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 mewing 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!"

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-opetropy!"—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 Openglopish, "Mopistoper Blopack opis gropeat. OpI'll bopet hope gopives Bopill Copollopins opa dopetopentopiopon topodopay." And l 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.

Paul Hutchens

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PREFACE

Hi—from a member of the Sugar Creek Gang!

It's just that I don't know which one I am. When I was good, I was Little Jim. When I did bad things—well, sometimes I was Bill Collins or even mischievous Poetry.

You see, I am the daughter of Paul Hutchens, and I spent many an hour listening to him read his manuscript as far as he had written it that particular day. I went along to the north woods of Minnesota, to Colorado, and to the various other places he would go to find something different for the Gang to do.

Now the years have passed—more than fifty, actually. My father is in heaven, but the Gang goes on. All thirty-six books are still in print and now are being updated for today's readers with input from my five children, who also span the decades from the '50s to the '70s.

The real Sugar Creek is in Indiana, and my father and his six brothers were the original Gang. But the idea of the books and their ministry were and are the Lord's. It is He who keeps the Gang going.

PAULINE HUTCHENS WILSON

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 in 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 somebody just shoved into our—into our—" I suddenly 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 daylights 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 daylights 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 snowdrift.

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 in 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 somebody just shoved into our—into our—" I suddenly 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 daylights 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.

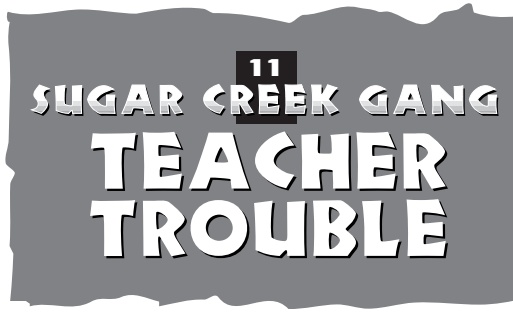
All of a sudden I heard a weird sound out in the woods not far from me. It sounded like a screech owl, and it went *shay-shay-shay-a-a-a.* It scared me stiff and made me want to run. But it was almost an eighth of a mile up the lane yet before I would get to Poetry's house. There really wasn't any sense 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 daylights 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 snowdrift.



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 harebrained 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 goodbye 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.

Paul Hutchens

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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:

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