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SUGAR CREEK GANG
TREE HOUSE
MYSTERY

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

1

It was one of the rainiest days I ever saw.

If it *hadn't* been a rainy day, I might not have been browsing around in our big *Merriam Webster International Dictionary*, which we keep upstairs in the alcove of our south bedroom.

And if I *hadn't* been browsing around in the dictionary just to give my mind something to do—and also to keep from losing it—I wouldn't have stumbled onto the very exciting idea that was to give the Gang a flying start into one of the strangest experiences we'd ever had.

Without that exciting idea, we wouldn't have built the tree house I'm going to tell you about right now. I'll also tell you about the mysterious stranger who moved into it one night—without our permission—and landed us into the middle of one of the saddest stories there ever was. Part of it actually happened to us but most of it to the old stranger himself.

Before there was any sadness, though, there was a lot of gladness, and the six members of the Sugar Creek Gang were right in the middle of everything—all the mystery and hot-tempered action, the disappointments, and the brand-new kind of danger. It would be the kind of danger that makes a boy feel fine to be in the middle of—the way a boy feels fine to be

racing along in the center of a whirlwind, dodging this way and that, running in zigzag fashion out across the pasture, not knowing where he is going or when he will stop.

Actually, it took *two* ideas to get things really started. The first one came flying into my mind from page 2,386 in the dictionary, and the other came in through my left ear when I answered the telephone about seven minutes later.

It had been thundering a lot and lightning all kinds of the prettiest lightning you ever saw. Some of it was what Dad calls just plain “sheet” lightning and some of it “chain” or “forked” lightning, tearing like mad across the Sugar Creek sky.

About fifteen minutes after the thundery part of the storm was over, the rain settled down into a lazy drizzle that anybody who knows his rain knows is the kind that sometimes lasts all day. It’s hard to keep from feeling grouchy in that kind of weather.

Well, as our family does with nearly everything around our place, we had given our dictionary a name, calling it “Aunt Miriam.” Its actual name, as you know if you have one like it, was *The Merriam-Webster New International Dictionary, Second Edition*.

Many times when Mom is wondering where Dad is and can’t find him anywhere else, she makes a beeline for our upstairs south bedroom and finds him in the alcove with Aunt Miriam, working a crossword puzzle or just

moseying from page to page, picking up new things to think about.

“My mind gets awfully hungry,” Dad often says to her and then adds jokingly, “and my wife is a bad cook!”

Mom herself spends quite a lot of time with Aunt Miriam every week when she is studying her Sunday school lesson. She is the teacher of the Gleaners’ class. Maybe a thousand times I’ve heard Mom say, “Miriam has the most interesting ideas to make the lesson come to life.”

I guess I was feeling especially grumpy that rainy afternoon, not being able to go outdoors or be with any of the gang as I wanted to. Mom was sitting sewing near the east window in our living room, getting as much light as she could from the murky sky. Charlotte Ann, my sometimes-cute baby sister, was pestering me to give her another piggyback ride, and I didn’t want to do it. I’d already walked and run and crawled all over the whole downstairs with her on my back—and also on my shoulders—maybe a half dozen times that afternoon.

Now I wanted a little peace and quiet for my mind, which was very hungry and trying to get something to eat out of a new book my parents had bought me for my birthday.

So when Charlotte Ann kept on fussing and tugging at me, I yelled at her, “Scat, will you! Leave me alone!” I swung around in my chair, turning my back on her and starting to let my mind sink down into one of the most interest-

ing books I had ever owned. It had in it more than a hundred colored pictures of American birds with interesting facts about the bird families they belonged to. A lot of the birds were the kind that lived and moved and made their nests around Sugar Creek.

There were quite a few long words in the book, and it was fun to learn the meaning of them. Two of the words were especially important to anybody who wants to learn about birds. One of the words was *altricial* and the other *precocial*, and Aunt Miriam knew exactly what they meant.

The *precocial* bird babies, such as ducklings or chickens or grouse or shorebirds, are born with down or fuzz on them and are able to run around to find their own food soon after hatching.

But most baby birds are those called *altricial*. They are hatched completely naked, and all their food has to be carried to them, they are so helpless.

I was thinking, as I sat straining my eyes in the dark room, that Charlotte Ann was like an *altricial* baby bird. She'd had to be waited on hand and foot ever since she was born. She still had to be, almost two-thirds of the time, or she wasn't happy. She just couldn't be baby-sat with but had to have something doing every second, and I had to do it. If what I did seemed funny to her or made her happy, I had to keep on doing it, over and over and over again.

