

“I’m thirsty,” Circus said. He jumped up from where he had been lying on his back with his feet propped up on a big hollow stump. That hollow stump was the same one his dad had slipped down inside once and had gotten bit by a black widow spider that had had her web inside.

Right away we were all scurrying down the steep hill to the spring and getting a drink of water apiece, either stooping down and drinking like cows or else using the paper cups that we kept in a little container we had put on the tree that leaned over the spring—in place of the old tin cup that we'd battered into a flat piece of tin and thrown into Sugar Creek.

All of a sudden, we heard a strange noise up at the top of the hill that sounded like somebody moving along through last year's dead leaves and at the same time talking or mumbling to himself about something.

"*Sh!*" Dragonfly said, shushing us, he being the one who nearly always heard or saw something before any of the rest of us did.

We all hushed, and then I heard a man's voice talking to himself or something up there at the top of the hill.

"*Sh!*" I said, and we all stopped whatever we had been doing and didn't move, all except Little Jim. He lost his balance and, to keep from falling the wrong direction—which was into a puddle of cold clean water on the other side of the spring—he had to step awkwardly in several places, jumping from one rock to another and using his pretty stick-candy-looking stick to help him.

We kept hushed for a minute, and the sound up at the top of the hill kept right on—leaves rasping and rustling and a man's voice mumbling something as though he was talking to himself.

All of us had our eyes on Big Jim, our leader. I was looking at his fuzzy mustache, which was like the down on a baby pigeon, wondering who was up on the hilltop, thinking about how I wished I could get a little fuzz on *my* upper lip, and wondering if I could make mine grow if I used some kind of cream on it or something, the way girls do when they want to look older than they are.

Big Jim looked around at the irregular circle of us and nodded to me, motioning with his thumb for me to follow him. He stopped all the rest of the gang from following. And the next minute I was creeping quietly up that steep incline behind Big Jim.

Little Jim also came along, because right at the last second Big Jim motioned to him that he could, as he had a hurt look in his eyes as if maybe nobody thought he was important because he was so little.

I had a trembling feeling inside of me. I just knew there was going to be a surprise at the top of that hill and maybe a mystery. Also, I felt proud that Big Jim had picked me out to go up with him, because he nearly always picks Circus, who is next biggest in the gang.

I didn't need to feel proud, though, because when I heard a little slithering noise behind me, I knew why Circus didn't get invited—he was halfway up a small sapling that grew near the spring. He was already almost high enough to see what was going on at the top of the hill. Circus was doing what he was

always doing anyway, climbing trees most any time or all the time, looking like a monkey even when he wasn't up a tree. The only thing that kept him from hanging by his tail like a monkey was that he didn't have any tail, but he could hang by his legs anyway.

When we had almost reached the top, I felt Little Jim's small hand take hold of my arm tight, as if he was scared, because we could still hear somebody walking around and talking to himself.

Big Jim stopped us, and we all very slowly half crawled the rest of the way up. My heart was pounding like everything. I just knew there was going to be excitement at the top. And when you know there is going to be excitement, you can't wait for it but get excited right away.

"Listen!" Little Jim whispered to me. "He's pounding something."

"Sh!" Big Jim said to us, frowning fiercely, and we kept still.

What's going on up there? I wondered and wished I was a little farther up, but Big Jim had stopped us again so we could listen.

One, two, three—*pound, pound, pound.* There were nine or ten whacks with something on something, and then the pounding stopped, and we heard footsteps going away.

I looked back down the hill at the rest of the gang. Dragonfly's eyes were large and round, as they are when he is half scared or excited. Poetry had a scowl on his broad face,

since he was the one who had a detectivelike mind and was maybe disappointed that Big Jim had made him stay at the bottom of the hill. Little red-haired Tom Till's freckled face looked very strange. He was stooped over, trying to pry a root loose out of the ground so that he'd be ready to throw it at somebody or something if he got a chance or if he had to. His face looked as if he was ready for some kind of fight and that he half hoped there might be one.

And if I had been down there at the bottom of the incline at the spring and somebody else had been looking down at me, he would have seen *another* red-haired, freckled-faced boy, whose hair was trying to stand up on end under his old straw hat and who wasn't much to look at but who had a fiery temper, which had to be watched all the time or it would explode on somebody or something.

Maybe, in case you've never read anything about the Sugar Creek Gang before, I'd better tell you that I am red-haired and freckled-faced and do have a fiery temper some of the time—and that my name is Bill Collins. I have a great mom and dad and a little baby sister, whose name is Charlotte Ann, and I'm the only boy in the Collins family.

I whirled around quickly from looking down the hill at the rest of the gang and from seeing Circus, who was up the elm sapling trying to see over the crest of the hill but probably couldn't. Big Jim had his finger up to his lips for all of us to keep still, which we did.

The pounding had stopped, and we could hear footsteps moving along in the woods, getting fainter and fainter.

Then Big Jim said to us, "He can't hear us now. His shoes are making so much noise in the leaves."

We hurried to the top and looked, and Little Jim whispered, "It's somebody wearing old overalls," which it was, and he was disappearing around the corner of the path that led from the spring down the creek, going toward the old sycamore tree and the swamp.

Big Jim gave us the signal, and all of us broke out of our very painful silence and were acting like ourselves again but wondering who on earth had been there and what he had been doing and why.

All of a sudden, Dragonfly, who had been looking around for shoe tracks with Poetry, let out a yell and said, "Hey, gang, come here! Here's a *letter* nailed onto the old Black Widow Stump!" which was the name we'd given the stump after Circus's dad had been bitten there.

We all made a rush to where Dragonfly's dragonflylike eyes were studying something on the stump, and then I was reading the envelope, which said, in very awkward old handwriting:

U R G E N T

To the Sugar Creek Gang
(Personal. Please open at once.)

13
SUGAR CREEK GANG
The **INDIAN**
CEMETERY

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

There were two very important things I didn't have time to tell you about in my last story, *Screams in the Night*. One of those two things was what happened when we ran *ker-smack* into the kidnapper himself and had a terrible fight with him, and the other was a strange moonlight adventure in an Indian graveyard.

In fact, the two were sort of mixed up together. The kidnapper was doing something mysterious in that Indian graveyard, and some of the gang accidentally stumbled onto him. Did you ever see an Indian cemetery, the kind the Chippewa Indians have away up in northern Minnesota? That's the country where the Sugar Creek Gang was spending its awfully fast vacation. Those cemeteries are the strangest-looking places in the world. I'll tell you about the one we had our adventure in just as soon as I get to it.

I was sitting on the farther end of the long dock with my back to the shore, swinging my bare feet. I was holding onto my fishing rod and watching the red-and-white bobber way out in the lazy water.

Now and then the bobber would bob a little and move around in a small, lazy circle on the surface of the big blue lake, which meant

that the live minnow I had put on the hook for bait was down there in the water somewhere and was still frisky enough to be a very attractive afternoon lunch for any hungry bass or walleye or northern pike that might be dumb enough to come along and eat it.

I'd been sitting there for maybe ten minutes, not getting any bites except from deer-flies, which had terribly sharp stings. So I smeared some insect repellent on my bare hands and arms and face and legs and feet and was getting a good tan to take back home with me after vacation would be over.

It was about three o'clock, and all the gang except me were in their tents taking an afternoon nap, which was what we all had to do every day. A boy feels so good on a camping trip that he might get too tired, and when a boy gets too tired without enough rest and sleep, he can get sick easier or catch cold, and his body will be a good growing place for most any kind of germ.

I'd already had a short nap and had sneaked out by myself to the end of the dock, put a frisky, wiggling chub on for bait, and cast my line way out into the deep water. I was hoping that by the time it was time for the gang to wake up, I'd be getting a terribly big fish on my line. Then I could yell and scream, and we'd all have a lot of excited noise to start the rest of the afternoon off right.

After that, there'd be a picture to take of the fish and me, and maybe it would be big

enough to enter in the northern Minnesota fish contest. And then maybe our hometown paper, *The Sugar Creek Times*, would publish the picture, and the write-up would say something like this:

SUGAR CREEK BOY
LANDS FOURTEEN POUNDER

Bill Collins, eleven-year-old son of Theodore Collins, who lives just three and one-half miles west of here, has distinguished himself to anglers by landing a fighting, wild-running, very fierce-looking northern pike at Pass Lake, Minnesota, where he and his pals are camping.

I was still a little sleepy, and, since it's never very good fishing that time of day anyway, I sort of nodded. I must have dozed off, because all of a sudden I felt the dock shaking a little behind me, and looking around I saw one of the gang coming, his fishing rod in his hand and his straw hat flapping. His round face was grinning, although he had the finger of one hand up to his lips, meaning for me to keep still.

“Hi, Poetry!” I whispered.

He stopped close to me and looked down into my freckled face and said, “Hi, Bill! *Sh!* Listen! I've just thought of something important.”

I watched him wiggle-twist his pudgy fingers into his khaki shirt pocket and pull out a

piece of white cloth with something wrapped up in it.

“What you got?” I said.

And he said, “See this piece of glass we found up there beside the sandy road last night where the kidnapper’s car was stuck?”

I remembered all about it—the kidnapper’s car stuck in the sand, the wheels spinning, him swearing and swearing, and Poetry and I hiding behind some bushes watching and listening, not knowing till afterward that a little kidnapped girl was in the backseat of the car right that minute.

The man all of a sudden had climbed out of the car and let out some of the air of his back tires to increase traction and then had climbed in again and roared away. After he’d gone, our flashlights had shown us something bright, and Poetry had picked it up and kept it, saying it was a clue. But it was only a broken piece of glass.

I stared at the piece of thin glass in Poetry’s hand and thought of how it was curved like a piece of broken bottle.

“He was maybe drinking,” I said, “and threw the bottle away and it broke and—”

“It’s *not* a piece of broken bottle,” Poetry said. He lifted the minnow pail that was sitting beside me and put it behind him so he could set himself down beside me. Then he said, “Take a look *through* it. It’s a piece of lens from somebody’s glasses, and I’ll bet the kidnapper broke them while he was having trouble get-

ting his car out of the sand. Or maybe the little Ostberg girl wiggled and twisted, trying to get away, and they broke that way.”

Poetry made me look through it, which I did, as he held it so that it wouldn't get dropped. While I was looking through it, I noticed it magnified things and also brought things up closer.

And then I saw my red-and-white bobber start moving faster than a four-inch-long minnow could have pulled it. Out—out—out it went. Then it dunked under, and the line on my rod tightened, and *then* the ratchet of my reel started to sing. As quick as a flash I tightened my grip on the pole and my thumb on the reel, letting the line unwind, waiting for the fish—or whatever was on the other end of the line—to get the minnow swallowed.

I quick dodged my face away from Poetry's hand and the piece of glass and got set to sock the line. I gave a quick fierce jerk, and you should have seen what happened.

Away out there about fifty feet, there was a fierce boiling of the surface of the water and a wild tugging on my line. I heard the reel spinning and felt the line burning hot on my thumb. I was sure I'd hooked a terrific northern pike, and Poetry and I all of a sudden started making a lot of fishermen's noise.

I scrambled to my feet and didn't even bother to notice what was going on behind me. I heard Poetry trying to get out of my way and out of the way of the minnow pail, which he

was having a hard time doing, but I couldn't look back to see. I had to hold onto my fish. I did hear Poetry grunt five or six quick grunts, though, and heard the pail get itself knocked over and heard and felt a heavy body go *ker-whamety-thump* on the dock.

Then there was a noisy splash beside me, and I knew it was the minnow pail. It'd had about twenty-five live chubs in it and shouldn't have been left on the dock in the first place but should have been down in the fresh water to keep the minnows alive.

Then there was another splash. I took a sideways look and saw Poetry himself down there in the water.

He grabbed the pail, yelling, "The lid wasn't fastened, and the minnows are all spilled out!" Poetry held up the empty pail with every single minnow gone that Barry, our camp director, was supposed to fish with that evening.

Well, my heart would have been beating hard with being to blame for losing the minnows if it wasn't already beating terribly fast with excitement because of the fish on my line. It was no time to worry over spilled minnows, though. So I yelled down to Poetry, "Look—look!"

And when Poetry looked, he saw what I saw. A great two-foot-long fish of some kind I'd never seen before jumped out of the water, showed every bit of himself in a long leap, and then splashed back in again and dived straight to the bottom.

And then all the gang were waking up in their tents. They came running out to the end of the dock to help by yelling and telling me what to do and what not to do all at the same time.

Splash! Zip! Swish!

I tell you it was an exciting time there for a few noisy minutes, with one member of the gang after another bounding onto the dock, and all of them telling me what to do and what not to do and why, and also how to and how not to.

But soon I had that big fish coming in a little closer to the edge of the dock where I was. Then, because he may have felt the way a boy would feel if he saw some giants yelling and waving their arms, he'd get scared and make a fierce run for the deep water again. And every time, I'd let him run and let the hot line go sizzling under my thumb from the whirring reel, so as not to let him break the line.

In about five minutes the fish was up close enough for Big Jim, the leader of our gang, to reach out with a long wooden-handled dip net and get him into it. In another jiffy he was landed.

"It-it-it's a *dogfish!*" Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of our gang, yelled when he saw the lunging, fierce-looking, large-mouthed fish in Big Jim's net. I looked at Dragonfly's eyes, which, when he's excited, get extra large the way a dragonfly's eyes are.

"It is not," Circus said, squinting at it and at the same time shading his eyes with his hand to

keep the sun out of them. Circus, being our acrobat, felt so good after his afternoon nap that he started walking toward the shore on his hands. He wound up in the shallow water beside the dock, because he accidentally lost his balance and fell off in a sprawling splash right beside Poetry, who was already there.

Little Jim, the greatest little guy in the gang and the most innocent-faced one of us, squeezed his way through to where I was and said, “It’s a two-foot-long bullhead!”

“It can’t be,” red-haired Tom Till said, squinting his blue eyes at the fish. “Bullheads have horns, and there isn’t a one on him!”

Well, it turned out that Dragonfly was right—it *was* a terribly big dogfish and wouldn’t be good to eat, although some people might want to eat it.

Anyway, that’s how the minnow pail with Barry’s two dozen minnows got turned over and all the minnows spilled out, and why Barry, for a friendly sort of punishment, decided that Poetry and I had to go to a resort about a quarter of a mile up the lake and get more minnows.

And that’s how Poetry and I ran *ker-smack* into the kidnapper mystery again. This is the way it happened.

14
SUGAR CREEK GANG

The TREASURE
HUNT

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

I was sitting in a big white rowboat. It was docked at the end of the pier that ran far out into the water of the lake. From where I sat in the stern, I could see the two brown tents where the rest of the Sugar Creek Gang were supposed to be taking a short afternoon nap.

That was one of the rules about camp life none of us liked very well but which was good for us because then we always had more pep for the rest of the day and didn't get too tired before night.

I'd already had my afternoon nap and had sneaked out of the tent and to the dock, where I was right that minute. I was just sitting there and imagining things such as whether there would be anything very exciting to see if some of the gang could explore that big tree-covered island about a mile away across the water.

Whew! It certainly was hot out there close to the water with the sunlight pouring itself on me from above and also shining up at me from below. The lake was like a big blue mirror that caught sunlight and reflected it right up under my straw hat, making my hot freckled face even hotter. Because it was the style for people to get tanned all over, I didn't mind the heat as much as I might have.

It seemed to be getting hotter every minute, though. It was the kind of day we sometimes had back home at Sugar Creek just before some big thunderheads came sneaking up and surprised us with a fierce storm.

It was also a perfect day for a sunbath. *What on earth made people want to get brown all over for anyway?* I thought. Then I looked down at my freckled brownish arm and was disgusted with myself. Instead of getting a nice tan like Circus, the acrobatic member of our gang, I always got sunburned and freckled, and my upper arm looked like a piece of raw steak instead of a nice piece of brown fried chicken. Thinking that reminded me that I was hungry, and I wished it was supper time.

It certainly was a quiet camp, I thought, as I looked at the two tents where the rest of the gang was supposed to be sleeping. I just couldn't imagine anybody sleeping that long—anyway, not any boy—unless he was at home and it was morning and time to get up and do the chores.

Just that second I heard the sound of footsteps from up the shore. Looking up, I saw a smallish boy with brown curly hair coming toward me along the path that runs all along the shoreline. I knew right away it was Little Jim, my almost best friend and the greatest little guy that ever lived. I knew it was Little Jim not only because he carried his ash stick with him—which was about as long as a man's cane—but because of the shuffling way he walked. I noticed he was stopping every now

and then to stoop over and look at some wildflower. Then he'd write something down in a book he was carrying, which I knew was a wildflower guidebook.

He certainly was an interesting little guy, I thought. I guess he hadn't seen me, because I could hear him talking to himself, which he had a habit of doing when he was alone. There was something kind of nice about it that made me like him even better than ever.

I think that little guy does more honest-to-goodness thinking than any of the rest of the gang—certainly more than Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member, who is spindle-legged and slim and whose nose turns south at the end; or Poetry, the barrel-shaped member, who reads all the books he can get his hands on and who knows 101 poems by heart and is always quoting one; and also even more than Big Jim, the leader of our gang, who is the oldest and who has maybe seventeen smallish strands of fuzz on his upper lip, which one day will be a mustache.

I ducked my head down below the dock so Little Jim couldn't see me and listened, still wondering, *What on earth!*

Little Jim stopped right beside the path that leads from the dock to the Indian kitchen, which was close by the two brown tents. He stooped down and said, "Hm! Wild strawberry." He leafed through the book he was carrying and wrote something down. Then he looked around him and, seeing a balm of Gilead tree

by the dock with some five-leaved ivy on it, went straight to the tree and with his magnifying glass began to study the ivy.

I didn't know that I was going to call out to him and interrupt his thoughts. That was something my mother had taught me not to do when a person is thinking hard, because nobody likes to have somebody interrupt his thoughts.

But I did. "Hi, Little Jim!" I said from the stern of the boat.

That little guy acted as cool as a cucumber. He just looked slowly around in different directions, including up and down. Then his blue eyes looked absentmindedly into mine, and for some reason I had the kindest, warmest feeling toward him.

His face wasn't tanned like the rest of the gang's. He was what people called "fair"; his small nose was straight, his little chin was pear-shaped, and his darkish eyebrows were straight across. His small ears were the way they sometimes were—lopped over a little because that was the way he nearly always wore his straw hat.

When he saw me sitting there in the boat, he grinned and said, "I'll bet I'll get an A in nature study in school next fall. I've found forty-one different kinds of wildflowers."

I wasn't interested in the study of plants at all right that minute. I was interested in having some kind of an adventure. I said to Little Jim, "I wonder if there are any different kinds of flowers over there on that island where Robinson Crusoe had his adventures."

Little Jim looked at me without seeing me, I thought. Then he grinned and said, “Robinson Crusoe never saw that island.”

“Oh yes, he did! He’s looking at it right this very minute and wishing he could explore it and find treasure or something,” I answered, wishing I were Robinson Crusoe myself.

Just that second another voice piped up from behind some sumac on the other side of the balm of Gilead tree. “You can’t be a Robinson Crusoe and land on a tropical island without having a shipwreck first, and who wants to have a wreck?”

I knew it was Poetry, even before he shuffled out from behind the sumac and I saw his round face and his heavy eyebrows that grew straight across the top of his nose, as if he had just one big long eyebrow instead of two like most people.

“You *are* a wreck,” I called to him, joking. We always liked to have word fights that we didn’t mean, after which we always liked each other even better.

“I’ll leave you guys to fight it out,” Little Jim said to us. “I’ve got to find me nine more kinds of wildflowers.” With that, that little chipmunk of a guy scuffed on up the shore, swinging his stick around and stooping over to study some new kind of flower he spied every now and then.

And that’s how Poetry and I got our heads together to plan a game of *Robinson Crusoe*, not knowing we were going to run into one of the strangest adventures we’d had in our whole lives.

“See here,” Poetry said, grunting and sliding down off the side of the dock and into the boat where I was, “if we play *Robinson Crusoe*, we’ll have to have one other person to go along with us.”

“But there were only *two* of them,” I said, “Robinson Crusoe himself and his man Friday, the boy who became his servant, and whom Crusoe saved from being eaten by the cannibals, and who, after he was saved, did nearly all Crusoe’s work for him.”

“All right,” Poetry said, “I’ll be Crusoe, and you be his man Friday.”

“I will *not*,” I said. “I’m already Crusoe. I thought of it first, and I’m already him.”

Poetry and I frowned at each other.

Then his round face brightened, and he said, “All right, you be Crusoe, and I’ll be one of the cannibals getting ready to eat your man Friday, and you come along and rescue him.”

“But if you’re going to be a cannibal, I’ll have to *shoot* you, and then you’ll be dead,” I said.

That spoiled that plan for a minute, until Poetry’s bright mind thought of something else, which was, “Didn’t Robinson Crusoe have a pet goat on the island with him?”

“Sure,” I said.

And Poetry said, “All right, after you shoot me, I’ll be the goat.”

Well, that settled that, but we couldn’t decide right that minute the problem of which one of the gang should be the boy Robinson

Crusoe saved on a Friday and whom he named his man Friday.

It was Poetry who thought of a way to help us decide which other one of the gang to take along with us. It happened like this.

“Big Jim is out,” I said, “because he’s too big and would want to be the leader himself, and Robinson Crusoe has to be that.”

“And Circus is out too,” Poetry said, “on account of he’s almost as big as Big Jim.”

“Then there’s only Little Jim, Dragonfly, and Little Tom Till left,” I said.

Then Poetry said, “Maybe not a one of them will be willing to be your man Friday.”

We didn’t have time to talk about it any further. Right then Dragonfly came moseying out toward us from his tent, his spindly legs swinging awkwardly and his crooked nose and dragonflylike eyes making him look just like a ridiculous Friday afternoon, I thought.

“He’s the man I want,” I said. “We three have had lots of exciting adventures together, and he’ll be perfect.”

“But he can’t keep quiet when there’s a mystery. He always sneezes just when we don’t want him to.”

Dragonfly reached the pier and let the bottoms of his bare feet go *ker-plop, ker-plop, ker-plop* on the smooth boards, getting closer with every *ker-plop*.

When he spied Poetry and me in the boat, he stopped as if he had been shot at. He looked

down at us and said in an accusing voice, "You guys going on a boat ride? I'm going along!"

I started to say, "Sure, we want you," thinking that, when we got over to the island, we could make a man Friday out of him as easy as pie.

But Poetry beat me to it by saying, "There's only one more of the gang going with us, and it might not be you."

Dragonfly plopped himself down on the edge of the dock, swung one foot out to the gunwale of the boat, caught it with his toes, and pulled it toward him. Then he slid himself in and sat down on the seat behind Poetry. "If anybody goes, I go, or I'll scream and tell the rest of the gang, and nobody'll get to go."

I looked at Poetry, and he looked at me, and our eyes said to each other, *Now what?*

"Are you willing to be eaten by a cannibal?" I asked, and he got a puzzled look in his eyes. "There're cannibals over there on that island—one, anyway—a great big barrel-shaped one that—"

Poetry's fist shot forward and socked me in my ribs, which didn't have any fat on them, and I grunted and stopped talking at the same time.

"We're going to play *Robinson Crusoe*," Poetry said, "and whoever goes will have to be willing to do everything I say—I mean everything *Bill* says."

"Please," Dragonfly said. "I'll do *anything*."

Well, that was a promise, but Poetry wasn't satisfied. He pretended he wanted Tom Till to

go along, because he liked Tom a lot and thought he'd make a better man Friday than Dragonfly.

"We'll try you out," Poetry said and caught hold of the dock and climbed out of the boat.

The other two of us followed him.

"We'll have to initiate you," Poetry explained, as we all walked along together. "We can't take anybody on a treasure hunt who can't keep quiet when he's told to and who can't take orders without saying, 'Why?'"

"Why?" Dragonfly wanted to know.

But Poetry said with a very serious face, "It isn't funny," and we went on.

"What're you going to do?" Dragonfly asked, as we marched him along with us up the shoreline to the place where we were going to initiate him.

I didn't know myself where we were going to do it. But Poetry seemed to know exactly what to do and where to go and why, so I acted as though I knew too.

Poetry made me stop to pick up a big empty gallon can that had had prunes in it—the gang ate prunes for breakfast nearly every morning on our camping trip.

"What's that for?" Dragonfly asked.

And Poetry said, "That's to cook our dinner in."

"You mean—you mean—me?"

"You," Poetry said. "Or you can't be Bill's man Friday."

"But I get saved, don't I?" Dragonfly said with a worried voice.

“Sure, just as soon as I get shot,” Poetry explained.

“And then you turn into a goat,” I said, as he panted along beside us, “and right away you eat the prune can.”

With that, Poetry smacked his lips as though he had just finished eating a delicious tin can. Then he leaned over and groaned as if it had given him a stomachache.

Right that second, I decided to test Dragonfly’s obedience, so I said, “All right, Friday, take the can you’re going to be cooked in and fill it half full of lake water!”

There was a quick scowl on Dragonfly’s face, which said, *I don’t want to do it*. He shrugged his scrawny shoulders, lifted his eyebrows and the palms of his hands at the same time and said, “I’m a poor heathen. I can’t understand English. I don’t want to fill any old prune can with water.”

With that, *I* scowled and said to Poetry in a fierce voice, “That settles that! He can’t take orders. Let’s send him home!”

Boy, did Dragonfly ever come to life in a hurry! “All right, all right,” he whined, “give me the can.” He grabbed it out of my hand, made a dive toward the lake, dipped the can in, and came back with it filled clear to the top with nice clean water.

“Here, Crusoe,” he puffed. “Your man Friday is your humble slave.” He extended the can toward me.

“Carry it yourself!” I said.

And then, all of a sudden, Dragonfly set it down on the ground where some of it splashed over the top onto Poetry's shoes. Dragonfly got a stubborn look on his face and said, "I think the cannibal ought to carry it. I'm not even Friday yet—not till the cannibal gets killed."

Well, he was right, so Poetry looked at me and I at him, and he picked up the can, and we went on till we came in sight of the boathouse, which, if you've read *Screams in the Night*, you will already know about.

It was going to be fun initiating Dragonfly—just how much fun I didn't know. And I certainly didn't know what a mystery we were going to run into in less than fifteen minutes.

In only a little while we came to Santa's boathouse. Santa, as you know, was the owner of the property where we had pitched our tents. He also owned a lot of other lakeshore property up there in that part of the Paul Bunyan country. Everybody called him Santa because he was round like all the different Santa Clauses we'd seen, and he was always laughing.

Santa himself called to us with his big laughing voice when he saw us coming. "Well, well, if it isn't Bill Collins, Dragonfly, and Poetry." Santa, being a smart man, knew that if there's anything a boy likes to hear better than anything else it's somebody calling him by his name.

"Hi," we all answered him.

Poetry set down the prune can of water with a savage sigh as if it was too heavy for him to stand and hold.

Santa was standing beside his boathouse door, holding a hammer in one hand and a handsaw in the other.

“Where to with that can of water?” he asked us.

And Dragonfly said, “We’re going to pour the water in a big hole up there on the hill and make a new lake.”

Santa grinned at all of us with a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes, knowing Dragonfly hadn’t told any lie but was only doing what most boys do most all the time anyway—playing make-believe.

“May we look inside your boathouse for a minute?” Poetry asked.

And Santa said, “Certainly. Go right in.”

We did and looked around a little.

Poetry acted very mysterious, as though he was thinking about something important. He frowned with his wide forehead and looked at different things such as the cot in the far end, the shavings and sawdust on the floor, and the carpenter’s tools above the workbench—which were chisels, screwdrivers, saws, planes, and hammers and nails. Also, Poetry examined the different kinds of boards made out of beautifully stained wood.

“You boys like to hold this saw and hammer a minute?” Santa asked us. He handed a hammer to me and a saw handle to Dragonfly, which we took, not knowing why.

“That’s the hammer and that’s the saw the kidnapper used the night he was building the

grave house in the Indian cemetery,” Santa said.

I felt and must have looked puzzled till he explained, saying, “The police found them the night you boys caught him.”

“But—but how did they get *here*?” I asked.

Poetry answered me by saying, “Don’t you remember, Bill Collins, that we found this boat-house door wide open that night—with the latch hanging? The kidnapper stole ’em.”

I looked at the hammer in my hand and remembered. I tried to realize that the hammer I had in my hand right that minute was the same one that, one night last week, had been in the wicked hand of a very fierce man who had used it in an Indian cemetery to help him build a grave house. Also, the saw in Poetry’s hand was the one the man had used to saw pieces of lumber into the right lengths.

“And *here*,” Santa said, lifting a piece of canvas from something in the corner, “is the little nearly finished grave house. The lumber was stolen from here also. The police brought it out this morning. They’ve taken fingerprints from the saw and hammer.”

“Why on earth did he want to build an Indian grave house?” I asked, looking at the pretty little house. It looked like the chicken coop we had at home at Sugar Creek, only almost twice as long.

Dragonfly spoke up then and said, “He maybe was going to bury the little Ostberg girl there.”

But Poetry shook his head. “I think he was going to bury the ransom money there, where nobody in the world would guess to look.”

Well, we had to get going with our game of *Robinson Crusoe*, which we did, all of us feeling fine to think that last week we had had a chance to catch a kidnapper, even though the ransom money was still missing.

15
SUGAR CREEK GANG

**THOUSAND
DOLLAR FISH**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

When you just *know* there's going to be some exciting trouble in the next twelve minutes or less, you have to make your red head do some quick clear thinking, if you can.

Not a one of the Sugar Creek Gang knew *what* was going to happen, but the very minute I heard that outboard motor roaring out on the lake, sounding as if it was coming straight toward the shore and the old icehouse we were all in, I said, "Quick, gang! Let's get out of here and get this ransom money back to camp!"

Little Jim's gunnysack had a lot of money in it right that minute, money that we'd dug up out of the sawdust in that abandoned icehouse. The sack was nearly filled with stuffed fish, big and middle-sized northern and walleyed pike with thousands and thousands of dollars sewed up inside.

I won't take time right now to tell you all you maybe ought to know about how we happened to find that ransom money buried in the sawdust of the icehouse. That'd take too long, and, besides, you've probably read all about it in the last story about the Sugar Creek Gang, which is called *The Treasure Hunt*.

I'd better tell you, though, that a little St. Paul girl named Marie Ostberg had been kid-

napped and the kidnapper had hidden up in the Chippewa Forest of northern Minnesota in what is called "Paul Bunyan Country," where we were camping. Our gang had found the girl in the middle of the night and then captured the kidnapper in an old Indian cemetery the next night.

Then we had a very mysterious and exciting time hunting for the ransom money in one of the strangest places in all the world to find money. At last we found it in this very old ice-house, sewed up inside these great big fish, which we'd been digging up and stuffing into the gunnysack.

In maybe another seven minutes we'd have had it all dug up and into the sack and would have been on our way back to camp. But all of a startling sudden we heard that outboard motor roaring in our direction. We knew that unless we moved fast we would never be able to get out and far enough away into the bushes not to be seen.

"What's the sense of being scared?" Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of our gang, asked me right after I'd ordered us all to get going quick. "The kidnapper's caught and in jail, isn't he?"

"Sure, but old hook-nosed John Till's running loose up here somewhere," I said.

John Till was a very fierce man and the unpleasant dad of one of the members of our gang. He had been in jail a lot of times in his wicked life and was staying in a cabin not more

than a quarter of a mile up the shore from where we were right that minute.

Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of the gang, who knew 101 poems by heart and was always quoting one, turned around quick, scrambled back across the sawdust we'd been digging in, and peeped through a crack between the logs toward the lake.

"Who is it?" I asked.

And he said in his ducklike, squawky voice, "I can't tell, but he looks awful mad."

Well, anybody knows that nobody could see well enough *that* far to see a person's face and be able to tell whether it had a mad look on it. But if it was John Till, who hated us boys anyway, he probably *would* be mad and would do savage things to all of us if he caught us in that icehouse taking the money.

So we all scrambled as fast as we could out of that icehouse and into the open, carrying Little Jim's gunnysack full of fish. We made a dive across an open space to a clump of bushes, where we wouldn't be seen by anybody on the lake.

Circus, the acrobatic member of our gang, was with us, and he, being the strongest of us, grabbed up the sack, swung it over his shoulder, and loped on ahead.

"Hurry!" we panted to each other and didn't stop running until we reached the top of the hill, which we did just as we heard the outboard motor stop. There we all dropped down on the grass, gasping and panting and happy

that we were safe. But I was feeling pretty bad to think that there were probably a half dozen other fish still buried in the sawdust in that old log icehouse.

“Quick, Poetry, give me your knife,” Circus ordered.

“What for?” Poetry said and at the same time shoved his hand in his pocket and pulled out his official Boy Scout knife. He handed it over to Circus, who quick opened the heavy cutting blade and started ripping open the sewed-up stomach of the northern pike he’d just pulled out of the sack.

“There’s no sense in carrying home a six-pound northern pike with only a quarter of a pound of twenty-dollar bills in it,” Circus said.

I knew he was right. It was a long way back to our camp, and if for any reason we had to run fast, we could do it better without having to lug along those great big fish, especially the biggest one.

I didn’t bother to watch Circus then, because I started peering through the foliage of some oak undergrowth back toward the lake. And I saw a man come around the corner of the icehouse and stop. The old door hung open, but I could see several boards nailed across the opening on the inside.

“Look!” Dragonfly said. “He’s got a big string of fish.”

And sure enough he had.

Little Jim, who was beside me, holding onto the stick he always carried with him when

we were on a hike or out in the woods, whispered close to my ear, "I'll bet he's got a lot more money sewed up in a lot more fish and is going to bury it in the sawdust where these were."

I happened to have my high-powered binoculars with me, so I quick unsnapped the carrying case they were in. I zipped them out and raised them to my eyes, and right away it seemed I was only about one-third as far away as I really was. I gasped so loud at what I saw—or rather *whom* I saw—that my gasp was almost a yell.

"*Sh!*" Circus said to us, just as if *he* was the leader of our gang, which he wasn't.

I was leader today—that is, I was supposed to be, because our real leader, Big Jim, wasn't with us. He was back at camp with Little Tom Till, the newest member of our gang.

"It's old John Till, all right," I said. I could see his stooped shoulders, dark complexion, red hair, bulgy eyes, bushy eyebrows, and hook nose.

"What if he finds we've dug up part of the fish and run away with them?" Little Jim asked in a half-scared voice.

"Maybe he won't," I said and hoped he wouldn't.

While I was watching John Till toss his stringer of fish into the icehouse and clamber up the boards after them, Circus was slashing open fish and taking out the ransom money, which was folded in nice plastic bags, the kind

my mom uses in our kitchen back home at Sugar Creek.

We all helped Circus do what he was doing, all of us maybe more excited than we'd been in a long time, while different ones of us took turns watching what John Till was doing.

I knew that soon he would be out of that icehouse again and probably would go back to the big white boat he'd come to shore in. He'd shove off and row out a few feet, and then there would be a roar of his motor, and away he would go out across the sunlit water, his boat making a long widening V behind him. Then we would sneak back and get the rest of the money.

Everything was now pretty clear in my mind as to what had been going on the last day or two. Perhaps John Till had been what police call an "accomplice" of the real kidnapper, and it had been his special job to look after the ransom money. He'd decided that the best way in the world to hide it where nobody would ever think of finding it would be to catch some big fish, cut them open, clean out the entrails, fold the money in plastic, stuff it inside the fish, and sew them up, the way my mother sews up a chicken she's stuffed with dressing just before she slides it into the oven for our dinner.

Then he would dig down deep in the sawdust of the icehouse till he came to some ice, lay the fish on it, and cover it up. Nobody would *ever* think to look inside a fish for money. Even if they accidentally dug up a fish, it'd be cov-

ered with sticky wet sawdust, and they wouldn't see the stitches in its stomach.

While I was thinking that and also watching the shadow of John Till through the doorway of the icehouse, all of a sudden there was a quick gasp beside me.

I said to Circus, "What on earth?" thinking maybe he'd found something terribly special.

But he hadn't. He dropped his knife, leaped to his feet, and said, "You guys stay here! I'll be right back."

"Stop!" I said. "Where are you going?" I remembered I was supposed to be the leader.

But Circus had his own ideas about that. He squirmed out of my grasp, almost tearing his shirt because I had hold of it and didn't want to let go.

The next second there were only four of us left—barrel-shaped Poetry; kind-faced, great Little Jim; pop-eyed Dragonfly; and me, red-haired, fiery-tempered, freckle-faced Bill Collins. Circus, I saw, was streaking through the bushes as fast as he could go toward the lake and the icehouse but not getting out in the open where John Till could see him.

What on earth? I thought. I didn't dare yell or try to stop him by whistling, or John Till would have heard me. And then who knows what might happen? I didn't have the slightest idea what Circus was up to.

He darted like a scared chipmunk out from some bushes not far from the icehouse and made a dive for the open door.

He's crazy! I thought. *He's going to try to— what is he going to try to do?*

I soon found out. It happened so fast that I didn't even have time to think.

Swish! Wham! A half-dozen flying movements and it was all over. Circus grabbed that icehouse door, swung it shut, lifted the big heavy bar and threw it into place, and old hook-nosed John Till was locked inside.

16
SUGAR CREEK GANG

The HAUNTED
HOUSE

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

I've been racking my brain, which is supposed to be under my red hair, trying to remember if I've ever told you the story of the haunted house at Sugar Creek and what happened there one night when we went on a coon hunt with Circus's dad's long-nosed, long-eared, long-legged, long-voiced, long-tongued hounds.

Circus is the name of the acrobatic member of our gang, and his dad is the father of a large family of nearly all girls and only one boy. His dad is the best hunter in all Sugar Creek territory.

The things that happened around and in and on top of that old haunted house would make any boy's red hair stand on end and also scare the living daylights out of him—which is what they did to me.

As I said, I've been racking my brain to see if I've ever told you about that haunted house, and I can't remember having written even half a paragraph about it. So here I go with that spooky, weird, and breathtaking story about the old abandoned house that was way up on a hill above Sugar Creek on some wooded property that belonged to Old Man Paddler.

Old Man Paddler is the kindest, friendliest, longest-whiskered old man who ever lived. He

likes kids a lot and is always doing something that will make them happy or that will be good for them.

Of course, you know there isn't any such thing as a haunted house, which usually is supposed to be a house that nobody lives in but which is visited every now and then by a "ghost." Not a one of us believed in ghosts, except Drag-onfly, the pop-eyed member of our gang. He is superstitious because his mother is.

When we heard about that old house in the woods and about the strange noises inside it that nobody could explain—well, it looked as if we were in for another exciting experience, different from any we'd had in our whole lives. It was while we were having a gang meeting one summer day on Bumblebee Hill that we first learned about it.

As quick as I had finished dinner that day, I looked across the table to where my grayish-brown-haired mom sat with my little sister Charlotte Ann in her lap.

My face must have had a question mark on it, because when Mom looked at me, she said the most surprising thing. I couldn't even imagine her saying it, it was so strange. She said, "Certainly, Bill, if you want to. I'm feeling just fine and not a bit tired. I can do the dishes alone for a change. So if you want to skip out and go down to your meeting with the gang, you just run along."

Imagine that! Mom nearly always expected me to do the dishes after every noon meal—

and so did Dad. And when both Mom and Dad expected me to do a thing, I nearly always did it, even when I didn't expect to myself.

I looked at Dad's big gray-green eyes under his shaggy brown eyebrows to see if Mom meant it, and if he was going to agree with her.

You could have knocked me over with a toothpick when he said, "That's right, Son, you run along to your gang meeting. Your mother and I have some things to talk over, and I'll knock off a little while from work and help her with the dishes myself."

Hearing him say that, and in such a way, made me suspicious that they wanted to get rid of me so they could talk about something that might especially interest me if I could hear it.

Still, I knew that in another minute I would dive for the screen door, shove it open, and make a wild dash across the yard. I would pass the big swing in our walnut tree, zip through the gate and across the graveled road, vault over the rail fence and run *swish-zip-zip-zippety-sizzle* down the path that had been made by barefoot boys' bare feet to the spring.

There I'd swerve to the right and dash up along another rail fence that bordered the top of a bluff just above the bayou. Then I'd swing right again and sprint to the foot of Bumblebee Hill and up its lazy slope to the old abandoned cemetery at the top. There we were going to have our gang meeting just as soon after lunch that day as all the members of the gang could get away from their houses and get there.

But with both of my parents wanting me to get lost in a hurry so that they could talk about something, I suddenly wished I could hear what they were going to say. I knew it wasn't polite to "eavesdrop," so I decided I wouldn't. It was almost by accident that I heard part of what they said—just enough to make me curious and want to find out more.

Right away I excused myself, scooped up my straw hat from the floor, where it wasn't supposed to be, and swished out our east door, which in the summertime is always open to help get a breeze through the house.

I was going so fast that I was halfway across our grassy yard before I heard the screen door slam behind me. Then I also heard something else, and it was, "*Bill Collins!* Come back here and close the door like a gentleman!"

When Dad says it like that, I always obey in a hurry.

I was trying hard to learn to shut doors like a gentleman around our house, but not having any older brothers or sisters to set an example for me, it was kind of hard. The only examples I had were my dad and mom, and they always shut the screen doors carefully anyway.

Well, I put on the brakes quick, stopped before I got to the walnut tree, dashed back, opened the screen door again, and shut it like a gentleman, which means quietly.

Then I saw our pitcher pump standing at the end of the boardwalk that runs out toward our barn. I saw the drinking cup hanging on a

wire hook on it. I decided to get a drink, because I always liked to hear the pump handle squeak when I pumped the pump.

After a cool gulp or two, I tossed what water was left in the cup out into a little puddle where maybe forty-seven yellow butterflies were getting a drink themselves. They were the kind of butterfly boys like to catch and also the kind that lay eggs on cabbage plants in the garden and whose worms hatch out of the eggs and eat up the cabbages. Those forty-seven—more or less—yellow butterflies all came to life quick and fluttered up in forty-seven different directions. Right away they started to light again all around the muddy edge of the little puddle of water.

I decided to go back past the screen door again, and just as I got there I stopped out of curiosity to find out if Mom and Dad were talking about me or something I had done and shouldn't have.

This is what I heard Dad's big gruff voice say: "Yes, it's too bad. Poor boy. He's got a tick and will have to have a doctor's care."

Who's got a tick—and what of it? I wondered, for there were all kinds of wood ticks around Sugar Creek and also different kinds up North, where we'd gone on a camping trip once.

Then I heard Mom say in her worried voice, which she sometimes uses when she is worrying out loud, "Yes, Theodore"—which is my dad's first name—"it's too terribly bad, and

it's his parents' own fault. They're always picking on him, and that's made him nervous."

"Poor Dragonfly," Dad's gruff voice said. "I wonder if I should have a talk with his father."

What they were saying didn't make sense at all. In my mind's eye I could see Dragonfly standing stark naked with both of his parents standing beside him, looking him over from head to toe and picking ticks off him, and Dragonfly not feeling well and having to go to the doctor. I wanted to call into the kitchen and ask Dad or Mom if Dragonfly was very sick, but instead I decided to run on down to the gang meeting, which I did.

Boy oh boy, I felt good as I dashed out across our grassy yard. I swerved out of the way when I came to the walnut tree, reached up and caught hold of the ropes on either side of the swing, swung myself up, leaped off, and dashed on through the gate past "Theodore Collins" on the mailbox. I made bare-foot tracks on the dust of the road as I vaulted over the rail fence, and away I went, feeling like a million dollars.

Even as I ran, I noticed the path was bordered on either side with wildflowers, such as buttercups, harebells, dandelions, oxeye daisies, and a lot of others. There were also mayapples, great big patches of them, with shining, light green leaves.

If there is anything in all the world that feels better than anything else, it is to run through a woods with bare feet on a shaded

path, smelling sweet-smelling flowers and pine trees and seeing different-colored butterflies flitting around—and maybe scaring up a rabbit and watching it run *hoppety-sizzle* in some direction or other to get away from what it thinks is danger.

I stopped at the spring to get another cool drink and looked out across Sugar Creek. I noticed that it was very quiet, not having a ripple on it but only a lot of different-shaped splotches of foam, which I knew were clusters of very small air bubbles sticking together. For just a second I thought about how well I liked old Sugar Creek and how I would like to go in swimming right that very minute with the rest of the gang.

Then, as I hurried on up along the rail fence toward Bumblebee Hill, I decided that Sugar Creek's unruffled surface with those specks of foam scattered all over it was kind of like a boy's face with a lot of freckles on it, which was the kind of face I had.

Sugar Creek and I were pretty good friends, I thought, as I dashed on.

I must have gotten an earlier start than any of the rest of the gang, because, when I came to the bottom of Bumblebee Hill, there wasn't a one of them there. Instead of going on up to the cemetery at the top, I just lay down in the grass at the foot of the hill and waited, hating to go up to the cemetery all by myself for some reason, even though there wasn't any such thing in the world as a ghost.

For a while I lay on my back watching some big white clouds up there in the sky, which looked sort of like the snow-white packs of wool that Dad shears off our sheep and ties into big white bundles for selling. I thought about how interesting it would be if I could make a quick jump clear up there and float from one cloud to another as if I was as light as a feather. Then I got to thinking again about how white they were, like my mom's sheets hanging on the line on Monday, and from that I thought of my parents and Charlotte Ann and her almost-snow-white soft skin and how cute she was when Mom was washing her face.

That made me think of Dragonfly, and at that very second I felt an ant or something crawling on my hand. That reminded me of Dragonfly's ticks. Also, at the very same time, I heard somebody sneeze and heard feet running, and I knew Dragonfly himself was coming.

I rolled over quick and sat up and squinted at him, not being able to see him very well because of looking up into the bright blue sky and at the snow-white clouds.

"Hi, Dragonfly," I said and looked at him to see if he appeared to be in good health, and he did, and I was glad of it.

"Hi, yourself," he said and plopped himself down on the ground and panted a while. He wheezed a bit, because he had a little asthma in the summer.

I looked at him, and he looked at me with his dragonflylike eyes, and he reached out with

his right hand and took hold of the fruit of a mayapple that grew close to where I'd been lying and started to pull it off. The lemon-shaped yellow fruit had been hanging the way the fruit of all mayapples do—from a little stem that was fastened at the fork of the mayapple stalk just under the spreading leaves.

“Did you ever taste one?” Dragonfly wanted to know and started to lift the round, smooth apple to his lips.

But all of a sudden he was interrupted by an excited small-boy voice calling out from somewhere not far away, “Hey, you, *stop!* Mayapples are *poison!*”

Even without looking, I knew it was Little Jim, the littlest member of our gang. He came dashing up to where we were, and I noticed he had with him a wildflower guide, which was open to a picture of a pretty green mayapple illustration. Finding out all he could about wildflowers and telling us about them whenever he found one he'd never found before—stuff like that—was one of Little Jim's hobbies.

Dragonfly didn't like to be stopped from doing what he wanted to do, so he bit into the mayapple. Then he screwed up his face into a homely twisted expression and spit out his bite quickly, drew his arm back, and hurled the rest of the apple up toward one of the white clouds that hung in the sky above Sugar Creek.

We all took a quick look at Little Jim's book, and I felt better when I read that “while the leaves and the stem of the mayapple are

poisonous, the fruit is not, but tastes very sour.”

There isn't anything much prettier in all Sugar Creek territory, though, than a bed of mayapples growing in a shady place under a tree, each stalk about a foot high, and each one having a snow-white flower with a yellow center. They were very nice to look at even though they weren't good to eat.

“Look,” Little Jim said, “here's a flower that's blossomed late. It's supposed to blossom in May, you know. See, it's got six petals, and the center has exactly twice as many yellow stamens.”

“So what?” Dragonfly asked, still with his lips puckered up and also rinsing out his mouth with saliva, which he spit out in the direction of Bumblebee Hill.

“They're *all* like that,” Little Jim said. “Every one that's ever born has only *one* white flower on it, and every white flower has just six petals and exactly *twelve* yellow stamens in its center!”

“Who cares?” Dragonfly asked in a disgusted mumbling voice.

Little Jim knew that it was important. I understood that little guy like an open book, and I knew what he was thinking about. I didn't say anything with my voice but only with my eyes when he looked into my green ones with his very clear blue ones. In fact, I didn't say anything about what we were thinking until quite a while later—not till a lot later in this story, when we were having some excitement that made some of our adventures in other years look like two cents.

17
SUGAR CREEK GANG

**LOST IN THE
BLIZZARD**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

The first time I saw that big dangerous-looking snake, it almost scared me half to death. It flattened out its ugly head, with its fierce-looking, shovel-shaped nose, and at the same time expanded its neck until it was almost three times as big as it had been. The snake was making a hissing sound like air being let out of a tire of my blue-and-white bicycle.

I stood stock-still and stared at it, my whole body tense with fright. It was lying in a half coil and had been sunning itself on the sandy path that leads from the two big pignut trees above our garden to an old iron pitcher pump at the other side of our farm.

If anybody had seen me staring at that savage-looking, mad-looking, mad-acting, reddish-yellow, thick-bodied snake with irregular-shaped brownish-black blotches scattered all the way down its length from neck to tail, he'd have said my eyes had widened until they were as big as the puffed-out head and neck of that snake.

I was barefoot too, so if the snake had wanted to, it could have bitten my foot or my ankle or one of my ten bare toes—I was that close to it. I didn't even have a stick in my hand as I sometimes have when I walk around our

farm, so I couldn't sock the snake the way a boy likes to do when he sees one.

"*Hiss-s-s-s!*" the big-bodied snake said to me fiercely.

Its ugly head was shaped like a triangle in our arithmetic book in school, and its nose turned up at the tip as if it was trying to smell to see what kind of strange animal I was myself.

As I said, I was scared stiff. My greenish-gray eyes must have been almost bulging out of their sockets as I wondered what on earth to do to kill the snake. If I tried to jump back, would it make a lunge for me and strike me with its fangs?

I couldn't help but think of one of the members of the Sugar Creek Gang whose name is Dragonfly. When he sees something exciting before the rest of us do, he always hisses like a snake, and his own eyes get big and round like a dragonfly's eyes are all the time, which is why we call him by that name.

Well, not having a stick to sock the snake, and not knowing what else to do, and being scared anyway, I let out several screams. In fact, I screamed maybe a half-dozen times, because the snake was not only puffing out its neck and hissing, but its triangle-shaped head was darting in and out in my direction very fiercely.

I must have come to life all of a sudden, for the next thing I knew, I had leaped back about six feet and was looking all around for a rock to hit the snake with. But I couldn't find any because Dad and I had been picking up all the

rocks from our farm for years and taking them out of the fields so we could raise better crops.

Even though I didn't find any rock, I did spy a big clod of dirt almost as big as my little sister Charlotte Ann's pretty round head, so I quick stooped, grabbed it up in my big-for-a-boy's hands, lifted it high over my head, and with all my fierce, half-scared, half-mad strength hurled it down toward the snake's shovel-shaped snout.

But as much as I hate to have to admit it, I missed. The dirt clod squished itself into a million particles of dirt and dust right beside where the snake's head had been a second before the clod got there.

And then the queerest thing I ever saw happened. That big forty-inch-long, yellowish-red snake all of a sudden opened its mouth wide and began to twist itself into and out of several kinds of knots as though I had actually hit it and injured it terribly. The next thing I knew, it gave itself a sideways flip-flop and landed on its back, exposing its pretty yellowish-green snake's stomach to the hot sun, which was shining down on both of us.

And the second it got on its back, it all of a sudden quit wriggling and twisting and just lay there as if it was absolutely dead.

What on earth! I thought. *I must have hit it after all!* And yet, I knew I hadn't, because I'd seen my clod of dirt miss by almost six inches. All that had happened to it was that maybe a lot of dust and dirt had spattered it in the eyes

and on the side of its angry head and three-inch-wide puffed-out neck.

But there it lay, not making a move and looking like a terribly big fishing worm that was as lifeless as a fishing worm is when a robin has pecked it to death, just before feeding it to one of her babies.

Well, what do you know? I thought. *I scared him to death!* I didn't know if it was my clod of dirt or the way I had yelled at it. But, of course, it couldn't actually be dead.

I looked around and saw a long stick, which I hadn't seen before, and, just to make sure, I picked up the stick and poked at the snake. It didn't even move the end of its tail but lay absolutely quiet.

I don't know what made me do what I did just then, but I all of a sudden felt very brave, sort of like maybe David in the Bible story, when he had killed a giant with one little stone out of his slingshot. I remembered that David was supposed to have had red hair, like mine, so I looked down at that giant shovel-nosed snake and yelled down at it, "Get up, you coward! Get up and fight like a man!"

Having the long stick in my hand, I knew I could kill it, as I had a lot of garter snakes and water snakes around Sugar Creek. So I yelled at it again, calling it a coward to let a ten-year-old boy scare it to death.

And then I got another surprise. From the direction of the iron pitcher pump, which is right close by the stile that we go over to go to

school in the fall and winter and spring, I heard a boy's yell. I knew it was the voice of my friend Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of our gang, who was my almost best friend and whose house I was on my way to when I had run into the snake.

"*Who's a coward?*" Poetry yelled to me from the top of the stile, where he was when I looked up and saw him. Then he scrambled his roly-poly self down the stile's four steps and came puffing toward me, walking up the dusty path.

"I just killed a great big snake." I said. "A fierce-looking one about six feet long and as big around as your wrist." It wasn't quite that big, but now that I was a hero, it seemed the snake was bigger than it was. Besides, I wanted Poetry to *think* it was until he got to where he could see it himself. Then I'd tell him I was only fooling, which different members of the gang were always doing to each other anyway.

I stood there, looking at Poetry lumbering toward me. Also I kept glancing at my defeated enemy, wondering how on earth I'd managed to scare it to death.

In a minute Poetry was there, and both of us were standing back about eight or ten feet and looking down at the yellowish-green, up-turned stomach of the snake.

"How'd you do it?" Poetry asked. "What'd you hit him with—that stick?"

"I scared him to death!"

"*Scared* him to death! That's just plain dumb.

You can't do that to a snake. You have to hit him with something."

"I did," I said with a mischievous grin in my mind. "I threw my voice at him, and it hit him, and he just twisted himself up into a couple of knots, like a boy does when he gets the cramps from eating green apples, and he plopped himself over on his back and died, right in front of my eyes. I'm a ventriloquist. I can throw my voice, you know."

Well, it was fun kidding Poetry. Then I told him I'd missed the snake with a clod of dirt but that he'd died anyway.

"Maybe there was a rock in the clod," Poetry said, "and when the clod hit the ground six inches from his head, and burst in pieces, the rock flew out and hit him on the head, and it just sort of accidentally killed him."

That reminded me again of red-haired David. If there was anything in the world I'd rather do than anything else, it was to imagine myself to be somebody else—like a hero in our history books at school or a brave character in the Bible. Right that second, I remembered that David's one small smooth stone had socked Giant Goliath, killing him deader than a doornail. David had rushed up to the fallen giant and had stood on him, and it seemed maybe I ought to do that to my giant-sized, shovel-nosed snake.

"That's Giant Goliath," I said to Poetry, "and I'm David. I'm going to stand on him and cut off his head and—"

“*Stop!*” Poetry said. “He might *not* be dead. Here, give me that stick.”

He took my stick, eased himself up closer to the snake, and poked at it. But it didn’t move at all, not even its tail.

“It’s dead, all right,” I said, feeling even prouder of myself than I had been, because of what I had done.

Right that second, Poetry looked at his wristwatch and frowned at it and said, “Hey, we’ve got to get going! There’s a gang meeting down at the spring. Big Jim just phoned our house, and it’s very important. He tried to call you, but nobody answered your phone, so I was on my way over to get you.”

18
SUGAR CREEK GANG
On the **MEXICAND**
BORDER

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

Long before we left Sugar Creek for our winter vacation along the Rio Grande River, I had been sure that when we went fishing down there we'd catch a fish as big as a boy.

I was *so* sure of it that I started telling nearly everybody I met about it. Why, that great big fish we were going to land might be as big as Little Jim, the smallest member of our gang, or maybe as big around as Poetry, the barrel-shaped member and the most mischievous one of us, who, because he wants to be a detective someday, is always getting us mixed up in some mysterious and exciting adventure.

But when, instead of a big fish, we caught something else just as big and had to pounce upon it and hold onto it for dear life or it would have gotten away—and also had to keep on holding on or we'd maybe have gotten our eyes scratched out or ourselves badly slashed up—well, I just couldn't have imagined anything so excitingly different happening to a gang of ordinary boys.

Of course, our gang wasn't exactly ordinary. Anyway, Circus, our acrobat and expert wrestler, wasn't. Big Jim, our fuzzy-mustached leader, wasn't either. Neither was Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member, who was always seeing exciting

things first and also was always sneezing at the wrong time because he was allergic to nearly everything.

Certainly Little Jim, the smallest one of us, wasn't ordinary. He was an especially good boy, which any ordinary boy knows isn't exactly ordinary. He wasn't any sissy, though, as you'll see for yourself when I get to that part of the story where Little Jim joined in the struggle we were having with a very savage, wild, mad something-or-other one moonlit night on the American side of the Rio Grande.

Even I myself, Bill Collins, red haired and freckle faced and a little bit fiery tempered part of the time, wasn't exactly ordinary. My mother says that most of the time I don't even act like what is called "normal"—whatever that is.

Well, here goes with the story of the Sugar Creek Gang along the Rio Grande.

The Rio Grande is a wet boundary between Mexico and the United States and is a long, wide, reddish-brown river that the people who live down at the bottom of Texas have harnessed up and put to work for them—kind of the way Dad harnesses old Topsy, our mud-colored horse, and drives her around all over the Sugar Creek territory wherever he wants to.

The way they harnessed the river was by digging miles and miles of ditches for its water to flow all around through the Rio Grande Valley to irrigate their orange and lemon and grapefruit groves and patches where they grow cabbage and lettuce and carrots and other gar-

den stuff. They also purify some of the water to make it safe for drinking and cooking.

Of course, a lot of interesting things happened to our gang before that last exciting night—but I'll just sort of skim over those so I can get to the most dangerous part in less than maybe a couple dozen pages. Soon I'll be galloping with you right through the—but you wait and see what.

“Maybe my dad will decide to buy a grapefruit grove down along the Rio Grande, and maybe we'll move down there to live,” Dragonfly said to me sadly about two days before we left for Texas.

He had come over to my house to play with me that snowy morning, and he and I were out in the barn cracking black walnuts and gobbling up the kernels as fast as we could. Every now and then his face would get a messed-up expression on it, and he would sneeze, which meant he either had a cold or was allergic to something or other in our barn.

Hearing him say that didn't make me feel very happy. Even though he sometimes was sort of a nuisance to the gang, he'd been one of us as long as any of us had, and it would make a very sad hole in our gang if he left us for good.

“Daddy says we'll have to try out the climate first to see if we like it,” he said, still sad in his voice and sad on his face. Then he added hopefully, “I hope I have to sneeze every five minutes after we get there.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I’d rather live up here at Sugar Creek where I only have to sneeze every *seven* minutes”—which would have been funny if it hadn’t been almost true.

Just that minute Mom’s voice came quavering out across our cold, snowy barnyard the way it does when she is calling me to come to the house for a while for something. So in only a few jiffies, Dragonfly and I were both diving headfirst through the snow to our back door.

When we got inside the house, Dragonfly started sneezing again like a house afire, and it wasn’t because of the good-smelling dinner Mom was cooking on our kitchen stove, either.