If only she would quit pestering me, I could do a little thinking, I thought. That's when I whirled

around in my chair, and that's when I had to stop reading.

As I whirled, my left foot struck against her chubby little legs, bowled her over, and sent her sprawling onto the floor. She let out a shriek and started to cry, her voice sounding like a loon choking on a half-swallowed fish. It sounded only a little bit like a human baby crying.

Well, that unearthly cry coming from Charlotte Ann shattered Mom's peace and quiet and brought her voice to excited life. "Bill Collins! What on earth is the matter with you today! You certainly don't act very *sociable!*" she exclaimed, probably meaning she thought I ought to stop reading my interesting book about American birds and become a baby-sister-sitter by giving Charlotte Ann another piggyback ride around the house.

The word *sociable* was new to me, so I decided that as soon as the chance came, I'd go upstairs to the alcove to see what Miriam had to say about it—to see what kind of boy I *wasn't* and Mom wished I were.

Well, I baby-sister-sat for another half hour, and Charlotte Ann still wasn't satisfied but got fussier and fussier. Being on my hands and knees at the time, I tumbled her off my shoulders onto the floor—sort of accidentally, maybe—and exclaimed to her, "You are the most altruistic bird I ever saw. What on earth's the matter with you, anyway? Why don't you grow up?"

But, of course, a toddler only three years old couldn't get any older all of a sudden.

Mom decided she was “fussy-sleepy” and needed her nap, so we put her into her pink Scottie-dog bed in the downstairs bedroom and shut the door. And I was free to do what I wanted to do for a while.

“Where are you going?” Mom asked when I started toward the kitchen to go through it to the stairway.

“Up to see Aunt Miriam,” I answered, which is the same thing Dad always says when he is going up to look up something. “My mind is half starved, and my mother is a bad cook.”

“Can’t you stay down here to keep me company?” Mom asked with an accusation in her voice. “It’s a very gloomy day.”

“I’m sorry,” I said back to her, “but I don’t feel very *sociable* this afternoon,” thinking maybe I already knew what the word meant. I kept on going toward the stairs, expecting that Mom’s voice would lasso me any second and make me come back to mother-sit awhile. But when I climbed all the way up to Aunt Miriam’s alcove without being stopped, I decided she wasn’t going to be a helpless mother who had to have attention on a rainy day.

I stood looking down at Miriam on her little roll-away table and thought how nice it was that she was always ready to let a boy know almost anything he wanted to know.

Miriam was always open, even when nobody was using her, because that was part of the instructions that had come with her when Dad bought her. We were always to leave her

open with about the same number of pages on either side. It was better for such a large book to be kept like that.

First, I lifted the purple scarf Mom had made for her so that her staying open like that wouldn't make her a dust catcher, because dust is not good for an open book.

In a minute now, I would know what kind of boy I was supposed to be and wasn't. I'd find out what Mom had meant when she said, "You certainly don't act very *sociable*."

Before looking up the word, I rolled Miriam's table over to the rain-spattered south window, where there was more light, and stood for a long minute looking down and out through the curtain of falling rain at the puddles in the barnyard. Then I looked up at the excited clouds, still scudding across the sky as if they were disgusted with life and didn't care who knew it—as if they would rather be sailing around high and dry, far up in a beautiful sunshiny blue sky. Even the clouds looked grumpy and felt so bad that they were crying about it, I thought.

Grumpy clouds and a grumpy boy with grumpy memories! That was the way I felt that very minute. Through the window that was catching all the rain's tears it could and draining them off onto the ivy leaves below, I noticed the pignut trees up at the end of the garden. They were tossing around in the half-mad wind, and I remembered something very exciting that had happened in the clover field up there.

That topsy-turvy experience had been caused by a new boy who had moved into our neighborhood, a boy named Shorty Long, whose blue cow had upset the calm of the whole territory. I had fought several times with Shorty. In at least one of the battles—in which he had bashed my nose—I had given him a licking. I had also been licked myself at the end of that same fight.

“Ho hum,” I sighed through the window at the rain. “At least I won’t have to worry about the short, fat Long boy *this* summer!” His family had moved away. Shorty’s blue cow, Babe, was also gone, and as far as we knew there wasn’t a single boy enemy left to cause us any trouble.

But, I thought right that second, what boy wants that? What he really wants is to be in the middle of some kind of excitement.