It was after we went into the living room, where Mom and Charlotte Ann, my baby sister, were that Dragonfly let out those stormy sneezes, six or seven of them in fast succession. Right away he exclaimed, “I smell somebody’s powder!”

I quick looked at Mom’s friendly, motherly face to see if her nose had any shine on it, the way it sometimes has when she’s been working in the kitchen and hasn’t remembered to powder it. It was a little bit shiny, so maybe Dragonfly was mistaken, I thought.

“The doctor says I’m allergic to some kinds of face powder,” he said. He screwed up his face and sneezed three more times in even quicker succession than he had the other time. He looked with worried eyes first at Mom and then at Charlotte Ann.

My little sister, I noticed, was over in the corner, sitting on the floor. And she had Mom’s

face powder box open and some of the powder had spilled out, making it look as if somebody had scattered peach-colored dust over about three square feet of the rug.

Right away, Dragonfly and I were out of doors again, getting there quicker than our old Mixy-cat could have gone if Dragonfly's Airedale dog had been chasing her.

All of a sudden, I got what wasn't a very bright idea. "You don't *have* to stay down South if you don't want to," I said to him.

"Why?"

"If you can *really* sneeze a lot while you're there, your folks won't move down to stay, will they?"

"No, but what if I *can't*? I can only sneeze when I'm close to something I'm allergic to." He scooped up a double handful of snow, made a ball of it, whirled, and threw it across the barnyard through the fast-falling flakes toward Topsy, our old horse, who was standing on the east side of the barn with her tail to the wind, the way horses do if they're standing outdoors in a storm.

"Look," I said, "let me fix you up a little box of Mom's face powder. And when you get down there, you—well, you'll know what to do with it."

He looked at me with a sneezy expression on his face and said, "I couldn't fool Dad. Besides, my mother would smell the powder on me and wonder if I was turning into a girl or something. She might even be allergic to it herself. She says I inherited the sneezes from her."

I knew several other things Dragonfly had maybe inherited from her, such as believing it meant bad luck if a black cat crossed your path or if you broke a looking glass, and good luck if you found a horseshoe. He also had a hard time not believing in ghosts, even though he went to our church and had become a Christian one day when he was sliding down a sycamore tree along Sugar Creek, like Zaccheus in the Bible. Because his mother believed in ghosts—or almost did anyway—it made it hard for him not to.

Dragonfly had a nice mother though, but he being her only boy, she worried about him too much, and that worried *him*.

Well, even my dad got what Mom called the “warm climate bug,” and because Mom hadn’t had any vacation for years, they decided we’d take our car and drive down to the bottom of Texas, too. That meant that with *two* cars going, there’d be room in the backseats for six boys to go along—which is how many of us there are in our gang except for little Tom Till, the seventh one of us, who had to stay home and help take care of his mother. He also was going to help his father do the chores for us while my family was gone.

Before I go any farther, maybe I had better explain to you how in the world a gang of school-age boys could get to go on a great warm-climate vacation in the middle of winter. If I don’t, nearly every mother who reads about us getting to go will wonder, *What on earth—*

and why? And some of them might even start to worry about us.

Well, it just so happened that a lot of coal miners in the United States, not even knowing how bad we all needed a vacation from school, went on what is called a “strike.” They didn’t work for so long that the schools around Sugar Creek got low on coal, and most of them had to close for a while.

You could have knocked us over with a snowflake when we found out that the Sugar Creek School was going to close, too. Of course, the school could have burned wood, but the school board decided not to do that, so we almost *had* to go on a vacation to show the coal miners how much we appreciated their not working.

My parents, especially Mom, felt sorry for the coal miners’ wives, who might not have enough money to buy their groceries, and she hoped the miners’ little children wouldn’t have to go hungry.

Dad didn’t say much except that coal mining was very hard work and any man who had to work all day in a mine, wearing out his muscles and sometimes his lungs away down under the earth, certainly ought to have good wages—as much as his boss could afford to pay.

But anyway, the coal miners’ strike was good for the Sugar Creek Gang, for as soon as our school closed, we quick packed up, and away we went.

On the way to the Mexican border, we

stopped to see some interesting places, one of which was Turkey Run State Park. In the summertime it is one of the most beautiful places in the world, having deep canyons and gorges cut right through sandstone rock.

“We’ll have to come here sometime in the summer,” Dad said, “when old Sugar Creek isn’t all chained with ice and snow.”

“*Sugar Creek!*” Dragonfly exclaimed. “*Is that Sugar Creek?*”

“Sure,” Poetry said. He was in the backseat of our car with Dragonfly and me. “Don’t you know your geography?”

“What’s geography got to do with Sugar Creek?” Dragonfly asked. He was not very good in that subject.

Poetry answered, “Don’t you know that Sugar Creek is the very center of the geographical world? Anybody knows that!”

Sometimes Poetry used such an argumentative tone of voice that it made me want to talk back even when I agreed with him, but this time I didn’t let myself. I said to Dragonfly, “Sure, anybody knows that”—which anybody does.

The next place we stopped was at one of my cousins’ houses, not very far from Turkey Run. There we left Charlotte Ann so that the coal miners’ strike would be good for Mom as well as for the rest of us. When Charlotte Ann’s around and not asleep, there isn’t a moment of peace for anybody. She is what is called a “normal” two-year-old girl, which means it is very hard on her nerves to have to be quiet.

As soon as Mom and Charlotte Ann had finished crying, we started on, and Dad drove a little faster to make up for lost time, which Mom said wasn't lost.

When we were going through Vincennes, Indiana, Dad reminded us that it was the first capital of what our history books call Indian Territory.

Then we crossed a big river to go into Illinois, and Dragonfly looked out and down at the water and said, "Old Sugar Creek's water certainly looks good this far from home."

"You're crazy," Poetry said. "That's the Wabash River."

"I know it," Dragonfly said, "but our geography book has a map in it that shows Sugar Creek emptying its water into the Wabash away back up there somewhere not far from Turkey Run, so some of that water down here is Sugar Creek water."

It kind of pleased me that Dragonfly was smart enough to think of that. And of course he was right. Some of the water in the Wabash River had been given to it absolutely free by good old Sugar Creek.

At a smallish town called Samburg in Tennessee, which we drove out of our way to go through the next day, Dad stopped while we looked at a terribly big lake and told us, "That's Reelfoot Lake, boys. It was made by an earthquake in 1811—supposed to be the biggest earthquake America ever had."

It certainly was the strangest-looking lake I

ever saw. It looked as if there were maybe ten thousand old tree stumps sticking up all over it. There were also a lot of whole trees, especially cypress, making it look like a forest growing in a lake. Part of it looked like a Sugar Creek cemetery with a lot of black ghosts standing around in it.

“That’s probably some of Sugar Creek’s water, too,” Dragonfly said. “Let’s go in swimming.”

“Don’t carry a good joke too far,” Poetry said, scowling.

But Dad heard what Dragonfly had said. “You’re right, Roy”—that being Dragonfly’s civilized name. “At the time of the earthquake, the Mississippi River had something like an epileptic fit. Its water backed up and filled all the huge cracks and crevices which the earthquake had made. Some of that water was probably Sugar Creek water, because Sugar Creek flows into the Wabash and the Wabash into the Ohio and the Ohio into the Mississippi. Yes, that’s probably partly Sugar Creek water.”

All of a sudden Little Jim, who had been standing beside me, broke away, made a dash down to the lake, scooped up a double handful of water, and, with a grin on his mouselike face, tossed the water up in the air over our heads. A second later some of it splattered on my freckled face, while he yelled, “Hurrah, it’s raining Sugar Creek water!”

It was time to drive on, so we did, not stopping at any place very important. And then we

came to Houston, a big city in Texas, where there was a natural history museum and a zoo, called the Hermann Park Zoo.

19
SUGAR CREEK GANG

The GREEN TENT
MYSTERY

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

The night we accidentally stumbled onto a brand-new mystery at Sugar Creek was the darkest summer night I ever saw.

Imagine coming happily home with two of your best pals, carrying a string of seven fish and feeling wonderful and proud. And then, halfway home, when you are passing an old abandoned cemetery, imagine seeing a light out there and somebody digging! All of a sudden you get a creeping sensation in your spine, and your hair under your straw hat starts to try to stand up!

Well, that's the way it started. Nobody from Sugar Creek had been buried in that old cemetery for years and years. It was only good for wild strawberries to grow in and bumblebees to make their nest in and barefoot boys to have their gang meetings in, telling ghost stories to each other.

And yet there it was, as plain as the crooked nose on Dragonfly's thin face, or the wide nose on Poetry's face, or the freckled nose on mine—an honest-to-goodness man was digging in the light of a kerosene lantern. The lantern itself was standing beside the tall tombstone of Sarah Paddler, Old Man Paddler's dead wife. It was shedding a spooky light on the man and his

nervous movements as he scooped yellowish-brown dirt out of the hole and piled it onto a fast-growing pile beside him.

I knew he couldn't see us, because we were crouched behind some elder bushes that grew along the rail fence just outside the cemetery. But I also knew that if we made the slightest noise he might hear us. And if he heard us—well, what would he do?

I kept hoping Dragonfly's nose, which as everybody knows is almost always allergic to almost everything, wouldn't smell something that would make him sneeze. Dragonfly had the craziest sneeze of anybody in the world—a small squeal with a whistling tail on it. If Dragonfly would sneeze, it would be like the story of Peter Rabbit running away from Mr. McGregor.

As you remember, Peter Rabbit was running *lickety-sizzle*, trying to get away from Mr. McGregor, the gardener. Spying a large sprinkling can, Peter jumped into it to hide himself. The can happened to have water in the bottom, and that was too bad for poor Peter Rabbit's nose. He sneezed, and Mr. McGregor heard it, and Peter had to jump his wet-footed, wet-furred self out of the can and go racing furiously to get away from mad Mr. McGregor and his garden rake.

"Listen," Poetry hissed beside me.

I listened but couldn't hear a thing except the scooping sounds the shovel was making.

Then he squeezed my arm so tight I almost said "Ouch" just as I heard a new sound. It

sounded as if the shovel had struck something hard.

“He’s struck a rock,” I said.

“Rock nothing,” Poetry answered. “I’d know that sound anywhere. That was metal scraping on metal or maybe somebody’s old coffin.”

Poetry’s nearly always squawking voice broke when he said that, and he sounded like a frog with laryngitis.

As you know, Dragonfly was the one who was a little more afraid of a cemetery than the rest. So when Poetry said that like that, Dragonfly said, “Let’s get out of here! Let’s go home!”

Well, I had read different stories about buried treasure. In fact, our own gang had stumbled onto a buried treasure mystery when we were on a camping trip up North and which you can read about in some of the other Sugar Creek Gang books. So when I was peeking through the foliage of the elder bush and between the rails of the tumbledown old fence, watching strange things in a graveyard at a strange hour of the night—well, all of a sudden I was all set to get myself tangled up in another mystery just as quick as I could, that is, if I could without getting into too much danger at the same time. As Dad says, “It is better to have good sense and try to use it than it is to be brave.”

Just that second I heard a bobwhite whistling, “*Bob White! Bob White! Poor Bob White!*” It

was a very cheery birdcall, the kind I would almost rather hear around Sugar Creek than any other.

As fast as a firefly's fleeting flash, my mind's eye was seeing a ten-inch-long, brown-beaked bird with a white stomach and a white forehead. The feathers on the crown of its head were shaped like the topknot on a topknotted chicken.

The man kept shoveling, not paying attention to anything except what he was doing. He seemed to be working faster though. Then all of a sudden he stopped while he was in a stooped-over position and for a minute didn't make a move.

"He's looking at something in the hole," Poetry whispered. "He sees something."

"Maybe he's listening," I said. It seemed he was—the way a robin does on our front lawn with her head cocked to one side, waiting to see or hear or both a night crawler push part of itself out of its hole. Then she makes a dive for the worm and holds on for dear life while she yanks and pulls till she gets its slimy body out. Then she eats it or else pecks it to death and into small pieces and flies with it to her nest to feed it to her babies.

Seconds later I heard another birdcall, and it was another whistling sound, a very mournful cry. "*Coo-oo, coo-oo, coo-oo.*" It was a turtledove.

And it was just as though that sad, plaintive turtledove call had scared the living daylight out of the man. He straightened up, looked all

around, picked up the lantern, and started walking toward the old maple tree on the opposite side of the cemetery.

“He’s got a limp,” Poetry said. “Look how he drags one foot after him.”

I didn’t have time to wrack my brain to see if I could remember anybody who had that kind of limp. No sooner had the man reached the maple tree than he lifted the lantern and blew out the light.

Then I heard a car door slam and the sound of a motor starting, and two headlights lit up the whole cemetery for a second. Two long, blinding beams made a wide sweep across the top of Strawberry Hill, lighting up the tombstones and the lonely old pine tree above Sarah Paddler’s grave and the chokecherry shrubs and even the elder bush we were hiding behind. Then the car went racing down the abandoned lane that led to the road not more than three blocks away, leaving us three boys wondering, *What on earth?* and, *Why?* and, *Who?* and, *Where?*

It seemed I couldn’t move—I had been crouched in such a cramped position for so long a time.

It was Dragonfly who thought of something that added to the mystery. He said, “First time I ever heard a bobwhite whistling in the night like that.”

The very second he said it, I wished I had thought of it first. But I did think of something else first. Anyway, I said it first. It was, “Yeah,

and whoever heard of a *turtledove* cooing in the night?”

“It’s just plain cuckoo,” Poetry said. “I’ll bet there was somebody over there in that car waiting for him and maybe watching, and those whistles meant something special. They probably meant ‘Danger! Look out! Get away quick!’”

Then Poetry said in an authoritative voice, as if he were the leader of our gang instead of Big Jim, who is when he is with us—and I am when Big Jim isn’t—“Let’s go take a look at what he was doing.”

“Let’s go home,” Dragonfly said.

“Why, Dragonfly Gilbert!” I said. “Go on home yourself if you are scared! Poetry and I have got to investigate!”

“I’m not s-scared,” Dragonfly said.

As quick as we were sure the car was really gone, I turned on my dad’s big long flashlight, and Poetry, Dragonfly, and I started to climb through the rail fence to go toward the mound of yellowish-brown earth beside Sarah Paddler’s tombstone.

20
SUGAR CREEK GANG

The BULL
FIGHTER

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

The very thought of my city cousin coming to visit us for a whole week while his parents went on a vacation was enough to start a whirlwind in my mind.

A whirlwind, you know, is a baby-sized rotating windstorm. On most any ordinary summer day around our farm, you can expect to see one of these friendly fun makers spiraling out across the fields or through the woods like a little funnel of wind. It laughs along, carrying with it a lot of different things such as dry leaves and grass and feathers from our chicken yard or dust from the path that goes from the iron pitcher pump across the barnyard to the barn, or anything else that's loose and light.

Away the little whirlwind goes, *whirlety-sizzle*, like an excited boy running in circles. Is it ever fun to toss yourself into one of them and go racing along with it and in it. Nearly every time I get into the middle of one, though, it acts as if it can't stand having a red-haired boy getting mixed up in it, and all of a sudden it isn't a whirlwind anymore. All the leaves and grass and dust and stuff stop whirling and just sail around in the sky awhile before they come floating down all over the place.

So Wally, my whirlwind city cousin, was com-

ing to visit us. He not only had a lot of mischievous ideas in his mind, but he didn't like to be told anything, such as how to do a thing and especially *not* to do a thing.

The worst thing was, he was going to bring with him his copper-colored dog, which he had named Alexander the Coppersmith and which didn't have any good country manners. Certainly there would be plenty of excitement around the place, and some of it would be dangerous. Just how dangerous, I couldn't tell until Wally and his dog got there.

There isn't any boy who likes excitement more than I do, and I even like it a little bit dangerous, as well as mysterious, but I *didn't* want Wally to come, and I *didn't* want Alexander the Coppersmith either.

Honest to goodness, I never heard or saw or smelled such a frisky, uncontrollable, uneducated, ill-mannered dog without any good country breeding, from his mischievous muzzle all the way back to his "feather."

Maybe you didn't know that dogs have feathers, but they do. "Feather" is the name of the tip end of a dog's tail. It's the featherlike hair that grows on the very, very end. I didn't know that myself until I read it in a book about dogs, which Dad gave me for my birthday.

When I had first seen Wally's dog, I thought it was an Airedale. Wally was extraproud of his copper-colored quadruped because he could do several things, such as sit up and bark when he wanted food.

I never will forget what happened the year Wally brought him the first time. It was on a Thanksgiving Day. Wally had been so sure that if we tied our turkey's neck to a rope and tied the other end of the rope to Alexander that he would lead the turkey all around the pen like a boy leading a pony. We tried it, and for a while it was a lot of fun watching the dog do his stuff. The turkey followed along behind like a baby chicken following its mother, until all of a sudden our old black and white cat, Mixy, came arching her back and rubbing her sides against things the way cats do. A second later, Alexander was making a wild dog dash toward Mixy. At that very second also, Mixy made a wild cat dash out across our barnyard toward the barn.

Alexander forgot his neck was tied to a turkey's neck. He dragged the turkey *flip-floppety-sizzle* behind him.

You can believe that I, Bill Collins, came to the quickest life I had ever come to. I started to make a wild dash for the gate of the turkey pen to shut it so that Alexander couldn't get out to catch Mixy, and also so the turkey couldn't get out, because it was the very turkey we had been saving for months to have for Thanksgiving dinner.

Besides, Mixy was my very favorite cat friend, and I couldn't stand the thought of her getting hurt, although I knew she was a fierce fighter and could probably take care of herself if the dog did catch up with her. I had seen her lick the daylights out of several of our neigh-

borhood dogs. Boy oh boy, when she gets her temper up, she can lick the stuffings out of the fightingest dog in the whole territory.

Squash! Wham! *Floppety-gobblety-sizzle!* Even though Mixy got to the barn safely, and Wally finally got Alexander the Coppersmith quieted down, the turkey's neck was broken, so Dad had to come and finish killing it, which he did, thirty minutes sooner than he would have anyway.

Even though Wally had been training his dog the best he could, that dog didn't seem to have any control of his emotions whenever there was a cat around.

And now Wally was coming again, and it was *that* dog he was bringing with him! Dad and I were talking it over one day about a month before Wally and Alexander arrived.

"Don't worry," my reddish brown mustached, bushy eyebrowed father said. "He will be a year older and a year smarter than he was last year." Except that Dad was thinking about Wally.

"He'll be a year older and a year dumber," I said, thinking about the dog.

"You can't say things like that about one of your relatives."

"I mean the dog will be a year dumber."

"And besides," Dad said, "Wally is not only your cousin. He is your Aunt Belle's only son, and an only son is sometimes a problem."

"I am your only son, too, and I hope I am not as wild as he is."

"I hope so myself," Dad said.

For a second I was half mad.

But Wally was really bad. He just couldn't learn anything. He couldn't be *told* anything, and he was always wanting to do what he wanted to do, whether anyone else wanted him to do it or wanted to do it with him. And it wasn't because he had red hair and freckles, because I had them, and I certainly wasn't that independent a person—not all the time. Not even half the time.

Dad tried to make me look at things more cheerfully by saying, "The Lord hasn't finished making Wally yet. He's only been working on him ten years, and about the only tools He has had to work with are his parents. Parents have a lot to do with what a boy turns out to be."

Because Dad and I were always joking with each other, I asked, "Is that why I'm such a good boy—I have such good parents?"

Dad grinned under his mustache and with his eyes and said, "You *are* a pretty good boy—don't you think?"

"I hate to say it," I said.

I remembered that when I was just a little guy, Dad would scoop me up in his arms and hug me. But that would look silly for a red-haired, freckle-faced boy as old as I was to be getting picked up by his father at nine o'clock in the morning. Besides, Dad had that bristly mustache, and what boy in his right mind would want to get mixed up with that? It'd be as bad as a dog getting mixed up with a fat porcupine.

Just thinking that reminded me of Wally

once more and also of his uncontrollable dog, and I was worried again. Nothing Dad could say that morning helped a bit. I simply couldn't get reconciled to the idea of losing a whole week of my life.

Mom had her say-so on the subject that same day. "I'll expect you to put on your very best manners when your Aunt Belle and Uncle Amos are here—for a very special reason."

"Why?" I said. "What reason?"

Mom was taking an apple pie out of the oven at the time, and I was smelling pie and thinking maybe it might not be such a bad thing to have Wally come. Every time we had company at our house, she always baked a lot of pies and cookies and stuff.

"Don't you know?" she asked.

"I don't see any special reason why I have to be extragood when such an extrabad boy is coming to see me," I said.

She answered, "Ask your father, then," which a little later I did when my dad and I were out in the garden hoeing potatoes.

"How come I have to be an extragood boy when Wally is here? How can I be, when it is hard enough just being as good as I am?"

"Can't you guess?" he asked.

I racked my brain to try to think what he was thinking of—and couldn't and said so.

"Well, let it go at that. You'll probably think of it yourself."

Mom called from the back door then, saying, "Telephone, Bill!"

I dropped my potato hoe as if it were a hot potato and started on the run, not knowing who wanted to talk to me but hoping it would be one of the gang, hoping especially it would be Poetry, the gang's barrel-shaped member.

And sure enough it was. He was coming over to my house right after lunch. "Have I ever got a surprise for you!" he said in his usual squawky voice.

Boy oh boy, did it ever feel good when Poetry talked like that. He had a detective mind and also what is called an "inventive" mind. He was always thinking up something new for us to do, and nearly always it was something especially interesting or exciting. Sometimes it was dangerous, but it was always fun!

A little later, when he hung up, I was tingling all over. My almost best friend, Poetry, was coming to play with me that afternoon, and he had a surprise. It could be—well, almost anything!

Right after the noon meal, he came sauntering over to our place. He stopped and waited for me in the big rope swing under the walnut tree beside the road. I was just about to take my last bite of blackberry pie when I looked out the east screen door and saw him. I also heard him making one of his fancy bird-calls, which was half like a harp and half like a musical whistle. It seemed to say, "Bill Collins! Bill Collins! Skip the dishes!"—which I knew I shouldn't do, and didn't.

Dad also heard Poetry's whistle, and his

voice came out from under his mustache, saying, "You boys have plans for the afternoon?" The way he said it was like a cowboy's lasso settling down over a calf's neck. I felt myself and my plan for the afternoon being stopped in their tracks.

"We *did* have," I said. "Is there something I ought to do around the house and garden first?"

"First and second and third," he answered. "The dishes first, the potato patch second, and the barn third." He stopped, and I thought I saw him wink at Mom.

Not being sure, I used a very cheerful voice, saying, "OK, I'll hurry out and tell Poetry to go on home. We were only going on a hike anyway."

"And maybe go swimming also?" Dad's voice said again.

"I'll go out right now and tell him he shouldn't have come." In a flash I was off the bench I had been sitting on. I was halfway through the screen door before Dad tightened the noose of his lasso with "STOP!" in a thud-dery voice.

I stopped stock-still, then stumbled down the steps and stopped again in a tangled-up heap as the door I'd gone through slammed shut.

It was quite a while later before Poetry and I got started on our hike—he having helped me with the different kinds of work I had to do first.

“You’re a good boy,” Mom said to Poetry as he and I were getting a drink at the iron pitcher pump just before leaving.

“Am I?” Poetry asked politely. Then he added, “Will you tell my mother that sometime?”

“She knows it. She told me that herself once.” Mom was wearing her very friendly mother face, the kind that was especially nice when we had company at our house.

“Maybe *your* mother could tell my mother to tell *me* that, too,” I suggested to Poetry.

Mom laughed a friendly laugh. “Oh, Bill Collins, you *know* you are a good boy.”

“You know it, and I know it,” I said, “but you might tell my *father* that sometime.”

I pumped another cup of cold water and tossed it over the horse trough, where it surprised a dozen yellow butterflies that had gathered around a little pool of water. The butterflies shot up into the air in different directions like sparks from a log fire do when you poke a stick into it, or as if a whirlwind had come along and swooped them all up into the air. Then they settled down again around the water pool.

Well, Poetry and I were finally off *lickety-sizzle* across the yard, past “Theodore Collins” on the tin mailbox, across the dusty gravel road, over the rail fence—I vaulting over and Poetry hoisting his roly-poly body over the top rail—and the two of us racing barefoot in the path that had been made by boys running toward the spring.

On the way, I was hoping that some of the rest of the gang would be there, such as spindle-legged Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member whose nose turns south at the end, or Little Jim, with his mouselike face and curly hair—the only one of the gang who could play the piano and also maybe the only one of us for sure about whom, if his mother told him he was a good boy, it would be the truth any time of day she happened to say it.

21
SUGAR CREEK GANG

The **TIMBER
WOLF**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

Our six sets of Sugar Creek parents expected us to have a very safe and sane winter vacation at the Snow Goose Lodge.

They expected it because our camp director was to be Barry Boyland, Old Man Paddler's nephew. Barry had taken us on two north woods summertime trips, and we'd not only come back alive but were, as they expressed it, "better boys than when we went."

We had gone South once in the winter, all the way down to the Mexican border. We'd gone up North twice in the summer, but never before had we spent a week in the north woods in the winter. Our folks seemed to think it would be good for us to have the experience of ice fishing, skiing, playing boys' games around an open fire in a fireplace, and learning a little more about woodcraft and other things it is worthwhile for a boy to know and do.

It's a good thing our parents didn't know in advance that a one-hundred-pound timber wolf would be hanging around the lodge most of the time we were there.

And my mother's grayish-brown hair would have turned completely gray overnight if she had known that the weather in the Paul Bunyan Playground was going to be so unseason-

ably warm that it would wake up the hibernating bears—and that we would have an adventure with an honest-to-goodness live bear before our wonderful week was over.

Our folks certainly didn't imagine that after nearly a week of unseasonably warm weather, while the bears were still out, not having found their new winter quarters, a wild blizzard would come sweeping in and we would be caught out in it a long way from the lodge, not able to tell directions or to find our way back.

It's a very good thing our parents didn't know.

Of course, none of the gang knew it either. All we knew was that somewhere in the wilds of the North, near a town called Squaw Lake, on the shore of a lake by the same name, there was a lodge called the Snow Goose, and we were going to have a one-week winter vacation there.

The Snow Goose Lodge, as you maybe already know, if you've read the story named *The Green Tent Mystery*, was owned by the Everards, people who spent part of one wonderful summer camping in a green tent in our own Sugar Creek territory.

What you don't know, and maybe ought to before you get to the most exciting part of this story, is that our camp director, Barry Boyland, was studying in a Minneapolis college, and the vacation was for his education as well as ours.

"He's writing an important paper on 'Wildlife in the Frozen North,'" Mom said at the supper table one evening before we went.

“And you boys are to help him while you’re there,” Dad said across the table from me.

Mom’s kind of bright remark in answer was: “You are not to *be* the wildlife, understand, but only to help Barry learn all he can about it.”

I knew from what they had said, and the way they said it, that I was expected to behave myself even better than usual.

What else you don’t know—and maybe would like to—is that this year the Everards had gone to California for the winter. The Gang and Barry would be alone at Snow Goose, except for the time Ed Wimbish, an old trapper, would spend with us.

The day finally arrived for us to leave. After we’d said our last good-byes to our envious fathers and our half-worried mothers, we were on the big bus and gone. Barry would meet us at Minneapolis. Then we’d spend the night in a hotel to get acquainted with what it is like to stay in a big city hotel. We’d start early the next morning in Barry’s station wagon for the Snow Goose.

After we had traveled maybe twenty-five miles on the bus, Big Jim, who was sitting in the seat beside me, drew a letter from an inside pocket and said, “I got this just before we left. It’s from the Everards.”

I read the letter and felt my spine tingling with the kind of feeling I always get when I’m beginning to be scared. When I’d finished it, I passed it back, saying, “Better not let Little Jim

and Dragonfly know about it. They're too little. They'd be s-scared."

There was no use keeping the secret from any of the other members of the gang, though. We'd all have to know sooner or later. So Big Jim let everybody read the letter, the scary part of which was:

You won't need to be afraid of any of the wild-life you will see around the lodge. The bears are in hibernation, and the wolves are cowards and afraid of human beings. You'll probably not see even one wolf, unless it is Old Timber, which Mr. Wimbish will tell you about. We've never seen him ourselves. Ed calls him the ghost wolf because he always fades from sight a second after you see him—or so Ed says. But Ed exaggerates, and you can take some of what he says with several grains of salt.

"Sounds fishy to me," I said to Big Jim. I'd read stories about wolves, and in the stories they hadn't been afraid of human beings at all.

Poetry, who had brought his camera along, said, "I've always wanted a picture of a human ghost but could never get one. I'm going to try a ghost *wolf!*"

His tone of voice was light, but I knew from the way he looked at me that he was only talking that way to help keep Little Jim and Dragonfly from worrying.

When we got to Minneapolis, Barry met us and took us to the Hastings Hotel, where we

had two big double rooms with a bath between them and an extra cot in each room.

Dragonfly tried to make us laugh by trying a very old and very worn-out joke on us. He said, "How come we have to have a bathtub when we aren't going to stay till Saturday night?"

"Quiet!" Big Jim ordered. "I'm phoning Sugar Creek to tell them we're all here and all right."

Dragonfly tried another joke, saying, "But some of us are not all *there*," which wasn't funny, either.

Soon Big Jim had his mother on the phone.

I was standing close by, looking out the window at a small snow-covered park with trees and shrubs scattered through it. My mind's eye was imagining Old Timber standing tall and savage-looking with his long tongue out, panting and looking up at us. Even though my thoughts were at Snow Goose Lodge, it was easy to hear what Big Jim was telling his mother and also to hear what her excited mother voice was saying to him. She could hardly believe we were there so soon.