Still not ready to look up the word I had come to look up, I lazed to the unpainted cedar attic door and opened it just to listen to the rain on the shingled roof. That was one of my favorite sounds—rain on our attic roof or on our barn roof when I’m up in the haymow. Rain on a shingled roof makes a boy feel sad and glad and lonesome all at the same time, like seeing and feeling a baby rabbit trembling in the palm of his hand.

Pretty soon I was back in front of Miriam, turning her big pages to the word *sociable*.

“So *that’s* what I’m not,” I said aloud when I saw what Miriam said Mom had said I wasn’t very. “I’m not very ‘friendly,’ I am not ‘inclined

to seek or enjoy companionship with others of the same species.’”

“Mom is wrong,” I said to me. “I’m one of the most sociable people in the world—when I’m with the Gang.”

My mind reached out its arms and gave a great big sociable hug to every other member: Big Jim with his almost-mustache and powerful biceps; Little Jim, the littlest member; Dragonfly, the spindle-legged member, who is allergic to ragweed in hay fever season and sneezes at almost every strange smell; Poetry, the barrel-shaped member and my almost-best friend, who likes poetry almost better than most boys like blackberry pie; and Circus, who has a beautiful singing voice and, when he grins, looks more like a monkey than any of the rest of us.

Right then my eyes stumbled onto something especially interesting. It was the picture of a bird perched on a branch of what looked like a large toadstool, except that it wasn’t a toadstool. It was, Miriam explained, a huge bird’s nest. The bird was what is called an African sociable weaverbird, “which breeds in colonies, nesting in one great umbrella-shaped structure of grass placed in a tree.”

I looked in Dad’s encyclopedia, then, and learned that sometimes as many as a hundred or even two hundred pairs of sociable weaverbird parents work together to build a giant-sized grass house with hundreds of small nests in it. And the birds all live together without fighting.

For some reason, right that second it seemed I ought to be willing to give my own sister a few extra piggyback rides without complaining. Maybe I could even help the whole Collins family build a more friendly home.

Just as I was wheeling Miriam back to her place in the alcove, I heard the phone downstairs ring, and my mind leaped into hope that whoever was calling would be one of the gang, one of my very own “species.”

I hadn’t any sooner reached the end of the banister at the head of the stairs, getting ready to plunge down, than Mom’s cheerful voice came singing up to me. “Bill! Telephone!”

I was out of breath when I reached the phone, after a stormy dash down the steps, through the kitchen, into the living room, and across its many-colored rag rug to the east window, where the phone was fastened to the wall.

“Who is it?” I whispered to Mom.

And she whispered back with her hand over the phone’s mouthpiece, “He sounded very businesslike.” Her eyes had a twinkle in them that said the person on the other end of the line was one of the Gang. Mom liked all the members almost as well as I did.

I used a very businesslike tone of voice myself as I spoke. “The Theodore Collins residence. William Jasper Collins speaking.”

A second later I knew who had called me. It was good old squawky-voiced, mischief-minded Poetry himself, my almost-best friend. He was

in a cheerful mood. “Is this the Sugar Creek Tent and Awning Company?” he asked.

“It’s the Sugar Creek *Everything* Company,” I answered, using an even more dignified voice than he had and feeling proud of myself for thinking what I thought was a bright remark.

“This is Leslie Thompson’s father’s boy. I’m speaking for his son. Do you repair old lawn umbrellas? The storm has ripped ours to shreds, and we have only the metal ribs left.”

And that is when the *second* idea hit me—the one that was to get this story really started. With my mind’s eyes I saw the whole thing: the Thompsons’ large lawn umbrella converted into the roof of a grass tree house for the gang to meet in. We would cut the top out of a young sapling down along the creek or the bayou, lash the umbrella’s center pole to its trunk, then interweave bluegrass and timothy and some of the tall marsh sedge near the swamp, tying everything together with binder twine and maybe covering the metal ribs of the umbrella with chicken-yard wire first. When we were finished, the roof of our house would look like an African sociable weaverbird’s monstrous nest.

To keep out the rain and wind, we’d have to have sidewalls, which we could make out of pieces of old canvas from some of our dads’ harvesters.

“We certainly *do* repair old lawn umbrellas!” I almost screamed into the phone. “We certainly do. Bring it right over as quick as you can!”