Then all of a sudden there were what sounded like a dozen other mother voices on the party line, trying to give Big Jim special orders for their sons. Big Jim had a pencil in his hand and was grinning and writing. Then, all of a sudden he was holding out the phone to me, saying, "It's your mother. She wants to talk to you."

"Your compass, Bill," Mom said. "You left it

on the upstairs bureau. Be careful not to get lost in the woods. Better buy a new one if none of the other boys have any. You know you got lost up there once before—and also on Palm Tree Island.”

It was good advice, although it worried me to have her worry about me.

“Don’t worry,” I said into the phone and maybe into the ears of five other mothers. “The sun shines up here too—the very same sun that shines down there—and we can tell directions by it anytime.”

“Then be sure your watch is running and the time is right *all* the time,” she ordered me. And I knew *she* knew the secret of telling directions on a sunshiny day if you had a watch and knew how to use a certain Scout trick. Mom was right, though. The watch had to be set correctly.

I guess a boy ought to be glad he has a mother to give him good advice, even if sometimes he doesn’t need it because he already knows exactly what she is telling him.

While we were all getting our hair combed, our ties straight, our shoes touched up a little, and our coat collars brushed for dinner in the hotel, we tossed what we hoped were bright remarks at one another. Nobody got angry at anybody since it is a waste of good temper to lose it on a friend.

Nothing happened of any importance till after dinner, which at Sugar Creek we would have called supper.

I’d thought Barry seemed a little anxious

about something while we were in the dining room. He hardly noticed the pretty murals, except to tell us they were enlarged photographs in full color of actual cherry trees, with grass and dandelions underneath and a gravel road running past. They covered one whole wall of the dining room.

He kept looking around, and whenever what is called a “page” went through, calling out names of people wanted on the phone, he seemed to hope his own name would be called.

We hadn’t any sooner gotten back to our rooms and settled down a little than the phone rang. I was closest to it and, in a mischievous mood, pretended a dignified voice and answered, saying, “Room 423, the Hastings Hotel. William Collins speaking.”

I certainly felt foolish a second later when a woman’s voice said, “May I speak to Barry, please—Mr. Boyland, I mean?”

I felt and heard myself gulp, then I answered, “Certainly. Just a moment.”

I didn’t have to call Barry, though. He had been sitting under a floor lamp on the other side of the room, reading a book called *Hunting in the Great Northwest* and taking notes with his green pen, maybe jotting down things he could quote in the important paper he was going to write for his college class.

Well, the very second the phone rang, he was out of his chair like a rabbit scared out of its hole. Almost before I could hand him the phone, he had it and was saying, “Hello!” in a

voice that sounded as if he was all alone with somebody he liked extrawell and was telling her something nobody else was supposed to hear.

Maybe it wasn't polite for me to listen, but how could I help it? It wouldn't have been polite for me to stop my ears, would it?

I couldn't tell what the woman's musical voice on the other end of the line was saying, but Barry's deep-voiced answers were like a boy's hand stroking a baby rabbit in the palm of his other hand. He was talking to her about his trip into the frozen North and asking her not to worry, that he'd be all right.

"Yes," Barry was saying to the person I imagined was his age and was pretty and could smile like our Sugar Creek teacher, Miss Lilly. "I'll be careful. I have six bodyguards, you know."

And then, all of a sudden, Barry was saying, "Yes. I think I can run over for a few minutes."

He put down the phone, turned back into the room, and said, with excitement in his eyes but with a very calm voice, "I'll have to be gone for an hour or so, boys. You can wait here, or you may go down to the basement game room for Ping-Pong—but mind you, no disturbance! Remember who you are."

"Your mother worried about you, too?" Little Jim asked, and I knew he was thinking that whoever called Barry was Barry's own mother, giving him last-minute instructions to take care of himself.

Barry looked at Little Jim with a faraway

expression in his eyes. Then he grinned and answered, "Every good mother worries a little."

Maybe I shouldn't have said what I did just then, but I might not have been able to help it even if I'd tried. This is what came out of my mind as I answered Little Jim, "His mother is maybe only about twenty years old."

Barry shot me a quick look with a grin in it and right away put in a phone call for a taxi. He got his heavy brown storm coat out of the closet, put it on, brushed a few flecks of dust off its dark-brown mouton collar, took another look in the mirror at his hair, ran his hand over his chin to see if he needed a shave, decided he didn't—or if he did, he wouldn't have time to give himself one—and a minute later was out the door and gone.

His idea that we might want to go to the game room in the basement was a good one. So pretty soon, Big Jim, who had charge of us, gave the order, and pretty soon after that we were in the basement playing noisy sets of the same kind of table tennis we sometimes played in Poetry's basement back home.

I watched for my chance to talk to Poetry alone for a few minutes, because I had something special on my mind. When he and I finished a game and handed our paddles to Dragonfly and Little Jim, we took the elevator to the hotel lobby.

We knew it wasn't supposed to be good for a boy to eat hard-to-digest candy before going to bed, so we bought the kind of candy bar we

liked best and hoped it wouldn't be hard to digest.

Poetry said, as he unwrapped his, "My jaw muscles haven't had any exercise since we were eating dinner beside the cherry trees."

"Supper," I said.

"Dinner," he countered and added, "the people back at Sugar Creek are behind the times!"

We were in two big leather-upholstered chairs behind a potted palm at the time. Ignoring what Poetry thought was a bright remark, I told him about the cheerful woman's voice I'd heard on the phone, asking for Barry. "She wasn't any more his mother than the man in the moon is a man," I said.

Poetry let out a low whistle, squinted his eyes, then said, "Poor Barry," and shook his head sadly.

"How come you say *that*?" I asked.

He sighed, took another bite of his bar, shook his head again sadly, and answered, "Life is more fun being a boy—without growing up and having a girl to worry about."

Neither of us said anything for a few minutes, while I thought about the happiness I'd seen in Barry's eyes when he was flying around the room getting his tie straight, his coat on, the dust off its lapels, and running his hand over his chin the way Dad does to see if he needs a shave.

There was a radio on in the hotel lobby, and somebody's voice was racing along very

fast, giving a news program. My mind was so busy thinking about Barry and wondering where he was and when he would be back that I hardly noticed the news announcement about the weather. It was something about “unseasonably warm weather in northern Minnesota continuing for another week.” I could see, out the hotel’s large picture window, the stars twinkling in an absolutely clear sky.

Poetry and I, behind our potted palm—pretending we were in a climate where palm trees grow naturally, such as at the very bottom of the United States where we had spent a whole week’s winter vacation with Mom and Dad and Dragonfly’s parents—sat munching away, talking dreamily about imaginary things:

“See those seagulls up there, tossing around in the hot summer air?” he asked.

I answered lazily, “Don’t make me open my eyes. I’m too sleepy here on this sandy beach under this palm tree.”

“All right, then. See those snow geese flying? See that beautiful white snow goose, with black wing tips and a pink beak, headed north to the lodge?”

I yawned lazily, my nine-o’clock-at-night imagination making me feel sleepy. “I don’t know what Barry went after in such a hurry, but I wish he’d come back. It’s my bedtime.”

And that’s when Barry came breezing into the lobby, and with him was a sparkling-eyed, rosy-cheeked girl in a dark green coat with wide fur sleeves and a fur collar. She was only

about five-and-a-half feet tall and was laughing, as also was Barry. They didn't seem to know there was anybody in the world except each other. He was carrying a four-foot-long gun case with a luggage-type handle.

I looked at Poetry in his chair, and the two of us stayed as low as we could under the fronds of the potted palm.

Barry set down the gun case, and the two of them went outside again into the cold night.

In a flash, Poetry and I were out of our tropical climate to see what was going on outside, if anything.

What we saw wasn't any of our business, but since it happened right in front of our astonished eyes, we almost had to see it.

"What do you know about that?" Poetry exclaimed in a disappointed voice. "Poor Barry!"—the same thing he had said when we were still up in our room.

For about a minute Barry and the girl stood at the door of a taxi, whose driver was waiting for her to get in. Then, all of a sudden, they gave each other a half-long kiss, as I'd accidentally seen Mom and Dad give each other quite a few times back home. Barry helped her into the cab then, closed the door, and stood watching while the driver steered out into the night traffic and was gone.

By the time Barry was back inside, Poetry and I were walking around the lobby, looking with let's-pretend indifference at the pictures

on the walls and at the many different kinds of candy bars at the hotel magazine stand.

Barry's voice behind us was certainly cheerful as he said, "You boys want a candy bar? Pick out your favorite. The treat's on me."

"No, thank you," Poetry said politely. "Candy at bedtime isn't good for a boy my size."

Just then, from the stairway leading to the basement game room came the rest of the gang, and there wasn't a one of *them* who thought a candy bar would be hard to digest before going to bed.

A little later we were all up the elevator and into our rooms, where Barry asked us, "Want to see what I went after?" He opened the gun case and took out one of the prettiest rifles I ever saw.

All our eyes lit up, Big Jim's and Circus's especially. "We may have to bring down a wolf, or maybe we can get a deer or two," Barry explained.

"Or a bear," Little Jim said with a grin, maybe remembering that he himself had once killed a fierce old mother bear back at Sugar Creek.

"This is what the phone call was about," Barry explained, looking at me out of the corner of his eye, which made me look around out of the corner of my eye at the other members of the gang. He was probably remembering I had said quite a while ago, after I'd heard the lady's musical voice on the phone—"His mother is maybe only twenty years old."

For a few seconds you could have heard a pine needle fall, everything was so extraquiet.

“You see,” Barry added, “one of my classmates at college lives at Squaw Lake. She’s a grandniece of Mr. and Mrs. Wimbish. When her own mother and father died, they sort of adopted her. This gun was her Christmas present to me. She had to order it from the East, so it was a little late getting here. Isn’t it a beauty?”

I thought, as Barry talked, that it was indeed the prettiest repeater rifle I ever saw, with its crowned muzzle and raised-ramp front sight and gleaming walnut stock. Just looking at it made me tingle with anticipation at what an exciting and maybe even dangerous time we were going to have on our vacation.

My mind flew on ahead to the Snow Goose, so that I missed part of what Barry was telling us. I didn’t come to until I heard him saying, “. . . so that’s the way it is. Next June, just as soon as school is out up here, there’ll be a wedding at the Snow Goose. You boys’ll get to know her yourselves when she comes up the last of the week to bring the station wagon.”

“The station wagon?” I exclaimed. “I thought *we* were going to ride up in it ourselves. I thought—”

“We *were* to have,” Barry explained and started to untie his tie, getting ready to get ready for bed. “But I had to have the engine overhauled, and the mechanic ran into some serious trouble.

“Jeanne is letting us drive *her* car. Two of you,” he added, as he slipped out of his shirt and I saw his powerful muscles like a nest of snakes under his tan skin, “two of you will have to ride the bus. There wouldn’t be room in the car for all of us, along with all this luggage.” He gestured around the room at our six different kinds of suitcases.

There was some friendly excitement for a while, as different ones of us begged Barry to let us ride the bus to Squaw Lake.

“It’ll have to be two of the biggest ones of you,” Barry decided.

“Biggest *tall* or biggest *around*?” Poetry asked hopefully.

That sort of settled it. Barry decided on Poetry for sure, and a little later, maybe because Poetry and I were such good friends, he picked me for the other one of the two.

Early in the morning we were off—Poetry and I on the bus, and the rest of the gang with Barry as soon as they could get the car serviced. As we pulled out of the gas station and headed out through the snowplowed streets toward the open country and the wild, frozen North, I was wondering how much sooner we would get to Squaw Lake than they would.

Poetry was wondering the same thing and said so. But he wasn’t worried the least bit about what we would do to pass the time while we waited for them. Something else was on his mind. “Poor Barry! He’s one of the finest woodsmen I know. He likes the out-of-doors,

and nature studies, and camping out. What'll he do, marrying a citified girl like that—you know—like that extrapretty, helpless-looking girl we saw back there in the hotel?"

I sighed and looked out the window at the cars and trucks we were threading our way through, then back at Poetry's face. "Yeah, poor Barry! Poor Sugar Creek Gang too! We'll lose our camp director!"

Neither of us said anything for a while. For a minute I felt pretty sad, but Poetry cheered me up by saying, "But both our fathers got married once, and it didn't hurt them—not much, anyway."

Hearing that, my thoughts took a flying leap out across the sky to Sugar Creek, and I thought about what a fine person Theodore Collins was. Also I seemed to see him and Mom sitting at the breakfast table that very minute without me. They were pretty nice people. Both of them, I thought.

Answering Poetry, I said, "Yeah, but my father married a good farm girl, who knew how to work and could bake pies and cakes and do all the other things a farmer's wife has to do."

"My mother too," Poetry said proudly. Then he shook his head once more and added, "But I'm afraid Barry's got a girl who'll have to be waited on, and who won't want to camp out, and will be too dainty to rough it like he likes to do."

But we couldn't worry our heads about it. We had a long ride and a wonderful winter

vacation ahead of us: ice fishing, running the trapline with Barry and Ed Wimbish, the old-timer trapper who, with his wife, Martha, once owned the Snow Goose but had sold it to the Everards.

Wildlife in the frozen North, that was what Barry was going up to study. How much wildlife would *we* see on our vacation? How *wild* would it be? And how *savage*? Was there an honest-to-goodness one-hundred-pound timber wolf hanging around the place, or was old Ed just an exaggerator as the Everards' letter had said?

We'd soon find out.

22
SUGAR CREEK GANG

**WESTERN
ADVENTURE**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

We were in the middle of the most exciting part of a pretend cowboys' necktie party when we heard the shot.

It was one of the loudest shotgun blasts I had ever heard, and its echoes were like four or five fast thunders bounding through the Sugar Creek hills.

What on earth! I thought.

We all stood still and stared at each other with startled faces. We had been running in one direction and looking back in the opposite direction toward the old scarecrow that we had used for our bad man in our game of cowboys' necktie party.

We had strung up the scarecrow by his neck, hanging him from the branch of a river birch about twenty yards from the sandy beach of our swimming hole.

The ridiculous-looking old dummy we had named Snatzerpazooka was just where we wanted him now, at the edge of Dragonfly's father's cornfield. Hanging there in plain sight, swaying in the breeze, he would scare away the crows that had been digging up the new corn sprouts. Dragonfly, as you maybe know, was the nickname we had given to the pop-eyed member of the gang, whose actual name was Roy Gilbert.

The very minute Snatzerpazooka was up and swinging, we started on a helter-skelter run along the creek toward the spring. Following what we knew to be the pattern of cowboys in the Old West after a lynching, which they called a “necktie party,” we were all galloping away on our imaginary horses, looking back and shooting with our voices, using our plastic and metal and wooden toy guns, yelling, “*Bang . . . bang . . . bang . . . bang-bang-bang!*”

I was seeing Snatzerpazooka over my shoulder, his ragged blue-and-white-striped overalls, his tied-on black hat, his crossbar. At the same time, I was galloping on my imaginary white stallion behind barrel-shaped Poetry, who was riding his own imaginary ordinary-looking roan horse.

The early summer wind was blowing in my hot face, my sleeves were flapping, and it felt good to be alive in a wonderful boys’ world.

The rest of the gang were on their own different colored imaginary horses, yelling, “*Bang! Bang! Bang!*” as I was. All of us were emptying our imaginary six-shooters at the grotesque scarecrow dangling by his neck in the afternoon sun.

Right in the middle of our excitement was when we heard the *actual* shot from somebody’s actual gun! It was an explosive blast that sent a shower of shivers all over me and scared me half to death.

As I’ve already told you, we all stopped and stared at each other, but not for long. Big Jim,

our leader, barked, “Quick! Down! Drop flat—all of you!”

By *all* of us, he meant not only mischievous-minded, squawky-voiced Poetry; spindle-legged, pop-eyed Dragonfly; and red-haired, fiery-tempered, freckle-faced me, Bill Collins, son of Theodore Collins; but also Circus, our acrobat, and Little Jim, the littlest one of us and the best Christian.

In case you might be wondering why Little Tom Till wasn't with us on our necktie party, maybe I'd better tell you that all that spring and early summer, he had been chumming around with a new boy who had moved into the neighborhood. That new boy was our enemy—and it wasn't our fault, either. It hadn't felt good to lose Tom out of the gang—even though he wasn't exactly a member but only played with us and got to go with us on different camping trips.

Well, when Big Jim barked that fierce order for us to “drop flat,” we obeyed like six boy-shaped lumps of lead—all of us except Poetry, who could only drop *round*.

Who, I wondered, had fired an actual gun? A *shotgun!*

We lay as quiet as six scared mice, straining our eyes to see through the sedge and ragweed and wild rosebushes and other growth, listening for all we were worth, and wondering, and worrying a little.

It certainly was a tense time. I could hear my heart beating, also the rippling ruffle in the

creek several feet behind me. Farther up the creek in the direction of our just-hung Snatzerpazooka, a saw-voiced crow was signaling with a rasping “*Caw! Caw!*” to his crow friends to stay away from the cornfield because there was a man around with a shotgun.

The smell of sweet clover from across the creek mingled with the odor of gun smoke.

Just then Dragonfly said wheezily, “*Look!* Snatzerpazooka’s gone! He’s down! His rope’s broke!”

“He can’t be!” I answered. “That was a left-over piece of Mom’s clothesline, and that old scarecrow wasn’t heavy enough to break it!”

A second later, though, my straining eyes told me Dragonfly was right. Even as far away as we were, I could see about five feet of rope dangling from the birch branch, and there wasn’t any scarecrow hanging by his neck on the end of it.

“Maybe the knot came untied,” Circus suggested.

Big Jim, beside and a little behind me, was peering over the top of a pile of drift left early that spring when Sugar Creek had overflowed its banks. He answered Circus, saying, “It couldn’t have. I used a bowline knot, and that kind can’t slip or jam!”

“It might have slipped off over his head,” Circus growled back, maybe not wanting his idea squelched.

“If it had,” Big Jim said deep in his throat, “the noose would still be there on the end of

the rope”—which made good sense, because there was only the five feet of rope dangling in the breeze and no noose at the end.

Who, I worried, had shot the shot and why? And where was our scarecrow?

How long we all lay there whispering and wondering and trying to imagine who had shot the shot and why and what at, I don't know, but it seemed too long before Big Jim would let us get up and follow him back to the river birch to look around.

While you are imagining us crouching and half crawling our way along the edge of the cornfield that bordered the creek, like scouts scouting an enemy camp, wondering with us who had shot the shot and why and what or who at, I'd better also explain what a cowboys' necktie party is and why we had given our scarecrow such a name.

It was Dragonfly himself who had named him. Why he named him that was because of the strangest story you ever heard, the *oddest* thing that ever happened around Sugar Creek or maybe anyplace in the whole world.

You see, when Dragonfly was just a little guy, only about three-and-a-half years old—before there *was* any Sugar Creek Gang—he had no sisters or brothers and was lonesome most of the time. So he created a playmate out of his own imagination.

I never will forget the first time I heard the name *Snatzerpazooka* and how excited little Dragonfly was, how he yelled and cried, in fact

actually *screamed*, when he thought his imaginary playmate wasn't going to get to go along with him and his folks when they went to town. It happened like this:

Dragonfly's parents with their little spindle-legged pop-eyed son, had stopped their car in front of our house beside the mailbox that has "Theodore Collins," my father's name, on it. While Mom and Dad stood in the shade of the walnut tree and visited with them through the car window, Dragonfly and I monkeyed around the iron pitcher pump, which is not far from our back door.

Feeling mischievous at the time, I thrust my hand into the stream of water Dragonfly was pumping into the iron kettle there, and, just as quick, flicked some of the water into his face.

A second later, he started to gasp and to wrinkle up his nose and the rest of his face. He looked toward the sun and let out a long-tailed sneeze, then said, "Snatzerpazooka!"

"Stop that! Don't sneeze like that!" he cried.

"I didn't sneeze," I answered him. "You did!"

"I did not!" he argued back. "*He* did!"

"He *who* did?" I asked.

That's when he used the word in his normal voice, saying, "Snatzerpazooka did!"

I looked at his dragonflylike eyes, which had a strange expression in them. "Who in the world is Snatzerpazooka?" I exclaimed. I was pumping a tin of water at the time. I tossed the water over the iron kettle into the puddle on the ground there, scaring a flock of yellow and

white butterflies out of their butterfly wits and scattering them in about seventeen different directions.

Dragonfly started to answer, got a mussed-up expression on his face, and let out another noisy, explosive sneeze with Snatzerpazooka mixed up in it.

His father called then from the car, saying, "Hurry up, Roy! We have to get there before two o'clock!"

"Just a minute!" Dragonfly yelled toward his father. Then he did the weirdest thing. He looked around in a circle and swung into a fast run out across the grassy yard, dodging this way and that like a boy trying to catch a young rooster his folks are going to have for dinner.

"Stop, you little rascal!" Dragonfly kept yelling. "Stop, or I'll leave you here!"

Then Dragonfly's father's deep voice thundered over Mom and Dad's heads toward his zigzagging son, now near the plum tree. "Roy! Stop running around like a chicken with its head off, or we'll drive on without you!"

Dragonfly stopped, and a minute later he was on his way to the gate. He was a little slow getting through it—*over* it, rather, because he was trying to do what Dad had ordered me never to do. He was climbing up the gate's cross wires to climb *over* the gate, when all he would have had to do would have been to lift the latch and walk through.

The minute Dragonfly was on the ground, he reached back and up with both arms, as if

he was reaching for something or somebody, and I heard him say scoldingly, "Come on! Jump! I'll catch you!"

"Roy Gilbert!" Dragonfly's father growled again gruffly. "Hurry up!"

"I can't," Dragonfly whined back. "I can't get him to get off the gate! He's stubborn and won't do what I tell him!" Dragonfly kept on not hurrying and not getting into the car's open backdoor, which I could see his impatient father was wanting him to hurry up and do.

A second later Mr. Gilbert's temper came to life, and he was out of the front seat in a hurry. He scooped up his son in his strong arms, carried him struggling to the car, half-tossed him into the backseat, slammed the door after him, and quickly got into the front seat again beside Dragonfly's worried-faced mother.

The car engine ground itself into noisy life. In a minute the Gilbert family would go speeding down the road, stirring up a cloud of white dust that would ride on the afternoon breeze across the field toward Strawberry Hill.

That's when Dragonfly let out a yell with tears in it, crying, "Wait! Don't go yet! He's still back there on the gate!"

Next, that little rascal shoved open the car door, swung himself out, scooted to the fence, helped his imaginary playmate off onto the ground, shoved him into the backseat, and climbed in after him.

What, I thought, on earth!

As soon as the Gilberts' car was gone and

the lazy cloud of dust was already on its way across the field, I heard Mom say to Dad, "At least our boy isn't as bad as *that!* Whatever is wrong with Roy, anyway?"

"Nothing's wrong with him," Dad answered. "He's just a normal boy who needs a little brother or sister to play with. Not having any, he has created one out of his own lively imagination."

Hearing Mom and Dad say that to each other while they were still on the other side of the gate, I broke in with a mischievous grin in my voice, saying, "*I* don't have any brothers or sisters, either."

That was before my little sister, Charlotte Ann, was born, which you know all about if you've read the very first Sugar Creek Gang story there ever was—the one that is called *The Swamp Robber*.

I had my right foot on one of the cross wires of the gate as if I was going to climb up and over.

Dad gave me a half-savage stare through the woven wire and, with a set jaw, exclaimed an order to me, which was, "Don't you *dare!* And we have enough trouble keeping *you* out of mischief! What would we do with *another* one of you?"

For some reason my foot slipped off the cross wire, and I was quickly off to the big rope swing under the walnut tree to pump myself into a high back-and-forth swing. I was wishing at the same time that I *did* have a little brother to play with. I was also wondering what if I

made for myself an imaginary playmate? What would he look like, and what would I name him? What a crazy name—Snatzerpazooka!

And what a lot of crazy experiences we had that summer with Dragonfly himself.

Dragonfly's parents worried about their boy for a while—what with his all the time talking to his ridiculous playmate, acting all the time as if there were two of him, having fights and arguments with a person nobody except Dragonfly could see or hear. That boy certainly had a "vivid imagination," Mom said one day.

In fact, his parents got to worrying about him so much that they took him to a doctor in the city, a special kind of doctor who understood children's minds. They found out it was almost the same as what Dad had already told Mom.

"There's nothing wrong with him that having a pet or a real-life playmate won't cure. Snatzerpazooka will just fade out of the picture after your boy starts to school or when he begins normal boy-life activities," the doctor told them.

But Snatzerpazooka didn't fade out. Dragonfly was so used to him and had so much fun playing with his imaginary playmate that even after he began going to school, and after the Sugar Creek Gang was started, he still hung onto him.

Many a time when we were down along the creek somewhere or up at the abandoned cemetery having a gang meeting and some-

thing important was brought to a vote, Dragonfly would make us let Snatzerpazooka vote, too.

Poetry worked harder than the rest of us trying to help Dragonfly forget his imaginary playmate. He refused to call him Snatzerpazooka but gave him the name Shadow instead. The two had an honest-to-goodness fight about it one day down at the spring. We had all finished getting down on our knees and drinking out of the reservoir the way cows do—that is, all of us had our drink except Dragonfly.

He stood back near the board fence, waiting till we were through. Poetry, being in a mischievous mood, and still on his hands and knees at the reservoir, looked back toward Dragonfly and said, “Here, Shadow, come get your drink!” He then went through the motions of helping Dragonfly’s imaginary playmate onto *his* hands and knees, bent his head forward and down to the surface of the water, saying, “You’re a pretty dumb little bunny. Don’t you know how to drink like a cow? You *look* like one! Get your head *down!*”

Then Poetry gave Shadow’s imaginary head a shove clear down under the water, his own right hand going under with it.

In seconds, Dragonfly was like a young tiger. He leaped forward and down onto Poetry’s back and started whamming him with both fists, demanding, “You stop dunking him!”

Poetry stopped all right. He was bowled over by Dragonfly’s flying attack and a split second later was on his stomach in the almost icy

water. He came up sputtering and spitting water. Reaching behind him, he caught Snatzerpazooka's *live* playmate by both his slender arms and ducked *his* head under as far as he had Snatzerpazooka's imaginary head.

Big Jim came to the rescue of both of them by stopping the fight and saying, "Come on, Snatzerpazooka! You come on up into the sunlight with me and get dried out. You'll catch your death of cold." With that he went through the motions of picking up the imaginary little boy and carrying him up the incline. Dragonfly himself hurried along after them.

By the time I got there, our spindle-legged pal was as far as the stump we later named the Black Widow Stump and on his way toward home. He had his right hand out behind him as though he was leading somebody, and I heard him say, "Come on, pal! Those rough-necks don't know how to treat a gentleman!"

No sooner had Dragonfly and his just-dunked imaginary playmate disappeared over the rim of the hill than Poetry started quoting one of the many poems he had memorized. It was one most of us knew by heart ourselves. It was by Robert Louis Stevenson, and in Poetry's squawky, ducklike voice it sounded almost funny:

"I have a little shadow that goes in and
out with me,
And what can be the use of him is
more than I can see.

He is so very, very like me from the
heels up to the head,
And I see him jump before me, when I
jump into my bed.”

Poetry was yelling the poem as loud as he could, so that Dragonfly could hear it. He started on the second verse but got interrupted by Dragonfly sneezing in a long-tailed, extraloud voice and exclaiming, “Snatzerpazooka!”

Poetry yelled back a mimicking sneeze and cried, “Snatzerpashadow!”

Because we all liked Dragonfly a lot, we decided at a special meeting to pretend along with him, letting him take Snatzerpazooka along with us whenever he wanted to, waiting for the imaginary little rascal when we had to, helping him over the fences, even carrying him when Dragonfly said he was too tired to walk.

Dragonfly didn’t cause us much trouble that first summer. The only thing was, Snatzerpazooka began to change a little. From being a helpless, innocent little fellow that had to be carried or helped over fences, he began to get ornery. Sometimes we’d hear Dragonfly quarreling with him and calling him names.

One summer day when I was down along the bayou not far from the Black Widow Stump, I felt a sneeze coming on. I twisted my face into a Dragonflylike tailspin and burst out with an explosive “Snatzerpazooka!” loud enough to be heard all the way to the clump of evergreens at the edge of the bayou.

Poetry was with me at the time, and being in a mischievous mood he mimicked me with a sneeze just like mine, which in his squawky voice sounded like a guinea hen with a bad cold. His sneeze, in the middle of which he cried, “Snatzerpashadow!” instead of “Snatzerpazooka!” hadn’t any sooner exploded out across the bayou than there was a saucy yell from behind the evergreens crying, “You stop that! There isn’t any Snatzerpazooka!”

Then, from behind those evergreens shot a spindle-legged, pop-eyed boy. A brown-and-tan puppy with a crank-handle tail leaped along beside him.

That was when we found out there wasn’t any Snatzerpazooka anymore—or wasn’t supposed to be, anyway.

Dragonfly was both mad and glad: mad at us for sneezing the way we had, and happy all over because his parents had gotten him a dog playmate. He told us how much the dog cost and what a good trailer he was.

“Looks like a bloodhound,” Poetry said. “Here, Red, come here and let me cheer you up a little!”

He was one of the saddest-faced dogs I’d ever seen. His hair was smooth but seemed very loose, as if he had three times as much as he needed, or as if his mother had made him a hair coat that was a lot too big for him. His skin was extrawrinkled on the forehead, and his ears were long and floppy.

“He *is* a bloodhound,” Dragonfly boasted.

“He’s half bloodhound and half beagle. That’s how come it was so easy to find you guys. I put him on your trail, and he led me straight to you. See here?”

Dragonfly held out to me my old straw hat, which that very morning I’d been wearing around the house and barn and had left on the ground under the plum tree.

“How come he didn’t bawl on the trail?” Poetry asked.

We’d all hunted at night with Circus’s dad’s hounds, and when they were trailing, there was plenty of dog noise.

Dragonfly’s proud answer was “He’s going to be a *still* trailer.”

That was hard to believe, yet there was my old straw hat, and here was Dragonfly with his hound pup, which right that minute was sniffing at me and wagging his crank-handle tail as much as to say, “Here’s your criminal! He smells just like his hat! Now what do you want me to do?”

You never saw such a happy little guy as Dragonfly over his droopy-faced hound. The doctor had been right. Dragonfly needed a real-life playmate—a human being or a pet, he had said.

“How do you like that?” Poetry said to me one day a little later. “Having us for playmates wasn’t enough. He had to have a floppy-eared, droopy-faced, crank-tailed, loose-skinned half bloodhound!”

Dad explained it this way: “He could be with you boys only part of the time. He needed a playmate *all* the time for a while—at home as well as at school and at play. He’ll be all right from now on. You just wait and see.”

We *did* wait and see. But Dad was wrong, as wrong as he had ever been in his life. Just *how* wrong, I’ll tell you in the next chapter.

23
SUGAR CREEK GANG

The **KILLER
CAT**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

The first time anybody around Sugar Creek knew for sure there was a bloodthirsty, savage-tempered wildcat in the territory was when one of them sneaked into Harm Groenwald's pasture and killed three of his prize lambs.

I never will forget the hair-raising chills that ran up and down my spine the morning I heard about it.

We had just finished breakfast at our house when we got the news. It had been one of the most peaceful breakfasts we had had in a long time. Charlotte Ann, my mischievous-minded, usually-hard-to-manage baby sister had been being especially well behaved, not fussing or whining but behaving like most babies don't in the morning.

My grayish-brown-haired mother was sipping her coffee quietly and had a very contented look on her face as we all waited for my bushy-eyebrowed father to finish reading the Bible story he had just started.

As I listened, I didn't have any idea that part of what he was reading was going to get mixed up in the excitement of a wildcat hunt before the summer would pass.

The short Bible story was about a grown-up boy named Jacob, who had had a quarrel with

his brother, Esau. To save his life he left home to go to another country where his mother used to live.

The first night of the long journey was spent in very rocky territory with steep cliffs and outcrops and different-shaped boulders piled on each other. It made me think of the rocky hills above Old Man Paddler's cabin. In fact, the hills in that part of Sugar Creek territory were not far from the haunted house we all knew about, and they were the best place in the world for wildcats to live and hunt and raise their families. Of course, I didn't think of that while Mom was sipping her coffee and Charlotte Ann was playing with her cute, pink, bare toes and Dad was reading along in his deep, gruff voice.

Anyway, while Jacob slept outdoors that night—using a stone for a pillow—he had a dream about a stairway leading all the way up to heaven. In the dream he saw angels going up and down on it.

In a minute Dad would finish reading, and then we'd have what Mom calls a Quaker prayer meeting. That means we'd all be quiet a minute and each one would think his own prayer to God just before Dad or Mom or maybe I would pray with out-loud words, and our day would be started right.

Then is when, all of a sudden, the phone started ringing in our front room.

I listened to see whether it was going to be our ring or somebody else's. I knew all the

gang's numbers by heart: two longs and a short for Little Jim; two shorts and a long for Poetry; three shorts for Circus; two shorts for Big Jim; four shorts for Dragonfly; and ours was one long and one short.

Different other neighbors had different other numbers.

On our phone system, all anybody on our seven-phone line had to do if he wanted to talk to any other family on the line was to go to the phone, lift the receiver, and ring whatever number he wanted.

Of course, everybody on the party line could hear the phone ring in their own house and would know who was being called but not who was calling—unless they lifted their own receiver and did what is called “eavesdropping.” Nobody was supposed to do that, but different people sometimes did and made different people mad at each other.

There was also a special ring, which was hardly ever used. It was called an “emergency ring,” and nobody was supposed to ring it unless there was an actual emergency, such as an accident or a death in the family or somebody's cow had run away and couldn't be found. That emergency ring was two extra long longs and two very short shorts.

Well, our heads were all bowed at our breakfast table, and in my imagination I was up in the hills not far from the haunted house, lying on a stone pillow and watching angels moving up and down a golden stairway, sort of

like people riding up and down on an escalator in a department store. And that was when I heard the jangling of the telephone. My mind was jarred all the way back to our kitchen table, and I was hearing the extralong ring, followed by another just-as-long long and then two short, sharp shorts.

“*Emergency!*” Mom, sitting beside Charlotte Ann’s high chair, exclaimed, jumping like a scared rabbit that had been shot at and missed. A startled look came over her face, and she was out of her chair in a flurry, accidentally knocking over her chair to get across the kitchen floor as fast as she could, into the living room and to the phone to answer it.

All that excitement brought Charlotte Ann to baby-style life. Her arms flew out and up in several directions. She knocked over her blue mug of white milk, which spilled over the edge of her tray and splashed onto the floor. Mixy, our black-and-white house cat came from her box of straw by the kitchen stove and started lapping up as much of the spilled milk as she could before anybody in the family could mop it up and it’d be wasted.

In the living room Mom’s voice gasped, “What! A wildcat! Who said so? How do you know?”

I was out of my chair even faster than Mom had gotten out of hers. I stood beside her at the phone, straining my ears to hear whoever’s voice was on the other end of the line, but I couldn’t. That is, I couldn’t hear any *one* voice.

Instead, because Mom had her receiver about an inch from her ear, I heard a jumble of what sounded like a dozen women's voices. Everybody was talking to everybody, and almost nobody was listening to anybody.

I tell you there was a lot of excitement around our house after Mom hung up and explained what the emergency was. It was Harm Groenwald's fast-talking wife who had rung the emergency number. They'd had three of their prize lambs killed last night. Their carcasses had been torn in the same way that two of their other lambs had been a year ago.

"This time I'm going to find out what killed them!" Harm had told his wife. "I'm going to call Chuck Hammer."

Mrs. Groenwald said the Sugar Creek veterinarian had hurried out from town to have a look at the dead lambs. He used to live out West and had seen kills like that before. He turned the bodies over a few times and said grimly, "We've got either a mountain lion or a monster wildcat on our hands. They both kill the same way. See here?"

He showed Harm what he meant. "They always crush the neck bones in front of the shoulders, then tear into the carcass *behind* the shoulders and eat the heart and liver first."

"But whoever heard of a mountain lion or a wildcat around here?" Harm objected. "They don't live in this part of the country!"

"*One* does," Chuck said, "and he's a big one! Huge!"

They found its tracks in a muddy place, and Chuck said, "Wildcat! I'd say thirty-five pounds, anyway. Maybe forty-five!"

Harm Groenwald's fast-talking, high-pitched-voiced wife told all that to all the people who had answered the emergency ring—told it in less than a minute and a half. It took Mom almost three minutes to tell it to Dad and me.

Dad quick got on the phone then and asked the vet, who was still at Groenwald's house, to stop at our farm on his way back to town. Addie, our red mother hog, had given us a litter of six pigs last night, and Dad thought Chuck ought to look her over and maybe suggest a better diet for her so that her babies would grow stronger fast.

I helped Mom clean up Charlotte Ann's spilled milk and finished just in time to go out to the hog lot where Dad and the veterinarian were talking about the monster of a wildcat and also where Chuck was giving Addie a physical checkup.

"She's all right," he told Dad. "She's given you six of the healthiest pigs I've ever seen. Not a runt in the litter."

Poetry, my best friend, had heard the emergency ring and was on the way to our house to talk it over with me when he'd hitched a ride with Chuck. So he was there, too. That was one reason I didn't quite finish helping Mom clean up the kitchen. I needed to get out where all the excitement was.

Standing by Addie's gate, Poetry started a singsongy little ditty he'd learned somewhere:

“Six little pigs in the straw with their
mother,
Bright eyes, curly tails, tumbling on
each other;
Bring them apples from the orchard
trees,
And hear those piggies say, ‘Please,
please, please.’”

I told Poetry it was a cute rhyme, and that started him off in a singsong again.

In fact, right that minute there was a glad singsong feeling in my mind. There had been ever since Harm Groenwald's wife had told Mom and Mom had told Dad and me that it was a wildcat that had killed Harm's two lambs last year as well as this year's three. It had been a wildcat and not a *dog* that had done it!

You know why I was glad if you've read the story *The Bull Fighter*. I never will forget those 10,000 minutes—which is how many minutes it took for a week to pass. Wally, my city cousin, had spent the whole 10,000 minutes at our farm. And Alexander the Coppersmith, his ill-mannered, city-bred dog, had been with him, the most uncontrollable dog there ever was.

Anyway, the night Harm Groenwald's two lambs were killed was the same night Wally's nervous mongrel had unleashed himself. It was my fault that his collar was too loose. *My fault*, I

had thought again and again, *that two innocent lambs had been killed!*

I hadn't told anybody. One reason was that, if they ever proved it was Wally's dog that had done it, then Alexander would have to be shot, and I'd be to blame for *his* death, too. It'd be a shame for a city dog that didn't know any better to have to lose his life.

So I'd put off telling anybody, but I shouldn't have. I should have told what Alexander did before Wally took his dog home to Memory City with him.

But now I'd never have to! Feeling glad in my heart toward God for making everything work out the way it had, and because I was in the habit of talking out loud to Him anytime I felt like it, I all of a sudden said, "Thanks! Thanks a lot!"

Poetry, not knowing what I'd been thinking, answered with his squawky, ducklike voice, "I'm glad you like it. I'll sing it again." And he was off in another half-bass singsong about the six little pigs in the straw with their mother.

We were all interrupted then by the sound of dogs' voices coming from the direction of Harm Groenwald's pasture. I'd heard those same long-voiced hounds before. My mind's eye told me it was Jay and Bawler, Circus Browne's dad's big coonhounds. I was sure they were on the trail of the wildcat. Already Harm Groenwald had called on the best hunter with the best hounds in the whole territory to help him catch the wild beast that had killed his sheep.

Many a time at night I'd heard those dog voices hot on a coon trail along the bayou or the swamp or in the rocky hill country above Old Man Paddler's Lincoln-style cabin.

Jay is a big, long-bodied, hundred-pound bluetick with a deep, hollow bawl. Bawler is a lanky black-and-tan only about half as big as Jay. She has a high-pitched wail that sends chills up and down your spine when she's excited and going strong on a trail.

"Let's go join the hunt!" Poetry exclaimed.

And I answered, "Sure! Let's go."

Dad stopped us, though, by saying, "No, it's an organized hunt. The men have guns, and they won't want any boys along."

It didn't feel good to be stopped, but we weren't the only boys who didn't get to go. Circus, the best athlete and the acrobat of our gang, Dan Browne's only son, didn't get to go, either.

In a few minutes, there he was, coming through the orchard toward us. On a leash, running all around him in a lot of excitement, was his new hound pup he had named "Icha-bod," one of the cutest black-and-tans you ever saw.

"The hounds are coming this way," Poetry cried. "Listen! That means Old Stubtail came this direction last night after he killed the lambs. I'll bet he's got his home down in the swamp or maybe along the bayou!"

"Or in the cave," a voice behind us piped up. It was Little Jim, the smallest member of

the gang, who had come without making any noise.

Old Bawler and Jay were *really* coming our way. Already they were in the lane at the south side of our pasture—over the fence, through the pasture and watermelon patch, and straight for the pignut trees at the north end of our garden.

That was enough to scare me. It meant that last night after Old Stubtail, as Circus called him, had had his lamb dinner at Groenwalds', he had come across *our* south pasture, through *our* farmyard, and had been only a hundred yards from *our* henhouse and—

I got my thoughts interrupted then by the hound pup on Circus's leash going simply wild with excitement because Bawler was his mother, and he wanted to get into the excitement, whatever it was.

The pup was at the end of his leash, pulling and tugging and struggling wildly. And then his collar was over his head, and he was off toward the pignut trees to join in whatever kind of dog game his mother and old Jay were playing.

And that's when I heard the pup's hunting voice for the first time. It was a high-pitched, wailing tremolo, like the highest tone on the organ at our church. It was also the longest wail I'd ever heard.

Now there were *three* hounds, and I never saw hunting dogs more excited. They were as excited as if it had been only a few minutes

since the big cat had gone through our orchard. They were over in the orchard now, heading through it toward Poetry's dad's woods and the mouth of the branch beyond and the cave beyond that and Old Man Paddler's hills beyond that.

Mr. Browne let out a yell when little Ichabod joined the chase. He ordered him to stop, but Ichabod wouldn't. It was too much fun. He was also using his own sense of smell to tell him where to trail.

At the orchard fence, though, the pup scared up a rabbit and went off in a different direction, giving chase with an even more excited voice than before.

Bawler and Jay were over the orchard fence and on their way toward the Sugar Creek bridge, and Ichabod was heading toward the place where he'd last seen the rabbit, which was near the beehives in the orchard.

Circus made a dive for his hound when he circled near, grabbed him, and soon had him on leash again. He also gave him a good scolding, saying, "Don't you *ever* do that again! *Never* leave one trail for another. Do you hear?"

Well, it was a long, hard chase for Dan Browne and his hounds. Finally, somewhere in the hills in dry, ragged outcrops above Old Man Paddler's cabin, the dogs lost the scent, and the hunt was over.

Thinking maybe Old Stubtail might come back to finish eating one of the lambs he'd killed, Circus's pop set a number three double-

spring steel trap at a place in the fence where it was easy for a large cat to get through. He tied a feather on a string and hung it on an elderberry bush close to the trap so that the wind would blow it. The cat, belonging to the same family as a house cat, which would be attracted to anything like that, might see the feather, smell the bait near the trap, and get caught.

That night a farmer three miles down the creek lost a calf. The kill was the same kind—a broken neck in front of the shoulders, a hole behind the shoulder, and the heart and liver eaten out.

24
SUGAR CREEK GANG
The COLORADO
KIDNAPPING

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

We first learned about the mystery of Wild Horse Canyon while we were still at Sugar Creek, three days before starting for our summer vacation in the Rockies.

It was half past one, Friday afternoon. In a few minutes, just as soon as Little Jim got there, we would open our gang meeting, decide a few important things, then go in swimming. It would be our last happy-go-lucky swim until we got back, because while we were out West, we'd have to use hotel or motel pools where there'd be a lot of other people. Mountain streams would be too cold to swim in and really enjoy it.

We were all lying in the shade of the Snatzerpazooka tree, about twenty feet from the sandy beach of our swimming hole. Snatzerpazooka himself, the scarecrow we'd hung up early that summer to keep the crows from gobbling up the new shoots of corn in Dragonfly's father's cornfield, was swaying in the lazy afternoon breeze. Dragonfly's new Stetson cowboy hat was hanging on his left wooden shoulder.

Circus, our acrobat, was up in the tree. In fact, he was sitting on an overhanging branch close to the tree's trunk, using the trunk for a backrest.

Little Jim kept on not coming, and we kept

on feeling impatient, waiting for him. In a way, Little Jim was the most important member of the gang. That is, it was extra-important that he be there at this meeting. It was his folks—his township trustee father and his very musical mother—who were taking us with them on the out-West vacation. They were going to spend two weeks at a famous music festival in the mountains, and we were all getting to go along. I could hardly wait till next Monday.

Little Jim, the cutest member of the gang and maybe the most cheerful, was one of the best boys there ever was, I thought, as right that second I saw him coming along the path that leads from the spring to the Snatzerpazooka tree.

“Here he comes!” I exclaimed to the rest of us. “Hurry up!” I yelled down the narrow, weed-bordered winding path to him and expected to hear him call back cheerfully, “I’m coming!” as he nearly always does whenever anybody yells to him like that.

He came puffing up to where we were, but there wasn’t any usual cute little grin on his cute little mouse-shaped face. Instead, his lips were set, and he was either sad or mad about something. I couldn’t tell which.

“S’matter?” Poetry asked him. “How come you’re so late?”

Little Jim’s worried, teary-voiced answer cut like a knife into my heart when he said, “It’s Crescendo! Something’s happened to her. We can’t find her anywhere. She didn’t sleep in

her box last night or the night before, and she didn't come home this morning. She's been gone two whole days!"

We all knew what he meant when he said "Crescendo." He meant the very cute calico cat that had been Little Jim's pet ever since he was only five.

Little Jim was sad all right; he was also mad. He took a swipe at a tall mullein stalk with the striped walking stick he always had with him. He broke the mullein stalk, and its yellow-flowered head bent over and hung upside down.

"We wanted to give her to the animal shelter to feed and look after till we got back—and now she's gone!"

While Little Jim was getting his breath and telling us about Crescendo's being lost, strayed, or stolen, Dragonfly cut in to exclaim, "Who cares about a calico cat? Let's get started swimming!"

Big Jim growled back at him, "We're having an important meeting! Besides—don't you remember?—we have to examine the creek bottom first!"

"Why?" Dragonfly whined, pretending he didn't already know, and sneezed. In fact, he sneezed three times in rapid-fire succession—which meant we weren't starting on our mountain vacation any too soon for him. Hay fever season was already here.

"Because," Circus called down from his tree seat, "the heavy rains we've been having lately may have washed a lot of junk into the swim-

ming hole, that's why. A waterlogged old stump, sharp rocks, or broken bottles or tin cans we might get hurt on. Or maybe the water washed out a few dangerous holes."

I knew what he was talking about. Every year after the spring floods and also after every big summer rain had sent a rush of water swirling down the creek, we tested the bottom to be sure our swimming hole was still a safe place to swim. Sometimes it wasn't until we'd taken out quite a lot of junk that had been washed in.

Anyway, while we were waiting to test the creek bottom—and also trying to cheer up Little Jim, who was really worried about his calico pet, which was one of the prettiest cats I ever saw—we decided to look over some of the out-West advertising Big Jim had brought with him. It was some he had gotten in the mail that very morning from the town near which we were going to camp for two whole weeks, high in the Rockies. We would go into town every day to a big tent in a meadow there to hear the wonderful music of some of the world's greatest musicians.

Big Jim hadn't any sooner opened the *Aspen Avalanche* than Dragonfly let out a happy exclamation, saying, "Look! There's a cowboy wearing a hat just like mine!"

What he was looking at and exclaiming about was a full-page advertisement for a rodeo that was going to be held in Aspen. Right in the middle of the page, sitting on a very pretty

horse, was a man in a Western outfit, and on the man's head was a swept-brim hat, which, I noticed, *was* just like Dragonfly's. For half a second, I envied the spindle-legged little guy that his folks had let him have a big broad-brimmed Stetson while mine hadn't let *me*.

Then I saw the name of the cowboy and let out an exclamation myself. "Hey!" I cut loose with. "It's Cranberry Jones!"

Boy oh boy, oh boy oh boy! my mind exclaimed. Cranberry Jones, whose voice I'd heard on the radio and had seen different pictures of riding his famous palomino horse, was going to be one of the stars at the Aspen rodeo, and we would get to see him ourselves!

Dragonfly sprang to his cowboy-booted feet, swept his swept-brim hat from Snatzerpazooka's left shoulder, shoved it into our circle, and exclaimed, "See! His hat's just like mine!"

Poetry grunted, shrugged, and in his duck-like, squawky voice answered, "Yours is like *his*, you mean."

Dragonfly pouted back, "What's the difference? Just so they're alike!"

I looked at his chimpanzee-like face and at the hat he had just put on and liked him in spite of him.

Big Jim broke up our nonsensical argument then by saying, "Look, you guys! Want a mystery to solve while we're out there?"

Just the word "mystery" brought my mind to excited life. Big Jim had turned back to the front page, where there was a column of news

items with a heading that said: "Rolling Stones from the Avalanche."

Below the heading were interesting stories of things that had happened long ago. Each had a different date. One was "Thirty Years Ago This Week." Another was "Twenty Years Ago." Another, "Ten Years Ago." And down near the bottom were a few lines about an old man named Joe Campbell, Cranberry Jones's stableman, who had died of a heart attack last New Year's morning. Joe's body was found in a snowdrift just outside the stable door only a few yards from where one of Cranberry's palominos was standing, saddled and showing evidence of having been ridden.

"Joe's habit of taking very early morning rides 'for my health,' as he always expressed it, had been the cause of his death. The weather had been just too cold for an old man to venture out." That was the way the story ended.

But the mystery that Big Jim had just pointed out had happened the night before on New Year's *Eve* and had a heading that said:

BLONDE DISAPPEARS AFTER MIDNIGHT
DRINKING SPREE IN WILD HORSE TAVERN

Circus right that second came scrambling down the tree, shaking the branch Snatzerpazooka was hanging on and knocking some of the sawdust out of his stuffed head—Snatzerpazooka's stuffed head, I mean. Some of it fell

into my eyes so that for a second I couldn't see what I was seeing.

Besides, some of the print in the story was blurred and several lines were worn. Even some of the words were missing. It was a spooky story about a young lady who had come to the Winter Ski Festival. The story said, "She took a few lessons on the Little Nell Beginner's Slope, then was away to the more dangerous runs: The Cork Screw, Ruthie's Run, and even the treacherous FIS. Yesterday, after the morning mail . . ."

Big Jim, who was reading aloud to us, stopped. "Her name's worn off," he said, squinting at the paper, holding it close to his eyes and trying to make out the missing word.

"Let *me* see," Poetry said. "I've got twenty-twenty vision without glasses." He studied the story, then in his usual mischievous tone, remarked, "Like it says, she's *missing*"—which wasn't very funny.

Big Jim read on. "Yesterday after the morning mail . . . seemed despondent and spent most of the day alone. She was seen late at night at the Wild Horse Tavern bar. About midnight she left the bar and was last seen fighting her way through the blizzard toward her motel four blocks away. She did not arrive at the Snow-slide and at press time still had not been found."

Big Jim finished reading the news article to us. It was like reading the first chapter of an exciting mystery story in a magazine and seeing

at the bottom of the page the words "To Be Continued."

"Look!" Circus exclaimed. "There's an editor's note!"

And there was. It began, "The mystery is still unsolved. The story has been pointed up this week by the owners of the Snow-slide, The Cranberry Jones Enterprises. Jones himself has offered a \$500 reward for any information . . ."

That was as much of the editor's note as there was. The rest was worn away, maybe by the paper's being much handled in the mail.

Well, it wasn't any ordinary mystery story, and it wouldn't be continued in next week's *Avalanche*. If there was ever any new chapter, somebody would have to find the disappearing woman.

Already my mind was out there in the mountains in last winter's blinding blizzard, trying to imagine who the woman was and what had happened to her. I was wishing that when we got there we would stumble onto a clue of some kind that would help us solve the mystery.

"I know what I'll do with the five hundred dollars, if I get it," Dragonfly piped up. "I'll get me a palomino just like Cranberry Jones's. I'll—"

"If *we* solve the mystery," Poetry countered, "*we'll* divide it six ways between us, and your share'll be eighty-three dollars and thirty-three and one-third cents."

Little Jim chimed in then. "I wonder what was in her letter that made the woman so sad."

Poetry came back with another idea, which was, “When we get out there, I’ll bet we’ll find the missing body ourselves.”

Big Jim, who had been lying on his stomach, rolled over, straightened to a sitting position, and with a puzzled expression on his face, asked, “Who said anything about a *body*? It just said the woman disappeared in a blizzard at midnight, New Year’s Eve.”

Poetry scowled. “But she had to have a body to disappear in, didn’t she? Here, let me see the paper.”

Big Jim handed him the *Avalanche*, and after Poetry had read awhile, he yawned and said to us, “Well, gang, we’ll have to solve the mystery ourselves. A woman just doesn’t go up in smoke or disappear into thin air!”

Big Jim must have felt a little irked at our barrel-shaped friend because he answered him, “Who said anything about thin air! She disappeared in air that was full of swirling snow!”

Poetry grinned back, looked at his wristwatch and quacked, “High altitude air is always thin.” Then he added, “Time to go in swimming”—which it was.

Going in didn’t seem as important as it had, though, because all our minds were probably out in the Rockies with a mystery running around in them. In less than a week we’d be out there for real, having a wonderful vacation. One of the first things I was going to do, I thought and said so, was to walk past the Wild Horse Tavern where the golden-haired woman

had been drinking the night she disappeared. After we had our tent pitched away back in the mountains somewhere along Maroon Creek or maybe on the Roaring Fork, we'd all put our heads together and see if we could help solve the mystery. Maybe we could solve it, and maybe we couldn't.

25
SUGAR CREEK GANG

The GHOST
DOG

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It was one of the hottest, laziest summer afternoons I'd ever seen or felt—especially ever *felt*—when the mystery of the howling dog in the Sugar Creek swamp began to write itself in my mind.

I was dozing in the dappled shade of the beechnut tree near the Black Widow Stump at the time. Poetry, my almost best friend, was sprawled out beside me. The two of us were waiting for the rest of the gang to come for one of the most important gang meetings we ever had.

Of course, I didn't have any idea *how* important our meeting was going to be or what exciting and even dangerous experiences we were going to stumble onto that afternoon, or I wouldn't have been so lazy and sleepy.

Up to now, every time I'd dozed off, my chubby mischievous-minded friend had said or done something to jar me out of my dream-world into the sizzling hot afternoon that was making me so sleepy in the first place.

As you maybe remember, the beechnut tree we were lying in the shade of is just west of the Black Widow Stump, where we have so many of our gang meetings. That stump was the most important stump in the whole Sugar Creek ter-

ritory, because that was where a black widow spider had bitten Circus's whiskey-drinking father before he got scared half to death and gave his stubborn heart to God to be saved from his sins.

Circus, as you maybe know, is the curly-haired acrobat of our gang, who has to live with six sisters. He has learned to imitate almost every bird and wild animal there is in the swamp along the creek and the bayou, and he's always surprising or entertaining us with a bird-song or a growl or grunt or howl or screech or bark or squall or chirp.

That stump is also just south of the leaning linden tree that overhangs the incline leading down to the bubbling spring where we get our favorite drinking water. And that is about the coolest place anybody can find anywhere to get away from a long hot summer.

"Please!" I grumbled to Poetry, who had just punched me awake for maybe the seventh time. "Why don't you cooperate? You're going to get yourself whammed on the jaw or some place if you get my temper all stirred up!"

"Cooperate!" his ducklike voice came back. "Why don't *you* cooperate? I'm trying to tell you that Sugar Creek territory is going to be in the news—is *already* in the news. Here, look at this in the *Hoosier Graphic!* Here's a picture of the hollow sycamore tree in our barnyard and our old white mother hog with her six little pigs!"

"I saw it this morning," I mumbled back

grumpily, “and it’s nothing to brag about. Our old *red* mother hog raises her pig family in a modern hog motel, not in a hundred-year-old hollow sycamore tree in a barnyard with woodpeckers nesting in holes in its dead top. Last week our Red Addie had *seven* pigs, all of them with beautiful red hair like mine.”

Saying that to Poetry, I sighed a saucy sigh in his direction, rolled over three or four times to the very edge of the shade, and tried once more to sail away into the lazy, hazy, wonderful world of sleep. Maybe this time Poetry would respect my wishes and let me alone until some of the rest of the gang got there, when I’d *have* to stay awake.

Now that I was farther away from my oversized friend, the weather didn’t seem so hot. A lively little breeze came to life right then and began to rustle the glossy green leaves of the beech tree. Through my half-closed eyes I could see the leaves trembling and, with my lazy ears, hear them whispering like a huddle of girls in the schoolyard.

Maybe I ought to tell you that sometimes when I am alone in the woods or down along the bayou—or just moseying around looking for snails’ shells or birds’ nests or sitting on the bank of the creek waiting for a sleepy fish to make up its lazy mind to bite the nice, juicy blob of fishing worms on my hook—I listen to the rustling of the tree leaves all around overhead. And they *do* sound as if they are whispering—and sometimes even as though they are

clapping their hands, as it says in one of Mom's favorite Bible verses, "And all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

All alone like that, hearing the water rippling in Sugar Creek and the birds whooping it up in the trees overhead all around, I like to think I feel like the Indian boy Hiawatha in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem. Then I'm glad to be alive enough to enjoy being alive. It's as easy as eating blueberry pie to imagine the birds are Bill Collins's chickens, and the chipmunks, groundhogs, cottontails, raccoons, possums, and even the polecats are my brothers—Bill Collins being me, Theodore Collins's "first and worst son," which is sometimes Dad's way of describing me. Sometimes when he calls me that, it's a joke, and sometimes it isn't.

Ho-hum! Lying there beside Poetry that sweltering summer afternoon, sailing along like Wynken, Blynken, and Nod in the poem in one of our schoolbooks, I was just beginning to drift farther and farther "into the sea of dew," when all of a temper-awakening sudden, Poetry let out a hissing sound like a tire losing its air and exclaimed loud enough to scare the living daylights out of me, "*Hear that?*"

Not having heard that or any other that, I groaned a grumpy growl and tried to yawn myself back into Wynken, Blynken, and Nod's sailboat to snooze off again.

"I mean it!" Poetry's voice exploded into my peace and quiet. "I heard a dog howling!" He rolled over several times to where I was

lying and bumped into my back. Then he sat up and shook me by the shoulders. "Wake up, Theodore Collins's first and worst son! I heard a dog howling!"

"A dog howling or a boy's brains rattling—if he has any?" I came back with.

Up to now it seemed that everything in nature had been cooperating with me, trying to help me get the nap I needed. There was the buzzing and droning of seven hundred or more honeybees gathering nectar from the thousands of creamy yellow, sweet-smelling flowers of the leaning linden tree. Every now and then a lonesome crow croaked a cracked-voiced caw from a tree somewhere in the woods. Down in the creek the friendly little rifle laughed gaily along, singing a singsong song, which is one of the most musical sounds a boy ever hears in Sugar Creek country. And the hot sun was scattering showers of heat all over everywhere, and . . .

Even though all nature was trying to help me, the nature of the roly-poly boy who was my almost best friend was *not* cooperating.

"Do you know what day this is?" he asked, and I didn't and didn't care and didn't answer him.