And that was the beginning of the Sugar Creek Gang's new grass-roofed hideout, which we actually built, using the skeleton of Poetry's folks' old lawn umbrella for the framework of the roof. When we finished it, it didn't look any more like an African sociable weaverbird's hundred-family tree house than the man in the moon looks like a man. It was a pretty nice house, though, and was a good hideout for us to hide in from our imaginary enemies. Its roof was actually rainproof, and whenever there was a rain coming up and we knew it, we would run helter-skelter for its shelter and stay as dry as a feather in the sunshine. We even outfitted it with some old furniture.

We used our tree house for our headquarters for all kinds of explorations into what we pretended was wild Indian country. Also we acted out the Robinson Crusoe story we all knew so well.

But it was only make-believe, and a boy can't be satisfied *all* the time with a lot of let's-pretend stuff. Once in a while something has to come to some kind of life, which nothing did except that a lot of birds—some *altricial* and some *precocial*—thought our nest was full of wonderful material for making their own smaller nests. They kept stealing the straw and sedge and stuff, which we had to replace or our roof would leak.

But still nothing happened, day after day after day. Nothing *real* until—

By "until" I mean not until the day we

found a mysterious stranger living in our house. If we had known who he was and what kind of adventure he was going to lead us into, we probably wouldn't have decided to let him keep on living there. We might have been scared to.

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SUGAR CREEK GANG

The CEMETERY
VANDALS

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS

CHICAGO

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In only about seventeen minutes, the sher-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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SUGAR CREEK GANG

The **BATTLE
OF THE BEES**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS

CHICAGO

1

It had been quite a while since I had been caught up in the whirlwind of a stormy Sugar Creek adventure. It began to look as if I might have to live through the rest of the summer without anything worrisome happening to me. And as almost any boy knows, one of the worst things that can happen to a boy is to have nothing happen to him.

Also, as almost any boy knows, there are two kinds of adventures a boy can have around Sugar Creek. One is the hair-raising kind that whams into him the way a whirlwind surprises a pile of autumn leaves. It picks him up and tosses him into the middle of a problem or a mystery or a menace. It stirs up the boy to use his mind and muscles to help himself or somebody else out of whatever trouble he or somebody else is in.

The other kind of adventure is what my bushy-eyebrowed, reddish brown mustached farmer father calls the “educational” type. “It’s the best kind,” he has told me maybe seventy-three times, “and it will do a boy a lot more good in the long run.” My grayish brown haired mother calls it an “adventure of the mind.”

But what boy wants a lot of good done to

him? I'll have to admit that I would rather have the hair-raising, spine-tingling kind of adventure such as the gang has had quite a few of in the past several years.

Maybe you've already heard about how we killed a fierce, mad old mother bear and a sheep-stealing wildcat; how we licked the afternoon daylight out of a tough town gang in the Battle of Bumblebee Hill; and all the nervous excitement we had when we tried to act out a poem every boy knows, taking a wet pet lamb to school one day. We certainly found out that *that* was against the rule, and it more than certainly didn't make everybody laugh and play—especially not the teacher. We've even ridden the world's longest chairlift, at Aspen, Colorado.

But it began to look as if the rest of our summer vacation from school would be a very ordinary one, full of ordinary things such as mowing our own lawns for nothing, working in our own gardens for nothing, and washing and drying dishes for nothing. One of my worst chores was to baby-sit my little sister for nothing. She was three years old and couldn't be baby-sat anyway, because she never sat still long enough for anybody to sit with her.

And I should explain that when my parents talked about educational adventures, they didn't mean reading and writing and arithmetic.

"All of life is a schoolroom," my father explained to me. "You can have an adventure in your mind every day, even while you are drying dishes or hoeing potatoes or weeding the

black-seeded Simpson lettuce in the garden. Even while you're—"

Dad hesitated a few seconds, and while his sentence was still in midair, I cut in to suggest, "Or while I'm sitting on a log down at the mouth of the branch, with my line out in the water waiting for a bass to strike?"

My father's eyebrows dropped at my joke. Then he said something very educational and which, before you get through reading this story, you probably will decide is maybe one of the most important things in the world for a boy or even a girl to know.

"Son," my dad's deep voice growled out to me, "everything good or bad a boy ever does starts in his mind, not in his muscles."

"Not even in his powerful biceps?" I asked, trying hard to say something humorous.

Because we were standing halfway between the iron pitcher pump and the grape arbor with its empty two-by-four crossbeam, six feet high, challenging me to leap up and skin the cat on it, I felt my biceps ordering me to give them a little exercise. Quick as anything, I whirled, leaped for the crossbeam, caught it, and chinned myself three times. Then, quick as scat, I skinned the cat, swung my legs up and over, and in less time than it takes to write these few words, I was sitting up there and grinning down at Dad, feeling wonderful that my powerful biceps and my other muscles had done exactly what they had wanted to do.

“This adventure started in my muscles,” I said down to him.

Dad lowered his eyebrows at me again and said, “Wrong! Your muscles didn’t do that. *You* did. Your mind wanted you to do it, and you yourself—the you that is on the inside of you—ordered your muscles to do it, and they obeyed you.”

Still trying to be funny, I answered, “I’m glad you admit I have a mind.” I looked out across the treetops of our orchard toward the west, where Poetry, my almost-best friend, lived. I flexed my biceps and felt one of the most wonderful feelings a boy ever feels, as I filled my lungs with clean, seven-o’clock-in-the-morning fresh air. Then, like our old red rooster, I flapped my arms, lifted my face toward the sky, and let out a squawking, high-pitched “*Cock-a-doodle-doo!*”

“That,” I said to Dad, with a grin in my natural voice, “was an adventure of the voice.”

He shrugged and made it easy for me to come down by ordering me to. “There’s something I want to show you before breakfast,” he said.

He led the way from where we were to the row of flaming hollyhocks that grew along the orchard fence just west of the grape arbor—which was about thirty-seven feet from the west side of our house. There we stopped, both of us listening in the direction of the kitchen door to hear a woman’s voice calling to us that breakfast was ready.

“Look,” Dad began. He lifted a hollyhock leaf very carefully, the way he does Charlotte Ann’s little chin when he wants to see into her mischievous blue eyes. Charlotte Ann is the very cute little sister I’ve already mentioned—my “first and worst,” as Poetry describes her.

I focused my eyes on the large, coarse, round hollyhock leaf resting on Dad’s forefinger. I was also looking at several big, circular, wide-open maroon flowers of which there were maybe thirteen on the tall hollyhock stalk.

“What am I supposed to see?” I said to Dad, yawning.

He answered, “Dew! Fresh, clean dewdrops. See how damp this leaf is?”

When I answered, “What about it?” I was surprised at what he said next.

“Notice that this leaf is as wet on the inferior side as on the superior.” He probably thought I was old enough to learn the meaning of those two long words.

Then Dad went leaping and diving into the educational adventure he wanted me to enjoy with him. He was kind of like a boy already out in the middle of Sugar Creek calling back to another boy, “Come on in! The water’s fine!”

“The hollyhock,” Dad’s deep voice rumbled, “is a Chinese herb, a garden plant of the mallow family. In Egypt its leaves are used for food—after they’re cooked, of course. The hollyhock’s botanical name is the *Althea rosea*, and, like most flowers, it is symbolic.”

Most of Dad’s words were too long for me

to understand, and it seemed this wasn't going to be a very interesting adventure of the mind. It didn't have enough action in it—nothing to use my muscles on. I started to say so but yawned again instead and squinted at the hollyhock leaf. I was surprised to notice it *did* have as much dew on the underside as it did on its top.

“Furthermore,” Dad went on, “the symbolism of the hollyhock is *ambition*. And that's the first half of today's educational adventure.”

I had my eye on the hollyhock stalk right next to the one Dad was using as his object lesson. “*What's* the first half of my adventure?” I asked. My mind was in the kitchen where frying country sausage was sending its fragrance all the way out to our outdoor schoolroom.

“Ambition,” Dad answered in a teacherlike voice. “Every time you see a hollyhock anywhere, you're supposed to say to yourself, ‘Bill Collins, don't be a lazy good-for-nothing! Be ambitious! Wake up your mind and put it to work to be somebody worthwhile in life. Don't be a drone lying around a hive!’ Does that make sense to you?”

“Does what make sense?” I asked, but I thought I knew what he meant. He expected me to be a hollyhock kind of boy—not an idler or a worthless, shiftless, lazy good-for-nothing, as he had just said.

Well, Dad and Mom and I were pretty good friends. All three of us laughed with each other at different things that happened around the place or at things one or the other had read or

heard somewhere. We would sometimes have a joke between us for a whole day. So, even though I was sort of sleepy and also hungry, I looked up at the grin under Dad's mustache and asked, "Are you sure you're interested in my being an ambitious boy, or are you thinking about the garden out there, hoping somebody's only son will show a little more interest in it?"