Then's when Poetry tickled my nose with what felt like the feathered flower of a blue-grass stem, which made me sneeze a sneeze that woke me all the way up.

"I don't care if it's day or night!" I growled.

I sighed a sizzling sigh at him and turned my face toward the bayou.

“The calendar”—Poetry answered his own question—“says that today is just one month since we buried Alexander the Coppersmith, and that gives us something to do today: go up to the haunted house cemetery and help Little Jim put a bouquet of wildflowers on Alexander’s grave.”

That might have interested me, but it actually only irked me a little more at my round-in-the-middle friend for trying too hard to get my attention.

I could have let my mind do what it had done so many times the past month—unroll the story of one of the most exciting things that had ever happened to anybody in Sugar Creek history. That, as you maybe know, happened just thirty days ago. A fierce-fanged wildcat as big as a mountain lion moved into the neighborhood, and my cousin Wally’s copper-haired, city-bred mongrel, named Alexander the Coppersmith, had saved Little Jim’s life. He had attacked the savage-tempered cat while it was flying through the air straight for Little Jim’s throat.

You have to hand it to that nervous, nonsensical, half-hound, half-Airedale for being brave without knowing it and living a dog’s life better than any dog I ever saw. He proved that day to be one of the biggest dog heroes in the county—maybe in the whole state—by diving headfirst into a fierce, fast, furious fight with

that wildcat. You can imagine what the battle looked and sounded like if you've ever seen and heard a neighborhood dog, who ought to know better, and our old black-and-white house cat in a tooth-and-claw, life-and-death struggle for the survival of the fightingest.

There was barking and yelping and hissing and scratching such as I'd never seen or heard before. I watched and cringed and yelled, "Attaboy!" to Alexander, while Little Jim beside me, saved by the battle, clung to my right arm as if he was holding onto a tree root on a cliff side to keep from falling over the edge.

"Sic 'im!" I yelled to Alexander, and he did sic 'im, more savage than ever, while Circus and Big Jim, Dragonfly and Wally, and even Little Jim also kept on rooting for that daring dog doing what was natural to him.

It was not only maybe the fiercest fang fight ever fought but also one of the shortest. All of a sudden, the battle came to a spine-tingling, heart-sickening, bone-breaking end. I saw it and didn't want to believe it but had to because it was happening right before my worried eyes. That copper-colored canine and tawny-furred feline, all of a barking, hissing, howling, eye-scratching, fur-flying sudden, started to roll over and over and over like two tangled-up tumbleweeds in a Western wind, right toward the edge of the ledge they had been fighting on. And over the edge and down they both went—down and down and down and down and *down!*

Even while they were still falling, my eyes leaped ahead of them to see where they were going to land. Maybe a hundred feet below was an outcropping of jagged rocks.

We buried Wally's brave little mongrel not far from where he fell in battle, in a sandy place we found on the bank of the fast-flowing canyon river. Never again would we see Alexander streaking like a flash of burnished copper down the road, giving chase to a passing car. Never again would we hear at night his high-pitched wailing as he ran with Circus's dad's hounds in full cry on the trail of a coon down along the bayou. Never again would I get to sit on our side porch under the ivy canopy and stroke his half-sad, half-glad head—when I could get him quiet enough to let me do it.

As the last bit of gravelly soil was shoveled onto his grave, I realized that at last he was a quiet dog and would never again get himself into any trouble for not thinking or planning in advance what he was going to do.

A day or two after the funeral, we had a second one for the same dog, because we got to worrying. What if there should be a flash flood some day or night? It might send a wall of water roaring down the canyon. It might wash Alexander's body out of its grave and carry it a mile or more downstream, where it would lie exposed to the weather and might be eaten by buzzards or some carnivorous four-legged animal that sometimes roamed the hills of Sugar Creek territory!

It was a sad day for all of us, especially for Wally, and extraspecially for Little Jim, whose life Alexander had saved. It was too sad for me to even write about it for you at the time. But we dug up his body and carried it in a gunnysack through the woods to Old Tom the Trapper's dog cemetery behind the haunted house where Old Tom himself had once lived. There we dug a deep hole in the southwest corner under an elderberry bush and buried him again.

And I will never forget the time the gang made a special trip to the cemetery to help Little Jim put up the grave marker his father had made out of a slab of birch wood. His mother, who is an artist as well as the best pianist in the whole neighborhood and is our church organist, had stenciled a sleeping dog on it and lettered what is called an *epitaph*, which Little Jim decided he wanted on it. It was:

ALEXANDER THE COPPERSMITH

Long may he live in our hearts.

There were tears in my eyes as I stood looking at the mound of yellow earth under one of the overhanging flower clusters of the elderberry shrub. That one cluster was so heavy, and hanging so low, it was like a ripe sunflower head, almost hiding the epitaph's last three words, "in our hearts." It seemed we had lost a member of the gang instead of a dog.

While we were all standing and thinking, I

took a quick look around at us. Standing nearest the marker, sort of leaning on his shovel, was Big Jim, our leader, his jaw set, his almost mustache like a shadow under his nose. Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of the gang, was holding his handkerchief to his nose, maybe to keep from sneezing. He was maybe allergic to the gunnysack we'd buried the dog in or to dog hairs or to some weed or wildflower around the place. Poetry's round face under his dark and shaggy eyebrows was very sober for a change. The very curly brown hair of Circus, our acrobat, was shining in the afternoon sun. And, last of all, there was Little Jim himself—last except for me, Bill Collins, Theodore Collins's first and *best* son. Right that minute anyway.

I wasn't the only one to have tears in my eyes, either. Little Jim gave his head a quick jerk, the way he nearly always does when there are tears in his eyes and he doesn't want anybody to know it. That quick shake of his high forehead shakes the tears out without his having to use his handkerchief. Not any boy I know would want anybody, especially any other boy, to see him cry.

We all turned away then, carrying Alexander "in our hearts," as it said on the epitaph. Not a one of us said anything for quite a while, but all of us were doing different things to make it seem we weren't as sad as we felt. Some of us were picking up rocks and throwing them at anything or nothing. Others were taking off on a fast run in some direction or other, leap-

ing up and catching hold of tree branches and chinning ourselves or skinning the cat—things like that.

And that was the last of Alexander the Coppersmith, the most wonderful, nonsensical dog hero there ever was. At least he was the most important dog that had ever lived and hunted and howled in Sugar Creek territory.

The last of him, that is, until a mystery dog began howling in the Sugar Creek swamp and along the bayou at night. And the howling and bawling and baying and squalling sounded exactly like the sounds Alexander the Coppersmith used to make when he ran pell-mell with a pack of hounds on the trail of a coon or fox or other varmint that lived in our neighborhood.

When you and your parents and your common sense all tell you there isn't any such thing as a ghost dog—that when an animal dies that is the last of his life on earth or anywhere else—and then all out of nowhere you hear the dog yourself after he is dead, you get a creepy feeling moving like cold chills up and down your spine.

Was Alexander alive or not? Before the week was over we were going to find out, in one of the strangest adventures that ever happened to the Sugar Creek Gang.

26
SUGAR CREEK GANG

The **WHITE**
BOAT RESCUE

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It was one of the finest summer mornings I had ever seen, I thought as I rolled over and out of bed, took a deep breath of fresh air, and looked out the open window of my upstairs room.

The June sun was already up, shooting long slants of light across the backyard and garden. Old Red Addie, our big red mother hog, was grunting around the front door of her apartment hog house at the south end of her pen. Fifteen or twenty of Mom's happy laying hens were already up and scratching near the garden gate, scratching and eating and singing and scratching and eating—gobbling down what Dad calls "grains, greens, grubs, and grits," which is the variety of food a good laying hen has to have to stay well and lay an egg a day.

I guess there's nothing in the world that looks finer to a boy than an outdoor morning when there is plenty of open space for the sunshine to fall in and when the sky itself is as clear and blue as the water in Sugar Creek looks on a clear day when you are looking down at it from the bridge.

In the field east of the barn, the corn was talking in a thousand voices, making a husky, rusty rustling sound, as it says in a certain poem we had to memorize in school.

I started shoving myself into my jeans to make a dash downstairs and see if Mom's pancakes and bacon would taste as good as they smelled. Suddenly, from somewhere beyond the twin pignut trees at the north end of the garden, there came a meadowlark's juicy-noted, half-wild, very musical, rippling song. It seemed to say, "Summer is coming and spring-time is *here!*"

But a beautiful, wonderful outdoor summer was already here, having the time of its life making corn and beans and potatoes grow, making birds build nests to raise their baby birds in, spreading blankets of wildflowers all over Sugar Creek territory, and even making the fish bite.

Downstairs, Mom had the radio tuned to a favorite program whose theme song was "Every Day's a Wonderful Day."

Before I started to make my usual race for the head of the stairs, I happened to see our big *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* in the alcove by the bookcase. I decided to quickly look up a word—any word my eye happened to land on—which would be my word for the day. That was one of our family's fun games for the summer. Each person selected a new word from the dictionary, and all of us used it over and over again at different times during the day, just to get acquainted with it.

Already that summer I'd learned important words such as *leisure*, which Dad said was pronounced with a long *e*, but Mom said she liked

a short *e* better. It meant “spare time,” which a boy hardly ever has enough of. I also learned a new meaning for the word *freeze*, which is what a gopher or chipmunk or groundhog does when it is startled or scared. It rears up on its haunches to study and think and wait until it seems safe for it to drop down to the ground and go on about its business.

I quickly ran my right forefinger and both eyes down a column of words under the letter *f* and stopped when I came to a word I thought was new. It was “flotsam.” I didn’t even dream what an important word it was going to be before the day was over—and especially before the summer came to its exciting and dangerous climax.

On the way downstairs I was saying over to myself the dictionary’s definition of “flotsam,” which was “goods cast or swept from a vessel into the sea and found floating.”

Before I reached the bottom step, my imagination had me drifting along out in a boat in Sugar Creek. And one of the gang accidentally or on purpose was rocking the boat. Then the boat capsized, and all of us were getting spilled out into what my mind’s eye saw was a wild, stormy, sealike creek. Our oars fell overboard, and the waves carried them away. Fishing tackle boxes, bait canteens, straw hats—everything was turned into flotsam.

That was as far as my shipwreck got right then because I was near enough to the kitchen

table to make a dive for my chair and start sawing away on a stack of pancakes.

For some reason, though, I didn't sit down right away. I got to go out to the barn first to help my father finish the chores, which meant the horses and cattle got to eat their breakfast before we did.

At the table, Mom's wonderful day was interrupted by Charlotte Ann's upsetting her bowl of cereal in her high chair tray, making flotsam out of it in several milk-spattered directions. Some of it landed on the island shore of Mom's brown linoleum floor. Mom scolded her gently.

"You won't believe it," I said to my family, as I denied myself wanting to sit still and let Mom mop up the mess, "but my word for the day is 'flotsam.'"

"I believe it," Mom said, trying to keep her excitement in her mind. "Every day's not only a wonderful day, but it nearly always has a lot of little upsets, and the main boat upsetters in this house are my two wonderful children. One of them not only rocks the boat and often upsets it but actually throws her goods overboard."

Dad, maybe trying to lighten our family boat a little, said, "There are three words that usually go together: 'flotsam,' 'jetsam,' and 'lagan.' Lagan, Son, if you ever look up its meaning, is goods cast to drift or sometimes sunk on purpose, but it's attached to a buoy to float, so that if anybody finds it, they will know it belongs to *somebody*."

Trying to be funny and maybe not being very, I managed to say, “Who would want to tie anything to a *boy*?”

“B-U-O-Y,” Dad spelled and winked at Mom. Then he remarked to her, “Anything tied to a B-O-Y would be *really* sunk—some other father’s boy, of course.”

Well, we had a few minutes’ talk about a Bible verse, which we try to do once a day at our house so that we would have an anchor to tie our minds to in case we had an upset of some kind. Then we left the table and moved out into the working part of the day, hoping it would be as wonderful *all* day as it had been up to now—which it had to be for a certain B-O-Y.

I say it *had* to be, because the six sets of parents of the Sugar Creek Gang were sending the whole gang on a special errand, which I will tell you about in a few minutes, just as soon as I can write that far.

“Here’s a little flotsam,” Mom said, stopping me as I was about to go outdoors. She handed me a little basket containing a warm package of something wrapped in transparent plastic. It smelled as if it had just come from the oven, which it had. “Be sure, now, to make the Fenwicks welcome. Remember your best manners; smile and offer to do anything you see needing to be done.”

“I will,” I said, enjoying the smell of the warm, freshly baked something or other.

And away I went, remembering my best manners even at home by shutting the screen

door quietly. I was quickly on my way down to the Black Widow Stump to meet the gang. As soon as the whole gang was there, we'd have a hurry-up meeting to decide different things. Then we'd all take whatever our different mothers had baked and go across the bridge and down the creek to the Maple Leaf, a brand-new cabin we had helped build on a wooded knoll across the creek from the mouth of the branch.

In the Maple Leaf, having moved in only yesterday, was a missionary couple. They were to be the very first missionaries to spend part of their furlough in it. Dr. John Fenwick and his wife, Elona, had spent a lot of years in Central America, and they had come home for a rest and to get a little change from the very hot, humid climate that far south.

John Fenwick was a medical doctor, we found out, and *his* doctor down in Costa Rica had ordered him home for a rest. He had the kind of heart trouble called "angina pectoris."

The Maple Leaf, maybe I ought to tell you, was built on property owned by Old Man Paddler, the kind, long-whiskered old man who lived up in the hills and was always doing kind things for people—especially for missionaries, whom he seemed to like almost better than he did boys.

The wooded knoll had been given to the Sugar Creek Church, and all the men of the church as well as a lot of other men in the neighborhood—and also the Sugar Creek Gang itself—had built the cabin for free. That had

seemed even more fun than swimming and diving in the old swimming hole or catching sunfish and goggle-eyes. It certainly was a lot more enjoyment than weeding the garden and helping clean out the barn.

Anyway, today was *the* day. As soon as we'd get our welcoming visit over, the rest of the whole morning would be ours to do with as we liked, our twelve parents had told us.

Mom's final orders about politeness having been tossed back into the history section of my mind, I was now on my way like a "barefoot boy with cheek of tan," as a poem by James Whitcomb Riley says. I sped across the yard to the walnut tree by the gate, gave the rope swing a fling toward the east, and leaped out of the way when its heavy board seat came swooshing back. It would have bowled me over if it had hit me.

I took a quick look around the base of the tree to see if there were any new ant lion larva traps, and there were—three new conical pits in the powdery sand. I knew that buried at the bottom of each pit—now seven all together—was a hairy larva, the hatched egg of a night-flying insect. Each larva would stay buried, all except its head, until an ant or other insect accidentally tumbled into its trap. And then, *wham! Flurry! Chop! Chop! Slurp! Slurp!* And the ant lion would have had its breakfast without having to work for it or wait for its mother to cook it.

Any boy who knows anything about an ant

lion knows that its mother is a damselfly and that she lays her eggs on the surface of sandy or dusty soil under a rocky ledge or close to a house or barn or tree. As soon as the wormlike babies are born, they dig those cone-shaped traps themselves and are ready for breakfast without having to dress or help their parents do the chores or wash dishes or baby-sit, since each ant lion is its own baby-sitter.

But also, an ant lion never knows how good it feels to plop-plop across a dusty road with its bare feet—which it doesn't have anyway—or go racing like the wind through the woods on the way to meet a gang of other ant lions its age and size.

I must have daydreamed several minutes too long at the walnut tree, because from the house I heard Mom yell, "Hurry up, Bill, and get gone! Charlotte Ann's on the warpath! She wants to go with you. So the sooner you're out of sight, the sooner you'll be out of her mind, and she'll be out of my hair!"

The worry in Mom's voice made me sing out across the grassy yard to her, "Every day's a wonderful day!"

"For B-O-Y-S!" she called back. "Now you hurry up. And tell the Fenwicks we're glad they're here and to let us know whenever there's anything we can do for them. Be sure to make them feel at home!"

And then away I did go, plop-plopping my bare feet in the dust all the way across the road. I hadn't any sooner swung up and over the rail

fence than I remembered that at that very place, a few yards from the elderberry bushes, I had had a fierce, fast fistfight with one of the orneriest boys that ever lived in the territory. That boy's name was Shorty Long. In spite of my having given him a licking, he was still one of the worst boys anywhere around.

The only peace the gang had from him was when his family was away spending their winter vacations in a warm climate somewhere, which they did every year.

I took a look at the arena where we'd had our battle and said, gritting my teeth, "Take that—and that—and *that!*" I swung my one free fist around a little, then came to myself and started on toward the Black Widow Stump, saying to myself as I ran—and quoting my father, who had given me a talking to about keeping my temper under control—"Tempers are given to us by the Lord, Son. You can use them or lose them. If you waste your good temper in an explosion, you feel *sick* afterward. Some people actually feel as weak as a sick cat."

"How," I had asked my lowered-eyebrowed father that day—he had his own temper under good control at the time—"how can a boy who has had his nose bashed in a battle *keep* from losing his temper?"

Dad's answer was as if I had thrown a hard snowball at him and he had dodged it. Here is part of what he told me: "Just keep your eye on your mother. A hundred times a day things go wrong around the house and farm that could

make her the saddest or maddest person in the world. Instead, she keeps her mind filled with thoughts of God and with Bible truth. She keeps her heart's radio tuned to heaven and—well, you just watch her, and you'll see!"

I *had* been watching my wonderful gray-brown-haired mother ever since, and little by little I was learning.

"But," I said to myself as I zip-zip-zipped and zag-zag-zagged my way along on the little brown path to the Black Widow Stump, "What do I do today if my worst enemy happens along and stirs my temper all up with something he says or does?"

Shorty Long, being the only boy in the neighborhood whose parents took winter vacations in warm climates, was very proud of himself and very uppity about things they saw and did in the places they visited.

I gave my shoulders a twisting shrug as if I was a bucking bronco in a rodeo. And right away, in my mind, I *was* a bucking bronco, and Shorty Long was a cowboy trying to ride me and couldn't. I was a trained Western pony, my mane blowing in the wind. Shorty Long was lying in the dust behind me as I leaped into a fast gallop toward what was maybe going to be one of the most wonderful days the gang would ever have.

Maybe.

27
SUGAR CREEK GANG
The **BROWN BOX**
MYSTERY

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It might have been a long, hot, boring summer for the three members of the Sugar Creek Gang that were left—and there were *only* three of us left, Poetry, Dragonfly, and me—if all of a sudden one of the most interesting, exciting, and dangerous experiences hadn't exploded like a Fourth of July firecracker right in front of our eyes.

That stormy, mysterious, dangerous, and upside-down experience came to life the first week after Big Jim, Circus, and Little Jim left Sugar Creek territory to be gone for two whole weeks. Big Jim and Circus were to work on Big Jim's uncle's farm in Tippecanoe County, and Little Jim would visit a cousin in Wisconsin.

The mystery started the week the new Bay Tree Inn Motor Court was finished and had what is called "open house." Our family as well as maybe everybody else's family in the neighborhood went to see it. Well, not *all* our family went—just Mom and Dad and me—because Charlotte Ann, my chubby little cute-nosed sister, had been left to be baby-sat at Dragonfly's house.

There wasn't anything Charlotte Ann would rather do, anyway, than be baby-sat by Dragonfly's mother, who nearly always gave her a new

toy. She also let her play house with a set of pink plastic dishes and do almost anything in the world she wanted to do that wasn't dangerous.

I never will forget what my mother said to my father when the three of us were alone in Unit 17 at the Bay Tree Inn. That neat little cottage had been named Cliff Cottage and had been built by the management for people who wanted to stay quite a ways away from the sounds and sights of tourists in the sixteen other units. It sort of hung on the rim of a sandstone cliff overlooking a deep ravine, the same ravine, in fact, through which flows the small stream the gang calls "the branch."

Except for Sugar Creek itself, we liked the branch better than any other stream in the county. You could follow its sometimes lazy, sometimes nervous and excited and noisy, way from its source all the way through Harm Groenwold's woods and pasture, then into and through Thompsons' woods to where it finally empties at the mouth of the branch, where most of the time the gang keeps its boat tied.

Poetry, who is always reading interesting things and thinking up different ideas to make people laugh, has said maybe a hundred times, "The branch can lie in bed all day and run all over the county at the same time."

And Dragonfly, who also has a keen mind, nearly always answers him with: "It doesn't just *lie* in bed, it *runs* in bed—and not just all day but all night and, like a certain friend of mine, it's also all wet."

Anyway, standing near the picture window of Cliff Cottage's air-conditioned living room, Mom looked out and across the footbridge that spanned the ravine and said, "You couldn't find anything more picturesque at Turkey Run State Park, or at The Shades, or even in Brown County."

Brown County was the beautiful hill country Mom had been born and brought up in and where she had been a schoolteacher and a secretary before Dad had found her and married her to make her a farmer's wife.

Dad was standing beside Mom with his left arm halfway around her. Looking out that same window, he remarked, "If anybody taking a walk out there on the overhanging porch, or across the footbridge, should accidentally lose his balance and topple over, he would land like a ton of bricks on the rocks below and break a lot of bones. It's a good thing they have that iron railing all the way across."

Mom's answer was: "Not a ton but only one hundred forty-seven pounds. And not of bricks but of a hot, tired, and worn-out housewife who would like to spend a few days' vacation here away from washing, ironing, cooking, looking after the chickens, answering the telephone, canning cherries, raspberries, corn, and beans, and keeping her patience with two noisy children."

I was standing behind my parents near the fireplace at the time. I had just come in to ask an important question that Poetry Thompson,

my almost best friend, who was just outside the door, wanted me to ask. It was a *very* important question—one of the most important questions I might ever ask.

Hearing Mom say she needed a vacation from her two noisy children, I accidentally on purpose cleared my throat.

She turned a startled face in my direction, grinned, and remarked, “My first and worst son excepted, of course.”

Being called their “first and worst” son by my parents was their way of saying I was the only son they had and that they liked me. So I grinned back at my first and worst mother and answered, “Your first and *best* son agrees with you. You do deserve a vacation, and I know a way I can help raise money to help your first and worst *husband* pay for it.”

That seemed a good way to get to do what my mind was all excited about getting permission to do—in fact, what Poetry and I already had our minds made up to do. And all that was needed was to get our parents to agree to it.

When for a minute neither my mother nor my father answered me, I managed to say, “Of course, if you wouldn’t *want* the money, I could save it for a very badly needed two-week vacation for myself, just as soon as Big Jim and Circus and Little Jim get back. In fact, you could take *your* vacation right here in Cliff Cottage while the gang is having a north woods camping trip, which we haven’t had for quite a few summers—if I can remember that far back.”

Dad answered my suggestion by reminding me that six boys he knew had had a *winter* vacation not so long ago. “You *do* remember when the gang flew to Palm Tree Island, don’t you?”

For a few seconds I let myself remember the gang’s wonderful trip to the West Indies. First, our plane had sailed high out over small islands called the Florida Keys. As we’d looked down at them, Poetry had said that they looked like the “disjointed vertebrae of the backbone of the skeleton of a giant, hundred-mile-long dinosaur.”

Then, after only a hundred or more or less minutes in the plane, we had landed at the Palacia airport. Palacia was the capital of Palm Tree Island. There we were welcomed by a missionary friend of Old Man Paddler’s and by hundreds of excited, friendly, Spanish-speaking people.

It was while we were on that vacation on Palm Tree Island that we found Seneth Paddler’s long-lost twin brother, Kenneth.

For another few seconds, while I was still standing by the fireplace in the Cliff Cottage living room, my mind’s eye saw Kenneth Paddler, long-bearded and looking exactly like his brother, riding down one of Palacia’s cobblestone streets in a small cart. He was driving a billy goat, an honest-to-goodness billy goat.

My father’s voice broke into my memories of the gang’s West Indies vacation as he leveled his gray green eyes at me. “Was there something special you wanted to say about how you

could earn a little extra money this summer to help make it possible for your hardworking father, who *never* gets a vacation, to go *with* your mother when she goes on *her* vacation?”

What on earth! I thought. Imagine a boy’s *father* needing a vacation. “You mean you get tired of planting and plowing corn, feeding hogs, making speeches at Farm Bureau meetings, milking cows, and building fences? Or are you just tired of having to put up with a son you wouldn’t *have* to put up with if you would send him off to camp somewhere—maybe in the north woods?”

“Good try.” Dad grinned and added, “But I believe you were talking about your first and worst *parents’* vacation.”

I came out then with what was on my mind, beginning with, “Do you like fried frogs legs?”

Mom whirled around from the picturesque view across the gully, looked at me with an exclamation point in her brown eyes, and asked, “What kind of question is that?”

Maybe I should have told you—for about a week at our house we had been having a lot of family fun pretending we were actors in a play, having listened to what is called a “mock trial” the week before at the Sugar Creek Literary Society.

Sometimes I was a lawyer and Mom was the jury. My smallish sister, Charlotte Ann, was being tried for such crimes as spilling her milk, pulling up a petunia instead of a weed, or leaving the screen door open and letting our old black-and-white cat in. Things like that. Nearly

always my father was the judge, and he would do what is called “pronounce sentence.”

So when my brown-eyed mother asked me there in the Cliff Cottage, “What kind of question is that?” I could feel my father’s gray green eyes boring into me from under his reddish brown brows, asking the same question.

“If it please the court,” I began, “I am not the criminal in this case. I am the defense attorney, and my client is an honest boy.”

For a minute I actually felt I *was* a lawyer, as Poetry’s father had been in the mock trial. I swaggered over to the picture window that overlooked the limestone cliff on the other side and said, “See that little thread of water away down there at the bottom of the gully? That friendly little stream laughs and dances like an innocent barefoot boy through Harm Groenwold’s woods and on through his pasture, through Thompsons’ woods, and finally empties into Sugar Creek at the place known as the mouth of the branch, sacrificing its happy, carefree life to the larger, well-known creek shown on the map as Sugar Creek. Now, Your Honor, it so happens that the boys of the Sugar Creek Gang keep their boat tied there—”

In my mind I was back at the mock trial. It felt good being able to think on my feet, better than it does sometimes when I am alone in the woods yelling out Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address to the trees and birds and frogs. I swung around then to my parents, who in my mind had just become the jury, and went on.

“Last night, while Leslie Thompson and his friend, William Jasper Collins, son of the famous Farm Bureau speaker, Theodore Collins, were sitting in their boat fishing for catfish, they noticed that over on the island among the willows and pickerel weeds maybe a hundred bullfrogs were having a Farm Bureau meeting, bellowing and croaking and having the time of their lives.

“In the frogs’ meeting, one big shaggy-browed father frog stood up and bellowed: ‘Fellow members of this convention, the Bay Tree Inn Dining Room has listed on its menu at a charge of ten dollars per dinner, chicken-fried Sugar Creek frogs legs. I have just learned that two of the boys of the Sugar Creek Gang have read that menu and have decided to go into business as the Sugar Creek Frogs Legs Supply Company. The Bay Tree Inn management has offered them fifty cents for every pair of frogs legs they bring in—a paltry sum, for legs as large as ours.’”

I stopped in my speech—it was a little hard to be my father and a bullfrog at the same time. But it did feel good to have my parents listening without interrupting, so I quickly went on, hurrying a little to get in what was on the frog speaker’s mind. “One of the boys of the gang, the first and worst son of Theodore Collins, wants to earn enough money to pay for his parents’ vacation, and it is up to the citizens of Frogs Legs Island to stop him. If the boys *do* organize their company, they’ll row their boat

over here every night, shine their flashlights all around, blinding us, and fill their gunnysacks with us, and we'll all be chicken fried.'

"The big, handsome bullfrog father finished his speech, let out a scared croak, and sank like a submarine into the shallow water. The maybe one hundred other frogs at the convention went *ker-plunk* under at the same time, because maybe Leslie Thompson or William Jasper Collins had thrown a rock over toward the island and scared them all half to death."

Right away I turned myself into the judge. I swung back from the picture window I had been looking out of and asked, "Lady and gentleman of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

The gentleman of the jury, who was also the foreman, answered, "We have, Your Honor. We find the defendant guilty!"

Quicker than a frog's croak, my father became the judge, sentencing me with lowered eyebrows and stern words. "You, first and worst son, are hereby sentenced to membership on the governing board of the Sugar Creek Frogs Legs Supply Company. When do you begin operations?"

From behind me, a boy's voice broke in to say, "Tonight, sir." It was the friendly, ducklike voice of Leslie Poetry Thompson, who had come in while the frog was making his speech and who maybe had been listening to the whole thing.

Mom broke up the meeting then, saying,

“We’d better hurry on home. The mail will be there in—” she interrupted herself to look at her wristwatch, then finished her sentence “—in another thirty minutes.”

“What’s the rush?” the judge and gentleman of the jury asked. “I thought maybe you’d like to run on into town and shop around for that vacation lounging robe you’ve been looking in the catalogs for.”

The lady of the jury gave the gentleman of the jury a smallish frown and said, “Oh, you!”

Then Mom added, “I’m sorry, but I won’t be able to take any vacation this year. Not while my boss is on his own vacation.”

“Your *boss*? Is that what I am to you?” Dad asked.

It seemed a good time for Poetry and me to go outside and discuss plans for our first trip to Frogs Legs Island that very night.

I knew what Mom meant about her “boss” being on vacation. Old Man Paddler had finished the last chapter of the book he had been writing, and my mother was typing it for him. The old man wasn’t on a vacation exactly. He was in California visiting his nephew, who was on *his* vacation and wanted his uncle to come out and go fishing with him in the Pacific Ocean for codfish off the coast of Santa Cruz and for mackerel off the barge near Santa Ana.

Mom had been working every day during her spare time to get the book finished before the old man would get back. He had been gone for more than a week.