"The garden, of course," was Dad's good-natured answer. Then he added, "Ambition in a boy's mind can do a better job controlling his muscles than three beech switches hanging on the gun rack in the toolshed."

My mind's eye looked right through the ponderosa pine wall of the toolshed and saw Dad's gun rack with two shotguns and my .22 rifle on it. I also saw, lying across the lower horns of the rack, three innocent-looking beech switches, and I remembered how Dad had once remarked to Poetry's father, "The guns are for wild animals, and the switches are for wild boys."

Right then Mom called from the kitchen door that breakfast was ready. It probably would be pancakes and sausage, milk, and maybe some kind of fresh fruit, such as yesterday's just picked cherries, which I'd picked myself from the tree that grew not more than twenty feet from the hollyhocks' last tall, spire-like stalk.

"One minute," Dad called to Mom. "I have to assign tomorrow's lesson!"

Dad assigned it to me quickly, seeming to be in more of a hurry than before Mom had called. I took my small notebook out of my shirt pocket and wrote down what he told me.

On the way back to the board walk that led to our kitchen's back door, I was thinking about Dad's assignment, which was "Look up page 204 in *The Greem Treasury* in our upstairs library and study it. Also look up the word *dew* in our unabridged *Webster*. Then read William Cullen Bryant's poem 'To a Waterfowl.'"

Tomorrow I was to tell my teacher-father what, if any, new ideas had come to me.

Before going into the house to pancakes, sausage, fruit, and whatever else Mom would have ready, Dad and I stopped for a minute at the low, round-topped table near the iron pitcher pump, where there was a washbasin, a bar of soap, and a towel. There I washed my already clean face and hands.

That was one of the rules at our house. A certain red-haired, freckle-faced boy I knew got to wash his face and hands before he was allowed to sit at the table three times a day, seven days a week, three hundred sixty-five days a year. Say, did you ever figure up how many times you've had to do that since you were old enough to be told? Even in one year, it'd be over a thousand times!

"You first," I said to my father, since he was the oldest and was more used to cold water than I was.

While Dad was washing his hands and face,

I studied the leaves of Mom's row of salvia growing at the other end of her horseradish bed. When I lifted the chin of one of the green leaves, what to my wondering eyes should appear on the underside of the leaf but as much dew as there was on top!

Later, while I was sitting at the table with Dad and Mom—Charlotte Ann was still asleep in her little bed in the front bedroom—I said to Dad, "I'm already ready for tomorrow's lesson. William Cullen Bryant was wrong when he wrote 'Whither, midst falling dew . . .'"

I knew that those four words were the first line of Bryant's "To a Waterfowl." I'd memorized it in school.

"Dew," I said to Dad around a bite of pancake, "doesn't do what he said it did."

Mom, not knowing what on earth—or under a hollyhock or salvia leaf—Dad and I were talking about, looked at me across the table and asked, "What kind of talk is that—'Do doesn't do what he said it did'?"

Our senses of humor came to life, and for a few seconds Dad and I had a good laugh at Mom's expense. Dad asked her, "How do you spell do, my dear? Do you spell dew *do* or do you spell do *dew*?"

Mom's face was a blank, except for the question marks and exclamation points on it. Her kind of pretty eyebrows went down, and a nervous little crinkle ran up and down her forehead.

Dad explained what he and I meant, but

for some reason, *her* sense of humor didn't come to life. So we changed the subject and went on eating our sausage and pancakes and cherries.

Because I was a boy with a boy's mind, having more important things on it than dew, which didn't fall at all but condensed instead, I felt the outdoors calling me to come and enjoy it.

There was, for instance, a little brown path—made by boys' bare feet—that ran as crooked as a cow path through the woods to the spring. It began on the other side of the rail fence on the far side of the road and twisted and dodged along, round and round, till it came to a hill that led down to the Black Widow Stump and on to the leaning linden tree.

Beginning at the linden tree, another path scooted east along a high rail fence to a wild crab apple tree and on to the place where the gang squeezed through the fence to get to the bayou.

Still another path ran from the leaning linden tree down a steep incline to the spring. From the spring, after you eased through a barbed wire fence, a cool path ran between the bayou and the creek, through tall marsh grass and all kinds of weeds to a clearing that bordered Dragonfly's father's cornfield. It ended at a well-worn grassy place under the Snatzer-pazooka tree, where we had some of our most important meetings and where we left our clothes when we went in swimming.

That very place was the place where, at two o'clock that afternoon, the gang was supposed to meet—all of us that could. We were to discuss plans to spend tomorrow night at Old Man Paddler's cabin far up in the hills, beyond the cave and the sycamore tree and on the other side of the swamp.

All the whole wonderful Sugar Creek playground was sort of in my mind while I was at the breakfast table that morning—the morning of the beginning of the story of the Battle of the Bees.

In a sad corner of my mind, though, was something else—a garden begging a boy my size (with or without ambition) to come and do something about the small weeds, which, since the last rain, were growing twice as fast as the black-seeded Simpson lettuce, the Ebenezer onions, and the Golden Bantam sweet corn.

In the educational section of my mind was a row of hollyhocks with maybe a hundred many-colored flowers in full bloom. All the flowers seemed to have voices calling me to get out into the garden as soon as I could. "Ambition, Bill Collins! Ambition! Don't be an idle good-for-nothing! Don't be a drone lazying around at the door of a beehive!"

I'd seen hundreds of dopey drones lying around the beehives in Dad's apiary. While the worker bees were as busy as bees flying in and out, gathering honey and helping pollinate the clover in Harm Groenwald's field on the other

side of the lane, those lazy, good-for-nothing drones did nothing at all.

Sitting at the breakfast table that morning, I didn't have the slightest idea that bees and beehives, Charlotte Ann, and a home run I was going to knock that afternoon were going to give me an exciting adventure of mind and muscle such as I'd never had before in all my half-long life.

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SUGAR CREEK GANG

**LOCKED IN
THE ATTIC**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS

CHICAGO

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pretty soon I was just outside the east screen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

so uppity just because of his fancy boots and hat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" a chorus of voices asked him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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SUGAR CREEK GANG
RUNAWAY
RESCUE

Paul Hutchens

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CHICAGO

1

It was a very lazy, sunshiny early summer afternoon, and I was sitting on the board seat of the big swing under the walnut tree, thinking more or less about nothing. I never dreamed that, before the week would pass, I'd be head over heels in the middle of the red shoe mystery.

My reddish brown mustached father had just climbed down our new extension ladder, which had the Collins name painted on it. He'd been checking the top of the swing to see how safe it was, and he said, "Well, Son, you don't need to worry. Everything up there is all right. Just don't let the whole Sugar Creek Gang swing on it at one time."

He took the ladder down, slid the two sections of it together, and carried it toward our truck, which at the time was standing in the shade of the plum tree near the iron pitcher pump. There he lifted that ladder as if it was made of feathers instead of aluminum and laid it in the back of the truck. He was very proud either of our new ladder or of his powerful biceps. I couldn't tell which.

He climbed into the truck's cab then, started the motor, and began to drive toward the gate that leads out onto the gravel road.

"Where you going with that ladder?" I

called to him. He was just driving past the mailbox that had “Theodore Collins” painted on it when he called back to me, “One of our neighbors wants to borrow it for a few days.”

With that, he was off down the road, a cloud of white dust following him.

I stood up on the board seat of the swing and pumped myself one- or two-dozen times and then sat down to coast, enjoying the feel of the wind in my face and the flapping of my shirt sleeves. Swinging like that gives a boy one of the finest feelings he can have—even if he hardly ever gets to have it very long if his folks are at home.

In fact, that very second Mom called from the east window of our house for me to come and help her with a little woman’s work. She wanted the house to have a good cleaning before she left for Memory City tomorrow to spend a week at my cousin Wally’s house.

It was while I was dusting the lower shelf of our lamp table that I noticed the birthday book in which Mom keeps a record of all the names and birthday dates of people she sends cards to every year. Just out of curiosity, I leafed through to see whose birthday would be coming soon and gasped in surprise when I saw Mom’s own name. Then I remembered her birthday was next Saturday, the day she would be coming home from Memory City.

That meant I’d better set my brain to working and think of something nice to get for her—something extra special.

Mom must have heard me gasp, because she looked up from the kitchen floor where she was spreading wax on the linoleum and said through the open door, “Anything wrong?”

I started whisking my dustcloth a little faster and whistling and hardly bothered to answer, saying with a half yawn, “Oh, nothing. Just something I thought of.” And I watched for a chance to put the book back where it had been.

Anyway, it was while I was on my way Saturday afternoon to get a birthday present for Mom that Poetry and I stumbled onto the mystery—the red shoe mystery, that is.