Being secretary for Old Man Paddler meant also that she had to look after his mail, which our mail carrier, Joe Sanders, left in Theodore Collins's box every day instead of in the old man's box up in the hills.

Nearly every day there had been a letter, and sometimes quite a few, from people who had read the old man's first book, *The Possible Man in the Impossible Boy*, and wanted him to explain something or other. And sometimes there would be a letter from somebody with a heavy heart who wanted him to pray for him or her.

Nearly every day, also, there would be a letter from missionaries, thanking him for praying for them and for helping pay their missionary expenses.

Being a private secretary, Mom was supposed to open all the mail to see if there was anything important enough to have to be forwarded to California.

One thing, especially, Mom was supposed to watch for—any news from Palm Tree Island about Kenneth Paddler. Soon after the Sugar Creek Gang found him, he had disappeared again, and the missionaries didn't know where he was. He had written one letter to his brother, Seneth, saying he hoped to come back to Sugar Creek as soon as he felt able to. But then, just as many years before when he had had amnesia, he'd just disappeared.

Anyway, while Mom and Dad were still talking inside the Cliff Cottage living room, Poetry

and I took a walk across the narrow footbridge toward the other side of the ravine. We stopped about halfway across to look down at the very happy little branch, threading its way around among the rocks.

“Your big bullfrog father was right,” Poetry remarked, leaning over the railing and focusing his eyes on the rocks the saucy little stream was tumbling around and over and through. “Anybody falling over the edge would *really* get hurt and—”

He stopped himself, exclaiming, “Listen!”

I didn’t have to listen to hear what I was hearing, which was the sound of a motor way back in the woods somewhere. It sounded a little like an electric saw cutting down a tree or cutting a tree into fireplace wood.

We looked out into the dense woods and saw two motorcycles driving like crazy toward us along the path that bordered the branch. At the farther end of the bridge we were in the middle of, the riders slowed down, skidded to a stop, and looked across to where we were. It seemed that they weren’t seeing us, though, but were looking past us to the large living room window of Cliff Cottage where Mom and Dad maybe still were.

They stopped only a few minutes, talking to each other, then both motors roared to life and took off back into the dense woods and up a steep hill. They dodged this way and that to miss trees and bushes and fallen logs, going in the direction of Harm Groenwold’s apple

orchard, which we knew was on the other side. Then they disappeared.

“Did you see what I saw?” Poetry asked.

What we had both seen was a name in large letters printed on the back of each of their red leather jackets. It was **SONS OF LUCIFER**.

“Maybe that is the name of their motorcycle club,” Poetry guessed.

But those two motorcycles racing through the woods didn’t seem very important right that minute while Poetry and I were planning our first big business venture.

How was I to know that that very night, while we would be on Frogs Legs Island, the Sons of Lucifer would explode us into a very dangerous adventure?

28
SUGAR CREEK GANG
The WATERMELON
MYSTERY

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

If I hadn't been so proud of the prize watermelon I had grown from the packet of special seed Dad had ordered from the state experiment station, maybe I wouldn't have been so fighting mad when somebody sneaked into our garden that summer night and stole it.

I was not only proud of that beautiful, oblong, dark green melon, but I was going to save the seed for planting next year. I was, in fact, planning to go into the watermelon-raising business.

Dad and I had had the soil of our garden tested, and it was just right for melons, which means it was well-drained, well-ventilated, and with plenty of natural plant food. We would never have to worry about moisture in case there would ever be a dry summer, because we could carry water from the iron pitcher pump that was just inside the south fence. Our family had another pitcher pump not more than fifteen feet from the back door of our house. Both pumps got mixed up in the mystery of the stolen watermelon, which I'm going to tell you about right now.

Mom and I were down in the watermelon patch one hot day that summer, looking around a little, admiring my melon, and guess-

ing how many seeds she might have buried in her nice red inside.

“Let’s give her a name,” I said to Mom. The Collins family, which is ours, gives names to nearly every living thing around our farm anyway.

She answered, “All right. Let’s call her Ida.”

Mom caught hold of the pump handle and pumped it up and down quite a few fast, squeaking times to fill the pail I was holding under the spout.

“Why Ida?” I asked with a grunt, as the pail was getting heavier with every stroke of the pump handle.

Mom’s answer sounded sensible. “Ida means ‘thirsty.’ I noticed it yesterday when I was looking through a book of names for babies.”

I had never seen such a thirsty melon in all my life. Again and again, day after day, I carried water to her, pouring it into the circular trough I had made in the ground around the roots of the vine she was growing on. And always the next morning, the water would be gone. Knowing a watermelon is more than 92 percent water anyway, I knew if she kept on taking water like that, she’d get to be one of the fattest melons in the whole Sugar Creek territory.

Mom and I threaded our way through the open spaces between the vines, dodging a lot of smaller melons grown from ordinary seed, till we came to the little trough that circled Ida’s vine. While I was emptying my pail of water into it, I said, “OK, Ida, my girl. That’s

your name: *Ida Watermelon Collins*. How do you like it?”

I stooped, snapped my third finger several times against her fat green side, and called her by name again, saying, “By this time next year you’ll be the mother of a hundred other melons. And year after next, you’ll be the grandmother of more melons than you can shake a stick at.”

I sighed a long, noisy, happy sigh, thinking about what a wonderful summer day it was and how good it felt to be alive—to be a boy and to live in a boy’s world.

I carried another pail of water, poured it into Ida’s trough, and then stopped to rest in the shade of the elderberry bushes near the fence. Dad and I had put up a brand-new woven wire fence there early in the spring, and at the top of it we had stretched two strands of barbed wire, making it dangerous for anybody to climb over the fence in a hurry. In fact, the only place anybody would be able to get over *really* fast would be at the stile we were going to build near the pitcher pump, halfway between the pump and the elderberry bushes.

We would *have* to get the stile built pretty soon, I thought. In another few weeks school would start, and I would want to do as I’d always done—go through or over the fence there to get to the lane, which was a shortcut to school.

I didn’t have the slightest idea then that somebody would try to steal my melon or that

the stealing of it would plunge me into the exciting middle of one of the most dangerous mysteries there had ever been in the Sugar Creek territory. Most certainly I never dreamed that Ida Watermelon Collins would have a share in helping the Sugar Creek Gang capture a fugitive from justice, an actual runaway thief the police had been looking for for quite a while.

We found out about the thief one hot summer night about a week later, when Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of our gang, stayed all night with me in his green tent, which my parents had let us pitch under the spreading branches of the plum tree in our yard.

Of course, everything didn't happen that very first night, but *one* of the most exciting and confusing things did. It wouldn't have happened, though, if we hadn't gotten out of our cots and started on a pajama-clad hike in the moonlight down through the woods to the spring—Poetry in his green-striped pajamas and I in my red-striped ones and Dragonfly in—

But I hadn't planned to tell you just yet that Dragonfly was with us that night—which he wasn't at first. Dragonfly is the spindle-legged, pop-eyed member of our gang. He is always showing up when we don't need him or want him and when we least expect him and is always getting us into trouble—or else we have to help get him *out* of trouble.

Now that I've mentioned Dragonfly and

hinted that he was the cause of some of our trouble—mine especially—I'd better tell you that he and I had the same kind of red-striped pajamas. Our mothers had seen the same ad in the *Sugar Creek Times* and had gone shopping the same afternoon in the same Sugar Creek Dry Goods Store and had seen the same bargains in boys' nightclothes—two pairs of red-striped pajamas being the only kind left when they got there.

Little Tom Till's mother—Tom was the newest member of our gang—had seen the ad about the sale, too, and his mother and mine had bought for their two red-haired, freckle-faced sons blue denim jeans exactly alike and maroon-and-gray-striped T-shirts exactly alike. When Tom and I were together anywhere, you could hardly tell us apart. So I looked like Little Tom Till in the daytime and like Dragonfly at night.

Poor Dragonfly! All the gang felt very sorry for him because he not only is very spindle-legged and pop-eyed, but in ragweed season—which it was at that time of the year—his crooked nose, which turns south at the end, is always sneezing, and also he gets asthma.

Before I get into the middle of the stolen watermelon story, I'd better explain that my wonderful grayish brown haired mother had been having what is called "insomnia" that summer. So Dad had arranged for her to sleep upstairs in our guest bedroom. That was the farthest away from the night noises of our

farm, especially the ones that came from the direction of the barn. Mom simply had to have her rest, or she wouldn't be able to keep on doing all the things a farm mother has to do every day all summer.

That guest room was also the farthest away from the tent under the plum tree—which Poetry and I decided maybe was another reason that Dad had put Mom upstairs.

Just one other thing I have to explain quick is that the reason Poetry was staying at my house for a week was that his parents were on a vacation in Canada and had left Poetry with us. He and I were going to have a vacation at the same time by sleeping in his tent in our yard.

It was a *very* hot late summer night, the time of year when the cicadas were as much a part of a Sugar Creek night as sunshine is part of the day. Cicadas are broad-headed, protruding-eyed insects, which some people call locusts and others call harvest flies. In the late summer evenings, they set the whole country half crazy with their whirring sounds from the trees, where thousands of them are like an orchestra with that many members, each member playing nothing but a drum.

I was lying on my hot cot just across the tent from Poetry in his own hot cot, each of us having tried about seven times to go to sleep, which Dad had ordered us to do about seventy times seven times that very night, barking out his orders from the back door or from the living-room window.

Poetry, being in a mischievous mood, was right in the middle of quoting one of his favorite poems, “The Village Blacksmith,” speaking to an imaginary audience out in the barnyard, when Dad called to us again to keep still. His voice came bellowing out through the drumming of the cicadas, saying, “Bill Collins, if you boys don’t stop talking and laughing and go to *sleep*, I’m coming out there and *put* you to sleep!”

A few seconds later, he added in a still-thundering voice, “I’ve told you boys for the last time! You’re keeping Charlotte Ann awake—and you’re liable to wake up your mother too!” When Dad says anything like that, I know he really means it, especially when he has already said it *that* many times.

I knew it was no time of night for my cute little brown-haired sister, Charlotte Ann, to be awake, and certainly my nice friendly-faced mother would need a lot of extra sleep, because tomorrow was Saturday and there would be the house to clean, pies and cookies to bake for Sunday, and a million chores a farm woman has to do every Saturday.

“Wonderful!” Poetry whispered across to me. “He won’t tell us anymore. He’s told us for the last time. We can laugh and talk now as much as we want to!”

“You don’t know Dad,” I said.

“I’m thirsty,” he said. “Let’s go get a drink.” His voice came across the darkness like the voice of a duck with laryngitis.

Right away there was a squeaking of the springs of his cot as he rolled himself into a sitting position. He swung his feet out of bed and set them *ker-plop* on the canvas floor of the tent. I could see him sitting there like the shadow of a fat grizzly in the moonlight that filtered in through the plastic net window just above my cot.

A split second later, he was across the three feet of space between us and sitting on the edge of *my* cot, making it groan almost loud enough for Dad to hear.

“Let’s go!” he said, using a businesslike tone.

I certainly didn’t want to get up and go with him to get a drink. Besides, I knew that the very minute we started to pump the iron pitcher pump at the end of the board walk, not more than fifteen feet from our kitchen door, Dad would hear the pump pumping and the water splashing into the big iron kettle under the spout. He would come storming out, with or without words, and would start saying again something he had already said for the last time.

I yawned the laziest, longest yawn I could, sighed the longest, drawn-out sigh I could, and said to Poetry, “I’m too sleepy. You go and get a drink for *both* of us.”

Then I sighed once more, turned over, and began to breathe heavily, as though I was sound asleep.

But Poetry couldn’t be stopped by sighs and yawns. He shook me awake and said, “Come on, treat a guest with a little politeness, will you?”

He meant I had to wake up and get up and

go out with him to pump a noisy pump and run the risk of stirring up Dad's already stirred-up temper.

When I kept on breathing like a sleeping baby, Poetry said with a disgruntled grunt, "Give me one little reason why you won't help me get a drink!"

"One little reason?" I yawned up at his shadow. "I'll give you a *big* one—five feet eleven inches tall, one hundred seventy-two pounds, bushy-eyebrowed, reddish brown mustached—"

"You want me to die of thirst?" asked Poetry.

"Thirst or whatever you want to do it of. But hurry up and do it and get it over with, because I'm going to sleep."

That must have stirred up Poetry's own temper a little, because he said, "OK, pal, I'll go by myself!"

Quicker than a firefly's fleeting flash, he had zipped open the plastic screen door of the tent, whipped the canvas flap aside, and stepped out into the moonlight.

I was up and out and after him in a nervous hurry. I grabbed him by the sleeve of his green-striped pajamas.

But he wouldn't stay stopped. He growled at me and whispered, "If you try to stop me, I'll scream, and you'll be in trouble."

With that he started off on the run across the moonlit yard, not toward the pump but in a different direction—toward the front gate!—saying over his shoulder, "I'm going down to the *spring* to get a drink."

That idea was even crazier, I thought, than pumping the iron pitcher pump and waking up Dad.

But you might as well try to start a balky mule as try to stop Leslie Thompson from doing what he has made up his stubborn mind he is going to do. So a minute later, the two of us were hurrying past “Theodore Collins” on our mailbox—Theodore Collins being Dad’s name. Then we were across the gravel road, over the rail fence, and following the path made by barefoot boys’ feet through the woods to the spring. Poetry used his flashlight every few seconds to light the way.

And that is where we ran into our mystery!

Zippety-zip-zip, swishety-swish-swish, clomp-clomp-clomp, dodge, swerve, gallop. It’s nearly always one of the happiest times of my life when I am running down that little brown path to the spring, where the gang has nearly all its meetings and where so many interesting and exciting things have happened. Generally, my barefoot gallop through the woods is in the daytime, though, and I feel like a frisky young colt turned out to pasture. I had never run down that path in red-striped pajamas at night or when I was as sleepily disgruntled as I was right that minute for having to follow a not very bright barrel-shaped boy.

So when we had passed the Black Widow Stump and the linden tree and had dashed down the steep grade to the spring itself and found a dark green watermelon floating in the

cement pool that Dad had built there as a reservoir for the water, it was as easy as anything for me to get fighting angry at most anything or anybody.

A watermelon there could mean only one thing—especially when right beside it was a glass fruit jar with a pound of butter in it. It meant there were *campers* somewhere nearby. And campers in the Sugar Creek woods were something that which the Sugar Creek Gang would rather have most anything else. It meant our peace and quiet would be interrupted, that we would have to wear swimsuits when we went in swimming, and we couldn't yell and scream to each other the way we liked to do.

Poetry, who was on his haunches beside the spring, surprised me by saying, "Look! It's plugged! Let's see how ripe it is!"

Before I could have stopped him even if I had thought of trying to do it, he was working the extralarge rectangular plug out of the middle of the extralarge melon's long fat side.

It was one of the prettiest watermelons I had ever seen. In fact, it was as pretty as Ida Watermelon Collins herself.

Then Poetry had the plug out and was holding it up for me to see.

Somebody had bitten off what red there had been on the end of the plug, I noticed.

Then Poetry said, "Well, what do you know! This melon's not ripe. See, it's all white inside!"

That didn't make sense. This time of year, even a watermelon that wasn't more than *half*

ripe would be at least pink inside. My eyes flashed from the rectangular plug to the hole in the melon, and Poetry was right—it *was* white inside!

Then he said, “Oh, there’s something *in* it! There’s a ball of white *paper* or something stuffed inside it!”

I felt curiosity creeping up and down my spine and was all set for a mystery. Hardly realizing that I was trespassing on other people’s property and most certainly not having a right to, even if the melon *was* in our spring, I quickly stooped and with nervous fingers pulled out the folded piece of paper. It was the kind that comes off a loaf of bread and which, at our house, I nearly always toss into the woodbox or the wastebasket unless Mom sees me first and stops me. Sometimes she wants to save the paper and use it for wrapping sandwiches for Dad’s or my lunches, mine especially during the school year.

The melon *was* ripe, I noticed. The inside was a deep, dark red.

While my mind was still trying to think up a mystery, something started to happen. From up in the woods at the top of the incline there was the sound of running feet and laughing voices. There were flashlights and flickering shadows, and it sounded like a whole flock of people coming. *People!* Only these weren’t boys’ voices or men’s voices but *girls’* voices. *Girls!* They were giggling and laughing and coming toward the base of the linden tree just above us. In

another brain-whirling second they would be where they could see us, and we'd be caught.

When you are wearing a pair of red-striped pajamas and your barrel-shaped friend is wearing a pair of green-striped pajamas, and it is night, and you hear a flock of girls running in your direction, and you are half scared of girls even in the daytime, you all of a sudden forget about a plugged watermelon floating in the nice, fresh, cool water of your spring, and you look for the quickest place you can find to hide yourself!

We couldn't make a dash up either side of the incline, because that's where the girls were. And we couldn't escape in the opposite direction, because there was a barbed-wire fence there, separating us from the creek. But we had to do *something!* If it had been a gang of boys coming, we could have stood our ground and fought if we had to. But not when it was a bevy of girls. They sounded like a flock of blackbirds getting ready to fly South for the winter, except that they weren't getting ready to fly south but *north*, which was in our direction.

"Quick!" Poetry with his faster-thinking mind cried to me. "Let's beat it!" He showed me what he wanted us to do by making a dive east toward the place where I knew we could get through a board fence and on the other side of which was a path. It wound through a forest of giant ragweeds leading to Dragonfly's dad's cornfield in the direction of the Sugar Creek Gang's swimming hole.

In another jiffy I would have followed Poetry through the fence, and we would have escaped being seen. But my right bare foot, which was standing on a thin layer of slime on the cement lip of the pool where the melon was, slipped out from under me, and I felt myself going down, *down*.

I couldn't stop myself. I struggled to regain my balance and couldn't. I couldn't even fall where my mixed-up mind told me would be a better place to fall than into the pool, which would have been in a mud puddle on the other side. Suddenly, *thuddety-whammety, slip-slop-splashety*, I was half sitting and half lying in the middle of the pool of ice-cold springwater, astride that long green watermelon like a boy astride a bucking bronco at a Sugar Creek rodeo!

From above and all around and from every direction, it seemed, there sounded the voices of happy-go-lucky girls with flashlights, probably coming to get the watermelon, or the butter in the glass jar, or maybe a pail of drinking water for their camp.

29
SUGAR CREEK GANG

The TRAPLINE
THIEF

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One of the most interesting things about a

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

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

“Hi there, red-haired, freckle-faced Bill Collins, Theodore Collins’s only son!” he said mischievously.

“Hi, Little Jim Foote.”

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

“I don’t think—I just work. My mother does the thinking for me.”

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

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

“Going to church,” he said.

“To church? This isn’t Sunday.”

“Mother’s on the committee for the banquet, and Daddy’s taking her over to help decorate.”

“What banquet?” I asked.

“Don’t you know? The father-and-son ban-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

30
SUGAR CREEK GANG
The **BLUE**
COW

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How old are you now?" Dad asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was remembering a nestful of eggs I’d

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

every time he saw something to throw something at.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Orders are orders,” Dad said. “I’m testing your obedience. Go on and go fishing.”

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

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

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

I stormed into the house and was on our

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was smelling the sweet smell of wild plum

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

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

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

31
SUGAR CREEK GANG
TREE HOUSE
MYSTERY

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It was one of the rainiest days I ever saw.

If it *hadn't* been a rainy day, I might not have been browsing around in our big *Merriam Webster International Dictionary*, which we keep upstairs in the alcove of our south bedroom.

And if I *hadn't* been browsing around in the dictionary just to give my mind something to do—and also to keep from losing it—I wouldn't have stumbled onto the very exciting idea that was to give the Gang a flying start into one of the strangest experiences we'd ever had.

Without that exciting idea, we wouldn't have built the tree house I'm going to tell you about right now. I'll also tell you about the mysterious stranger who moved into it one night—without our permission—and landed us into the middle of one of the saddest stories there ever was. Part of it actually happened to us but most of it to the old stranger himself.

Before there was any sadness, though, there was a lot of gladness, and the six members of the Sugar Creek Gang were right in the middle of everything—all the mystery and hot-tempered action, the disappointments, and the brand-new kind of danger. It would be the kind of danger that makes a boy feel fine to be in the middle of—the way a boy feels fine to be

racing along in the center of a whirlwind, dodging this way and that, running in zigzag fashion out across the pasture, not knowing where he is going or when he will stop.

Actually, it took *two* ideas to get things really started. The first one came flying into my mind from page 2,386 in the dictionary, and the other came in through my left ear when I answered the telephone about seven minutes later.

It had been thundering a lot and lightning all kinds of the prettiest lightning you ever saw. Some of it was what Dad calls just plain “sheet” lightning and some of it “chain” or “forked” lightning, tearing like mad across the Sugar Creek sky.

About fifteen minutes after the thundery part of the storm was over, the rain settled down into a lazy drizzle that anybody who knows his rain knows is the kind that sometimes lasts all day. It’s hard to keep from feeling grouchy in that kind of weather.

Well, as our family does with nearly everything around our place, we had given our dictionary a name, calling it “Aunt Miriam.” Its actual name, as you know if you have one like it, was *The Merriam-Webster New International Dictionary, Second Edition*.

Many times when Mom is wondering where Dad is and can’t find him anywhere else, she makes a beeline for our upstairs south bedroom and finds him in the alcove with Aunt Miriam, working a crossword puzzle or just

moseying from page to page, picking up new things to think about.

“My mind gets awfully hungry,” Dad often says to her and then adds jokingly, “and my wife is a bad cook!”

Mom herself spends quite a lot of time with Aunt Miriam every week when she is studying her Sunday school lesson. She is the teacher of the Gleaners’ class. Maybe a thousand times I’ve heard Mom say, “Miriam has the most interesting ideas to make the lesson come to life.”

I guess I was feeling especially grumpy that rainy afternoon, not being able to go outdoors or be with any of the gang as I wanted to. Mom was sitting sewing near the east window in our living room, getting as much light as she could from the murky sky. Charlotte Ann, my sometimes-cute baby sister, was pestering me to give her another piggyback ride, and I didn’t want to do it. I’d already walked and run and crawled all over the whole downstairs with her on my back—and also on my shoulders—maybe a half dozen times that afternoon.

Now I wanted a little peace and quiet for my mind, which was very hungry and trying to get something to eat out of a new book my parents had bought me for my birthday.

So when Charlotte Ann kept on fussing and tugging at me, I yelled at her, “Scat, will you! Leave me alone!” I swung around in my chair, turning my back on her and starting to let my mind sink down into one of the most interest-

ing books I had ever owned. It had in it more than a hundred colored pictures of American birds with interesting facts about the bird families they belonged to. A lot of the birds were the kind that lived and moved and made their nests around Sugar Creek.

There were quite a few long words in the book, and it was fun to learn the meaning of them. Two of the words were especially important to anybody who wants to learn about birds. One of the words was *altricial* and the other *precocial*, and Aunt Miriam knew exactly what they meant.

The *precocial* bird babies, such as ducklings or chickens or grouse or shorebirds, are born with down or fuzz on them and are able to run around to find their own food soon after hatching.

But most baby birds are those called *altricial*. They are hatched completely naked, and all their food has to be carried to them, they are so helpless.

I was thinking, as I sat straining my eyes in the dark room, that Charlotte Ann was like an *altricial* baby bird. She'd had to be waited on hand and foot ever since she was born. She still had to be, almost two-thirds of the time, or she wasn't happy. She just couldn't be baby-sat with but had to have something doing every second, and I had to do it. If what I did seemed funny to her or made her happy, I had to keep on doing it, over and over and over again.

If only she would quit pestering me, I could do a little thinking, I thought. That's when I whirled

around in my chair, and that's when I had to stop reading.

As I whirled, my left foot struck against her chubby little legs, bowled her over, and sent her sprawling onto the floor. She let out a shriek and started to cry, her voice sounding like a loon choking on a half-swallowed fish. It sounded only a little bit like a human baby crying.

Well, that unearthly cry coming from Charlotte Ann shattered Mom's peace and quiet and brought her voice to excited life. "Bill Collins! What on earth is the matter with you today! You certainly don't act very *sociable!*" she exclaimed, probably meaning she thought I ought to stop reading my interesting book about American birds and become a baby-sister-sitter by giving Charlotte Ann another piggyback ride around the house.

The word *sociable* was new to me, so I decided that as soon as the chance came, I'd go upstairs to the alcove to see what Miriam had to say about it—to see what kind of boy I *wasn't* and Mom wished I were.

Well, I baby-sister-sat for another half hour, and Charlotte Ann still wasn't satisfied but got fussier and fussier. Being on my hands and knees at the time, I tumbled her off my shoulders onto the floor—sort of accidentally, maybe—and exclaimed to her, "You are the most al-tricial bird I ever saw. What on earth's the matter with you, anyway? Why don't you grow up?"

But, of course, a toddler only three years old couldn't get any older all of a sudden.

Mom decided she was “fussy-sleepy” and needed her nap, so we put her into her pink Scottie-dog bed in the downstairs bedroom and shut the door. And I was free to do what I wanted to do for a while.

“Where are you going?” Mom asked when I started toward the kitchen to go through it to the stairway.

“Up to see Aunt Miriam,” I answered, which is the same thing Dad always says when he is going up to look up something. “My mind is half starved, and my mother is a bad cook.”

“Can’t you stay down here to keep me company?” Mom asked with an accusation in her voice. “It’s a very gloomy day.”

“I’m sorry,” I said back to her, “but I don’t feel very *sociable* this afternoon,” thinking maybe I already knew what the word meant. I kept on going toward the stairs, expecting that Mom’s voice would lasso me any second and make me come back to mother-sit awhile. But when I climbed all the way up to Aunt Miriam’s alcove without being stopped, I decided she wasn’t going to be a helpless mother who had to have attention on a rainy day.

I stood looking down at Miriam on her little roll-away table and thought how nice it was that she was always ready to let a boy know almost anything he wanted to know.

Miriam was always open, even when nobody was using her, because that was part of the instructions that had come with her when Dad bought her. We were always to leave her

open with about the same number of pages on either side. It was better for such a large book to be kept like that.

First, I lifted the purple scarf Mom had made for her so that her staying open like that wouldn't make her a dust catcher, because dust is not good for an open book.

In a minute now, I would know what kind of boy I was supposed to be and wasn't. I'd find out what Mom had meant when she said, "You certainly don't act very *sociable*."

Before looking up the word, I rolled Miriam's table over to the rain-spattered south window, where there was more light, and stood for a long minute looking down and out through the curtain of falling rain at the puddles in the barnyard. Then I looked up at the excited clouds, still scudding across the sky as if they were disgusted with life and didn't care who knew it—as if they would rather be sailing around high and dry, far up in a beautiful sunshiny blue sky. Even the clouds looked grumpy and felt so bad that they were crying about it, I thought.

Grumpy clouds and a grumpy boy with grumpy memories! That was the way I felt that very minute. Through the window that was catching all the rain's tears it could and draining them off onto the ivy leaves below, I noticed the pignut trees up at the end of the garden. They were tossing around in the half-mad wind, and I remembered something very exciting that had happened in the clover field up there.

That topsy-turvy experience had been caused by a new boy who had moved into our neighborhood, a boy named Shorty Long, whose blue cow had upset the calm of the whole territory. I had fought several times with Shorty. In at least one of the battles—in which he had bashed my nose—I had given him a licking. I had also been licked myself at the end of that same fight.

“Ho hum,” I sighed through the window at the rain. “At least I won’t have to worry about the short, fat Long boy *this* summer!” His family had moved away. Shorty’s blue cow, Babe, was also gone, and as far as we knew there wasn’t a single boy enemy left to cause us any trouble.

But, I thought right that second, what boy wants that? What he really wants is to be in the middle of some kind of excitement.

Still not ready to look up the word I had come to look up, I lazed to the unpainted cedar attic door and opened it just to listen to the rain on the shingled roof. That was one of my favorite sounds—rain on our attic roof or on our barn roof when I’m up in the haymow. Rain on a shingled roof makes a boy feel sad and glad and lonesome all at the same time, like seeing and feeling a baby rabbit trembling in the palm of his hand.

Pretty soon I was back in front of Miriam, turning her big pages to the word *sociable*.

“So *that’s* what I’m not,” I said aloud when I saw what Miriam said Mom had said I wasn’t very. “I’m not very ‘friendly,’ I am not ‘inclined

to seek or enjoy companionship with others of the same species.’”

“Mom is wrong,” I said to me. “I’m one of the most sociable people in the world—when I’m with the Gang.”

My mind reached out its arms and gave a great big sociable hug to every other member: Big Jim with his almost-mustache and powerful biceps; Little Jim, the littlest member; Dragonfly, the spindle-legged member, who is allergic to ragweed in hay fever season and sneezes at almost every strange smell; Poetry, the barrel-shaped member and my almost-best friend, who likes poetry almost better than most boys like blackberry pie; and Circus, who has a beautiful singing voice and, when he grins, looks more like a monkey than any of the rest of us.

Right then my eyes stumbled onto something especially interesting. It was the picture of a bird perched on a branch of what looked like a large toadstool, except that it wasn’t a toadstool. It was, Miriam explained, a huge bird’s nest. The bird was what is called an African sociable weaverbird, “which breeds in colonies, nesting in one great umbrella-shaped structure of grass placed in a tree.”

I looked in Dad’s encyclopedia, then, and learned that sometimes as many as a hundred or even two hundred pairs of sociable weaverbird parents work together to build a giant-sized grass house with hundreds of small nests in it. And the birds all live together without fighting.

For some reason, right that second it seemed I ought to be willing to give my own sister a few extra piggyback rides without complaining. Maybe I could even help the whole Collins family build a more friendly home.

Just as I was wheeling Miriam back to her place in the alcove, I heard the phone downstairs ring, and my mind leaped into hope that whoever was calling would be one of the gang, one of my very own “species.”

I hadn’t any sooner reached the end of the banister at the head of the stairs, getting ready to plunge down, than Mom’s cheerful voice came singing up to me. “Bill! Telephone!”

I was out of breath when I reached the phone, after a stormy dash down the steps, through the kitchen, into the living room, and across its many-colored rag rug to the east window, where the phone was fastened to the wall.

“Who is it?” I whispered to Mom.

And she whispered back with her hand over the phone’s mouthpiece, “He sounded very businesslike.” Her eyes had a twinkle in them that said the person on the other end of the line was one of the Gang. Mom liked all the members almost as well as I did.

I used a very businesslike tone of voice myself as I spoke. “The Theodore Collins residence. William Jasper Collins speaking.”

A second later I knew who had called me. It was good old squawky-voiced, mischief-minded Poetry himself, my almost-best friend. He was

in a cheerful mood. “Is this the Sugar Creek Tent and Awning Company?” he asked.

“It’s the Sugar Creek *Everything* Company,” I answered, using an even more dignified voice than he had and feeling proud of myself for thinking what I thought was a bright remark.

“This is Leslie Thompson’s father’s boy. I’m speaking for his son. Do you repair old lawn umbrellas? The storm has ripped ours to shreds, and we have only the metal ribs left.”

And that is when the *second* idea hit me—the one that was to get this story really started. With my mind’s eyes I saw the whole thing: the Thompsons’ large lawn umbrella converted into the roof of a grass tree house for the gang to meet in. We would cut the top out of a young sapling down along the creek or the bayou, lash the umbrella’s center pole to its trunk, then interweave bluegrass and timothy and some of the tall marsh sedge near the swamp, tying everything together with binder twine and maybe covering the metal ribs of the umbrella with chicken-yard wire first. When we were finished, the roof of our house would look like an African sociable weaverbird’s monstrous nest.

To keep out the rain and wind, we’d have to have sidewalls, which we could make out of pieces of old canvas from some of our dads’ harvesters.

“We certainly *do* repair old lawn umbrellas!” I almost screamed into the phone. “We certainly do. Bring it right over as quick as you can!”

And that was the beginning of the Sugar Creek Gang's new grass-roofed hideout, which we actually built, using the skeleton of Poetry's folks' old lawn umbrella for the framework of the roof. When we finished it, it didn't look any more like an African sociable weaverbird's hundred-family tree house than the man in the moon looks like a man. It was a pretty nice house, though, and was a good hideout for us to hide in from our imaginary enemies. Its roof was actually rainproof, and whenever there was a rain coming up and we knew it, we would run helter-skelter for its shelter and stay as dry as a feather in the sunshine. We even outfitted it with some old furniture.

We used our tree house for our headquarters for all kinds of explorations into what we pretended was wild Indian country. Also we acted out the Robinson Crusoe story we all knew so well.

But it was only make-believe, and a boy can't be satisfied *all* the time with a lot of let's-pretend stuff. Once in a while something has to come to some kind of life, which nothing did except that a lot of birds—some *altricial* and some *precocial*—thought our nest was full of wonderful material for making their own smaller nests. They kept stealing the straw and sedge and stuff, which we had to replace or our roof would leak.

But still nothing happened, day after day after day. Nothing *real* until—

By "until" I mean not until the day we

found a mysterious stranger living in our house. If we had known who he was and what kind of adventure he was going to lead us into, we probably wouldn't have decided to let him keep on living there. We might have been scared to.

32

SUGAR CREEK GANG

The CEMETERY
VANDALS

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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.

33

SUGAR CREEK GANG

The **BATTLE
OF THE BEES**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It had been quite a while since I had been caught up in the whirlwind of a stormy Sugar Creek adventure. It began to look as if I might have to live through the rest of the summer without anything worrisome happening to me. And as almost any boy knows, one of the worst things that can happen to a boy is to have nothing happen to him.

Also, as almost any boy knows, there are two kinds of adventures a boy can have around Sugar Creek. One is the hair-raising kind that whams into him the way a whirlwind surprises a pile of autumn leaves. It picks him up and tosses him into the middle of a problem or a mystery or a menace. It stirs up the boy to use his mind and muscles to help himself or somebody else out of whatever trouble he or somebody else is in.

The other kind of adventure is what my bushy-eyebrowed, reddish brown mustached farmer father calls the “educational” type. “It’s the best kind,” he has told me maybe seventy-three times, “and it will do a boy a lot more good in the long run.” My grayish brown haired mother calls it an “adventure of the mind.”

But what boy wants a lot of good done to

him? I'll have to admit that I would rather have the hair-raising, spine-tingling kind of adventure such as the gang has had quite a few of in the past several years.

Maybe you've already heard about how we killed a fierce, mad old mother bear and a sheep-stealing wildcat; how we licked the afternoon daylights out of a tough town gang in the Battle of Bumblebee Hill; and all the nervous excitement we had when we tried to act out a poem every boy knows, taking a wet pet lamb to school one day. We certainly found out that *that* was against the rule, and it more than certainly didn't make everybody laugh and play—especially not the teacher. We've even ridden the world's longest chairlift, at Aspen, Colorado.

But it began to look as if the rest of our summer vacation from school would be a very ordinary one, full of ordinary things such as mowing our own lawns for nothing, working in our own gardens for nothing, and washing and drying dishes for nothing. One of my worst chores was to baby-sit my little sister for nothing. She was three years old and couldn't be baby-sat anyway, because she never sat still long enough for anybody to sit with her.

And I should explain that when my parents talked about educational adventures, they didn't mean reading and writing and arithmetic.

"All of life is a schoolroom," my father explained to me. "You can have an adventure in your mind every day, even while you are drying dishes or hoeing potatoes or weeding the

black-seeded Simpson lettuce in the garden. Even while you're—"

Dad hesitated a few seconds, and while his sentence was still in midair, I cut in to suggest, "Or while I'm sitting on a log down at the mouth of the branch, with my line out in the water waiting for a bass to strike?"

My father's eyebrows dropped at my joke. Then he said something very educational and which, before you get through reading this story, you probably will decide is maybe one of the most important things in the world for a boy or even a girl to know.

"Son," my dad's deep voice growled out to me, "everything good or bad a boy ever does starts in his mind, not in his muscles."

"Not even in his powerful biceps?" I asked, trying hard to say something humorous.

Because we were standing halfway between the iron pitcher pump and the grape arbor with its empty two-by-four crossbeam, six feet high, challenging me to leap up and skin the cat on it, I felt my biceps ordering me to give them a little exercise. Quick as anything, I whirled, leaped for the crossbeam, caught it, and chinned myself three times. Then, quick as scat, I skinned the cat, swung my legs up and over, and in less time than it takes to write these few words, I was sitting up there and grinning down at Dad, feeling wonderful that my powerful biceps and my other muscles had done exactly what they had wanted to do.

“This adventure started in my muscles,” I said down to him.

Dad lowered his eyebrows at me again and said, “Wrong! Your muscles didn’t do that. *You* did. Your mind wanted you to do it, and you yourself—the you that is on the inside of you—ordered your muscles to do it, and they obeyed you.”

Still trying to be funny, I answered, “I’m glad you admit I have a mind.” I looked out across the treetops of our orchard toward the west, where Poetry, my almost-best friend, lived. I flexed my biceps and felt one of the most wonderful feelings a boy ever feels, as I filled my lungs with clean, seven-o’clock-in-the-morning fresh air. Then, like our old red rooster, I flapped my arms, lifted my face toward the sky, and let out a squawking, high-pitched “*Cock-a-doodle-doo!*”

“That,” I said to Dad, with a grin in my natural voice, “was an adventure of the voice.”

He shrugged and made it easy for me to come down by ordering me to. “There’s something I want to show you before breakfast,” he said.

He led the way from where we were to the row of flaming hollyhocks that grew along the orchard fence just west of the grape arbor—which was about thirty-seven feet from the west side of our house. There we stopped, both of us listening in the direction of the kitchen door to hear a woman’s voice calling to us that breakfast was ready.

“Look,” Dad began. He lifted a hollyhock leaf very carefully, the way he does Charlotte Ann’s little chin when he wants to see into her mischievous blue eyes. Charlotte Ann is the very cute little sister I’ve already mentioned—my “first and worst,” as Poetry describes her.

I focused my eyes on the large, coarse, round hollyhock leaf resting on Dad’s forefinger. I was also looking at several big, circular, wide-open maroon flowers of which there were maybe thirteen on the tall hollyhock stalk.

“What am I supposed to see?” I said to Dad, yawning.

He answered, “Dew! Fresh, clean dewdrops. See how damp this leaf is?”

When I answered, “What about it?” I was surprised at what he said next.

“Notice that this leaf is as wet on the inferior side as on the superior.” He probably thought I was old enough to learn the meaning of those two long words.

Then Dad went leaping and diving into the educational adventure he wanted me to enjoy with him. He was kind of like a boy already out in the middle of Sugar Creek calling back to another boy, “Come on in! The water’s fine!”

“The hollyhock,” Dad’s deep voice rumbled, “is a Chinese herb, a garden plant of the mallow family. In Egypt its leaves are used for food—after they’re cooked, of course. The hollyhock’s botanical name is the *Althea rosea*, and, like most flowers, it is symbolic.”

Most of Dad’s words were too long for me

to understand, and it seemed this wasn't going to be a very interesting adventure of the mind. It didn't have enough action in it—nothing to use my muscles on. I started to say so but yawned again instead and squinted at the hollyhock leaf. I was surprised to notice it *did* have as much dew on the underside as it did on its top.

“Furthermore,” Dad went on, “the symbolism of the hollyhock is *ambition*. And that's the first half of today's educational adventure.”

I had my eye on the hollyhock stalk right next to the one Dad was using as his object lesson. “*What's* the first half of my adventure?” I asked. My mind was in the kitchen where frying country sausage was sending its fragrance all the way out to our outdoor schoolroom.

“Ambition,” Dad answered in a teacherlike voice. “Every time you see a hollyhock anywhere, you're supposed to say to yourself, ‘Bill Collins, don't be a lazy good-for-nothing! Be ambitious! Wake up your mind and put it to work to be somebody worthwhile in life. Don't be a drone lying around a hive!’ Does that make sense to you?”

“Does what make sense?” I asked, but I thought I knew what he meant. He expected me to be a hollyhock kind of boy—not an idler or a worthless, shiftless, lazy good-for-nothing, as he had just said.

Well, Dad and Mom and I were pretty good friends. All three of us laughed with each other at different things that happened around the place or at things one or the other had read or

heard somewhere. We would sometimes have a joke between us for a whole day. So, even though I was sort of sleepy and also hungry, I looked up at the grin under Dad's mustache and asked, "Are you sure you're interested in my being an ambitious boy, or are you thinking about the garden out there, hoping somebody's only son will show a little more interest in it?"

"The garden, of course," was Dad's good-natured answer. Then he added, "Ambition in a boy's mind can do a better job controlling his muscles than three beech switches hanging on the gun rack in the toolshed."

My mind's eye looked right through the ponderosa pine wall of the toolshed and saw Dad's gun rack with two shotguns and my .22 rifle on it. I also saw, lying across the lower horns of the rack, three innocent-looking beech switches, and I remembered how Dad had once remarked to Poetry's father, "The guns are for wild animals, and the switches are for wild boys."

Right then Mom called from the kitchen door that breakfast was ready. It probably would be pancakes and sausage, milk, and maybe some kind of fresh fruit, such as yesterday's just picked cherries, which I'd picked myself from the tree that grew not more than twenty feet from the hollyhocks' last tall, spire-like stalk.

"One minute," Dad called to Mom. "I have to assign tomorrow's lesson!"

Dad assigned it to me quickly, seeming to be in more of a hurry than before Mom had called. I took my small notebook out of my shirt pocket and wrote down what he told me.

On the way back to the board walk that led to our kitchen's back door, I was thinking about Dad's assignment, which was "Look up page 204 in *The Greem Treasury* in our upstairs library and study it. Also look up the word *dew* in our unabridged *Webster*. Then read William Cullen Bryant's poem 'To a Waterfowl.'"

Tomorrow I was to tell my teacher-father what, if any, new ideas had come to me.

Before going into the house to pancakes, sausage, fruit, and whatever else Mom would have ready, Dad and I stopped for a minute at the low, round-topped table near the iron pitcher pump, where there was a washbasin, a bar of soap, and a towel. There I washed my already clean face and hands.

That was one of the rules at our house. A certain red-haired, freckle-faced boy I knew got to wash his face and hands before he was allowed to sit at the table three times a day, seven days a week, three hundred sixty-five days a year. Say, did you ever figure up how many times you've had to do that since you were old enough to be told? Even in one year, it'd be over a thousand times!

"You first," I said to my father, since he was the oldest and was more used to cold water than I was.

While Dad was washing his hands and face,

I studied the leaves of Mom's row of salvia growing at the other end of her horseradish bed. When I lifted the chin of one of the green leaves, what to my wondering eyes should appear on the underside of the leaf but as much dew as there was on top!

Later, while I was sitting at the table with Dad and Mom—Charlotte Ann was still asleep in her little bed in the front bedroom—I said to Dad, "I'm already ready for tomorrow's lesson. William Cullen Bryant was wrong when he wrote 'Whither, midst falling dew . . .'"

I knew that those four words were the first line of Bryant's "To a Waterfowl." I'd memorized it in school.

"Dew," I said to Dad around a bite of pancake, "doesn't do what he said it did."

Mom, not knowing what on earth—or under a hollyhock or salvia leaf—Dad and I were talking about, looked at me across the table and asked, "What kind of talk is that—'Do doesn't do what he said it did'?"

Our senses of humor came to life, and for a few seconds Dad and I had a good laugh at Mom's expense. Dad asked her, "How do you spell do, my dear? Do you spell dew *do* or do you spell do *dew*?"

Mom's face was a blank, except for the question marks and exclamation points on it. Her kind of pretty eyebrows went down, and a nervous little crinkle ran up and down her forehead.

Dad explained what he and I meant, but

for some reason, *her* sense of humor didn't come to life. So we changed the subject and went on eating our sausage and pancakes and cherries.

Because I was a boy with a boy's mind, having more important things on it than dew, which didn't fall at all but condensed instead, I felt the outdoors calling me to come and enjoy it.

There was, for instance, a little brown path—made by boys' bare feet—that ran as crooked as a cow path through the woods to the spring. It began on the other side of the rail fence on the far side of the road and twisted and dodged along, round and round, till it came to a hill that led down to the Black Widow Stump and on to the leaning linden tree.

Beginning at the linden tree, another path scooted east along a high rail fence to a wild crab apple tree and on to the place where the gang squeezed through the fence to get to the bayou.

Still another path ran from the leaning linden tree down a steep incline to the spring. From the spring, after you eased through a barbed wire fence, a cool path ran between the bayou and the creek, through tall marsh grass and all kinds of weeds to a clearing that bordered Dragonfly's father's cornfield. It ended at a well-worn grassy place under the Snatzer-pazooka tree, where we had some of our most important meetings and where we left our clothes when we went in swimming.

That very place was the place where, at two o'clock that afternoon, the gang was supposed to meet—all of us that could. We were to discuss plans to spend tomorrow night at Old Man Paddler's cabin far up in the hills, beyond the cave and the sycamore tree and on the other side of the swamp.

All the whole wonderful Sugar Creek playground was sort of in my mind while I was at the breakfast table that morning—the morning of the beginning of the story of the Battle of the Bees.

In a sad corner of my mind, though, was something else—a garden begging a boy my size (with or without ambition) to come and do something about the small weeds, which, since the last rain, were growing twice as fast as the black-seeded Simpson lettuce, the Ebenezer onions, and the Golden Bantam sweet corn.

In the educational section of my mind was a row of hollyhocks with maybe a hundred many-colored flowers in full bloom. All the flowers seemed to have voices calling me to get out into the garden as soon as I could. "Ambition, Bill Collins! Ambition! Don't be an idle good-for-nothing! Don't be a drone lazying around at the door of a beehive!"

I'd seen hundreds of dopey drones lying around the beehives in Dad's apiary. While the worker bees were as busy as bees flying in and out, gathering honey and helping pollinate the clover in Harm Groenwald's field on the other

side of the lane, those lazy, good-for-nothing drones did nothing at all.

Sitting at the breakfast table that morning, I didn't have the slightest idea that bees and beehives, Charlotte Ann, and a home run I was going to knock that afternoon were going to give me an exciting adventure of mind and muscle such as I'd never had before in all my half-long life.

34

SUGAR CREEK GANG

**LOCKED IN
THE ATTIC**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

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 bare-foot 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 Snatzer-pazooka 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 horse-whipped." 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.

35

SUGAR CREEK GANG

**RUNAWAY
RESCUE**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It was a very lazy, sunshiny early summer afternoon, and I was sitting on the board seat of the big swing under the walnut tree, thinking more or less about nothing. I never dreamed that, before the week would pass, I'd be head over heels in the middle of the red shoe mystery.

My reddish brown mustached father had just climbed down our new extension ladder, which had the Collins name painted on it. He'd been checking the top of the swing to see how safe it was, and he said, "Well, Son, you don't need to worry. Everything up there is all right. Just don't let the whole Sugar Creek Gang swing on it at one time."

He took the ladder down, slid the two sections of it together, and carried it toward our truck, which at the time was standing in the shade of the plum tree near the iron pitcher pump. There he lifted that ladder as if it was made of feathers instead of aluminum and laid it in the back of the truck. He was very proud either of our new ladder or of his powerful biceps. I couldn't tell which.

He climbed into the truck's cab then, started the motor, and began to drive toward the gate that leads out onto the gravel road.

"Where you going with that ladder?" I

called to him. He was just driving past the mailbox that had “Theodore Collins” painted on it when he called back to me, “One of our neighbors wants to borrow it for a few days.”

With that, he was off down the road, a cloud of white dust following him.

I stood up on the board seat of the swing and pumped myself one- or two-dozen times and then sat down to coast, enjoying the feel of the wind in my face and the flapping of my shirt sleeves. Swinging like that gives a boy one of the finest feelings he can have—even if he hardly ever gets to have it very long if his folks are at home.

In fact, that very second Mom called from the east window of our house for me to come and help her with a little woman’s work. She wanted the house to have a good cleaning before she left for Memory City tomorrow to spend a week at my cousin Wally’s house.

It was while I was dusting the lower shelf of our lamp table that I noticed the birthday book in which Mom keeps a record of all the names and birthday dates of people she sends cards to every year. Just out of curiosity, I leafed through to see whose birthday would be coming soon and gasped in surprise when I saw Mom’s own name. Then I remembered her birthday was next Saturday, the day she would be coming home from Memory City.

That meant I’d better set my brain to working and think of something nice to get for her—something extra special.

Mom must have heard me gasp, because she looked up from the kitchen floor where she was spreading wax on the linoleum and said through the open door, “Anything wrong?”

I started whisking my dustcloth a little faster and whistling and hardly bothered to answer, saying with a half yawn, “Oh, nothing. Just something I thought of.” And I watched for a chance to put the book back where it had been.

Anyway, it was while I was on my way Saturday afternoon to get a birthday present for Mom that Poetry and I stumbled onto the mystery—the red shoe mystery, that is.

The very special entirely different kind of gift I had decided on was up in the hills not far from Old Man Paddler’s cabin. We were trudging happily along when what to my wondering eyes should appear but somebody’s red leather slip-on shoe lying in the mud at the edge of the muskrat pond.

That spring-fed pond, as you may already know, is about halfway through the swamp. The sycamore tree and the mouth of the cave are at one end, and the woods near Old Man Paddler’s clapboard-roofed log cabin are at the other end.

Even from as far away from the shoe as I was at the time, which was about thirty feet, I could tell it wasn’t anybody’s old worn-out, thrown-away shoe. It looked almost new, as if it had been worn hardly at all. It had a low heel and was the kind and size a teenage girl might wear.

I was so surprised at what I was seeing that I stopped and stood stock-still, and Poetry, who was walking behind my red wagon in the path, bumped into it with his shins.

For a few seconds, Poetry staggered around trying to regain his lost balance. Then he lost it completely, upsetting the wagon at the same time, and scrambled, rolled, and slid down the slope toward the pond's muddy bank. And also toward the red shoe.

"What on earth!" his ducklike voice managed to squawk at me. "Why don't you let me know when you're going to slam on your brakes like—"

"Look!" I exclaimed. "Right behind you at the edge of the pond! There's a red shoe. There's been a murder or a kidnapping around here somewhere!"

As soon as I said that, I began to think that probably that was what actually had happened. Somebody had kidnapped a girl and was taking her along the path through the swamp—maybe to the haunted house far up in the hills above Old Man Paddler's cabin. When they stopped here to rest a few minutes, the girl had broken away from him and started to run. She had stumbled over something, maybe her own feet, had fallen, and, like Poetry, had rolled down the slope. Her shoe had gotten stuck in the mud and slipped off when she tried to pull it out. But she had kept on running.

I suppose one reason my imagination was running away like that was because the swamp

was a very eerie place, even in the daytime. That spongy, tree-shaded, sometimes-flooded tract was where the six members of the Sugar Creek Gang had had quite a few exciting and dangerous adventures in the past.

I never will forget the dark night Big Jim's flashlight spotted old hook-nosed John Till's head lying out in the quicksand about thirty feet from the high path we were always careful to stay on when we were going through. That is, we *thought* it was his head lying there but found out a split second later that the rest of him was fastened to it. Somehow he had gotten off the only path there is and had been sucked all the way up to his chin in the mire.

That was a feverish time, I tell you. His calls for help and his scared eyes in the light of the flashlight were enough to make any boy's hair stand on end.

And it was in this very swamp that Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of our gang, had first seen a fierce mother bear wallowing in the mud on a hot summer day the way hogs do in a barnyard wallowing place.

One of our most nerve-tingling experiences happened right here at this muskrat pond when my cousin Wally's copper-colored mongrel, Alexander the Coppersmith, had a fierce under-the-surface battle with a snapping turtle—the biggest turtle there ever was in the Sugar Creek territory.

So, with these adventures in the history section of my mind, it was easy for me to imagine a

screaming girl's frantic struggle with a fierce-faced kidnapper, maybe on the grassy mound I myself was on right that second.

With my mind's eye I could see her wrestle herself out of his clutches, stumble, and roll down the bank, where her shoe came off in the mud. She didn't dare stop to get it and put it back on but kept running on through the swamp to the woods and on to Old Man Paddler's cabin or in the other direction to the sycamore tree and the cave.

That was as far as I got to think along that kind of scary line, because Poetry, who had picked up the shoe and had a different feeling about it than I did, started to quote one of the hundred and one poems he knew by heart:

“For want of a nail, the shoe was lost;
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost;
For want of a horse, the rider was lost.”

I'd memorized that poem myself when I was in the fourth grade.

There were quite a few things in our school readers that were supposed to teach us things that were good for a boy to know. This one taught us how important little things could be. If the horse's owner had noticed when the horseshoe had lost a nail and had a new nail put in, the horse wouldn't have lost the shoe and wouldn't have gone lame and stumbled and fallen, and the rider wouldn't have gotten killed. A boy ought to be careful about little

things such as having his mother sew up the small torn places in his shirt and not dropping lighted matches anywhere.

That lost-and-found shoe wasn't very large, but it could be a very important clue. "Be careful!" I called down the knoll to Poetry. "Don't wipe off or smudge up any fingerprints!"

"Who cares about fingerprints?" he called back. "Come on down and take a look at these *footprints!*"

I left my upset wagon where it was and clambered backwards to where Poetry was. "What footprints? Where?" I asked him, not seeing anybody's tracks.

"Right there!" he said. "At the edge of the water!"

I looked again and saw what he was stooped over and pointing at with his right forefinger. "That," I objected, "is a muskrat's track!"

I was looking at a three-inch-long, web-footed track—several of them, in fact—at the water's edge, and I knew that the webbed tracks had been made by the hind feet of one of the cutest wild animals there is in the Sugar Creek territory, a chuckle-headed, beady-eyed, stocky-bodied, nearly naked-tailed rodent.

Next, my eyes searched all along the bank of the pond where we'd found the red shoe. I saw only muskrat tracks—not one single human being's tracks anywhere.

"I guess we have stumbled onto a mystery," Poetry was willing to admit. Then he yawned, as if it wasn't too important, and, handing the

red leather shoe to me, he added, "Let's get going. We have to get the tree dug and balled and back and set out before your folks get home."

Now my mind was divided. An hour ago, when we'd started from home, pulling my red wagon along, it seemed I was on the way to do one of the most important things a boy could do—plan a big birthday surprise for his mother.

In fact, Dad and I had planned it together and had managed to keep it a secret for a whole week. It had been easy to keep the secret that long because Mom had been away from home that long. And when she would get back to the Collins place late this afternoon, the surprise would be waiting for her in the backyard just outside the dining room window.

The cute little two-foot-high blue spruce tree Poetry and I were on our way up to Old Man Paddler's to get would be standing green and straight and proud halfway between the two cherry trees at the end of the row of hollyhocks that grew along our orchard fence. Would my wonderful mother ever be pleased!

That's why Poetry and I were taking the path through the swamp instead of the shortcut through the cave. The cave actually comes out in the old man's cellar, but we never could have pulled the wagon through the cave.

As I said, my mind was divided. I had a birthday surprise to hurry up and get for Mom, and maybe I had a kidnap mystery to solve. Somebody somewhere—maybe close by—needed a boy's help.

“How,” I demanded of Poetry, as if he knew and didn’t want to tell me, “how in the world did the shoe get *here*? There isn’t a human being’s tracks anywhere except ours!”

“It fell here, of course. How else?”

“From where?” I asked and looked up at the overhanging branches of a big elm. “Shoes don’t grow on trees!”

“All right,” he said loftily. “I’ll get going on the mystery myself. Somebody’s got to solve it, and it may just as well be the best detective in the whole county.”

He meant himself, Leslie Thompson, which, even though I knew he was joking, was almost the truth. His mind was always ferreting out the answer to some knotty problem.

“First things first, though,” Detective Thompson began, and the tone of his ducklike voice told me he had taken charge of the mystery and I was to take orders from him from now on. “You carry the shoe. I’ll pull the wagon this time, and you follow behind. Keep your eyes peeled for anything suspicious such as a red dress with a girl in it and another red shoe with a girl’s foot in it.”

Of course, Poetry was right about our needing to get going. We had to get going to get done what we had to do, shoe or no shoe, girl or no girl.

Even though in a few minutes we were quite a way from where we had found the red shoe and were hurrying along on the winding narrow path, leaving the pond behind, my

mind was still back where it had been. Who, maybe last night, maybe early this morning, maybe only a few hours ago, had been in such a hurry that she had lost a shoe and hadn't dared stop to get it?

Also, Poetry's little ditty was repeating itself in my mind:

*For want of a nail, the shoe was lost;
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost;
For want of a horse, the rider was lost.*

I wasn't thinking of a lost horseshoe, though, but of a lost, left red shoe and the girl who had been wearing it.

I kept my eyes peeled in a circle of directions as we hurried along, looking and hoping to see a red dress with a girl in it. Whoever she was, did she need the kind of help two boys with work-and-play-hardened muscles could give?

Where was the other shoe, and why had this one been tossed away, if it had? I decided to wipe off the mud, using the gunnysack we'd brought along in the wagon for balling the tree.

The shoe, as I'd first decided, was almost new. "Hey!" I gasped to Poetry. "Look at the sole! It doesn't have any mud on it! Only on the side! She *wasn't* wearing it when it got left in the mud! It wasn't even on her foot!"

But Detective Thompson wasn't impressed. "Like I said," he called back over his shoulder, "it fell or was thrown from somewhere!"

Ahead of us I could see more light through the trees. That meant that soon we'd be through the swamp, into Old Man Paddler's woods, and on the way to his cabin and the stream behind his woodshed where the spruce tree would be waiting for us. In a little while, I started to think, we'd—

And that was as far as I got to think. At right that second, as plain as a white cloud in a clear blue sky, I heard a bloodcurdling scream, the kind a wildcat makes when it's hunting or maybe like a mountain lion makes. It was that loud.

"Wildcat!" I whispered to Poetry, who'd stopped stock-still so suddenly that I whammed into the wagon with my own shins, and we almost had another upset.

"Not a wildcat!" he corrected me. "They do their roaming and hunting in the morning and evening twilight. In the hot afternoons they sleep. Besides, last summer we killed the only wildcat there ever was in this part of the country. Remember?"

I remembered, all right, one of the most dangerous adventures we'd had in our whole lives. But right then I thought of something I'd not thought of for a long time. "She had two little kitten wildcats, didn't she? And we took them to the zoo in Memory City?"

"That's what I said," Poetry countered. "First, we killed the mother, and then we gave her babies away."

"Yeah," I came back, "but whoever heard of

a family of wildcats without there being a father as well as a mother! Old Stubtail's babies had to have a father!"

Already I was cringing at the idea, and my eyes were alert for a reddish brown fur coat with a wildcat in it. "There! There it is again!" I half whispered, half yelled to Poetry. This time the sound wasn't a scream, though. It was a wolflike cry that was half howl and half laugh with a little mournful wail all through it.

"It's a loon!" Poetry decided emphatically.

"But it can't be. We've never seen any loons around here. Only when we've been on camping trips in the northern lake country!"

But sounds such as the two bloodcurdling howls we'd just heard had to come from something or somebody. I wished Big Jim were with us with his rifle. Or Circus with his bow and arrow. Or even Little Jim, with his long walking stick, which he'd made himself and always carried. Or Dragonfly, who was good with his slingshot. Anybody, just so there would be more of us if we accidentally did run into a situation that would need the whole gang to solve it or to fight it out.

I was actually trembling inside as, with the red shoe in my hand, I hurried along after Poetry. I just knew there was something wrong somewhere. Somebody somewhere needed our help.

36

SUGAR CREEK GANG

The **CASE OF THE
MISSING CALF**

Paul Hutchens

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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!