The very special entirely different kind of gift I had decided on was up in the hills not far from Old Man Paddler’s cabin. We were trudging happily along when what to my wondering eyes should appear but somebody’s red leather slip-on shoe lying in the mud at the edge of the muskrat pond.

That spring-fed pond, as you may already know, is about halfway through the swamp. The sycamore tree and the mouth of the cave are at one end, and the woods near Old Man Paddler’s clapboard-roofed log cabin are at the other end.

Even from as far away from the shoe as I was at the time, which was about thirty feet, I could tell it wasn’t anybody’s old worn-out, thrown-away shoe. It looked almost new, as if it had been worn hardly at all. It had a low heel and was the kind and size a teenage girl might wear.

I was so surprised at what I was seeing that I stopped and stood stock-still, and Poetry, who was walking behind my red wagon in the path, bumped into it with his shins.

For a few seconds, Poetry staggered around trying to regain his lost balance. Then he lost it completely, upsetting the wagon at the same time, and scrambled, rolled, and slid down the slope toward the pond's muddy bank. And also toward the red shoe.

"What on earth!" his ducklike voice managed to squawk at me. "Why don't you let me know when you're going to slam on your brakes like—"

"Look!" I exclaimed. "Right behind you at the edge of the pond! There's a red shoe. There's been a murder or a kidnapping around here somewhere!"

As soon as I said that, I began to think that probably that was what actually had happened. Somebody had kidnapped a girl and was taking her along the path through the swamp—maybe to the haunted house far up in the hills above Old Man Paddler's cabin. When they stopped here to rest a few minutes, the girl had broken away from him and started to run. She had stumbled over something, maybe her own feet, had fallen, and, like Poetry, had rolled down the slope. Her shoe had gotten stuck in the mud and slipped off when she tried to pull it out. But she had kept on running.

I suppose one reason my imagination was running away like that was because the swamp

was a very eerie place, even in the daytime. That spongy, tree-shaded, sometimes-flooded tract was where the six members of the Sugar Creek Gang had had quite a few exciting and dangerous adventures in the past.

I never will forget the dark night Big Jim's flashlight spotted old hook-nosed John Till's head lying out in the quicksand about thirty feet from the high path we were always careful to stay on when we were going through. That is, we *thought* it was his head lying there but found out a split second later that the rest of him was fastened to it. Somehow he had gotten off the only path there is and had been sucked all the way up to his chin in the mire.

That was a feverish time, I tell you. His calls for help and his scared eyes in the light of the flashlight were enough to make any boy's hair stand on end.

And it was in this very swamp that Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of our gang, had first seen a fierce mother bear wallowing in the mud on a hot summer day the way hogs do in a barnyard wallowing place.

One of our most nerve-tingling experiences happened right here at this muskrat pond when my cousin Wally's copper-colored mongrel, Alexander the Coppersmith, had a fierce under-the-surface battle with a snapping turtle—the biggest turtle there ever was in the Sugar Creek territory.

So, with these adventures in the history section of my mind, it was easy for me to imagine a

screaming girl's frantic struggle with a fierce-faced kidnapper, maybe on the grassy mound I myself was on right that second.

With my mind's eye I could see her wrestle herself out of his clutches, stumble, and roll down the bank, where her shoe came off in the mud. She didn't dare stop to get it and put it back on but kept running on through the swamp to the woods and on to Old Man Paddler's cabin or in the other direction to the sycamore tree and the cave.

That was as far as I got to think along that kind of scary line, because Poetry, who had picked up the shoe and had a different feeling about it than I did, started to quote one of the hundred and one poems he knew by heart:

“For want of a nail, the shoe was lost;
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost;
For want of a horse, the rider was lost.”

I'd memorized that poem myself when I was in the fourth grade.

There were quite a few things in our school readers that were supposed to teach us things that were good for a boy to know. This one taught us how important little things could be. If the horse's owner had noticed when the horseshoe had lost a nail and had a new nail put in, the horse wouldn't have lost the shoe and wouldn't have gone lame and stumbled and fallen, and the rider wouldn't have gotten killed. A boy ought to be careful about little

things such as having his mother sew up the small torn places in his shirt and not dropping lighted matches anywhere.

That lost-and-found shoe wasn't very large, but it could be a very important clue. "Be careful!" I called down the knoll to Poetry. "Don't wipe off or smudge up any fingerprints!"

"Who cares about fingerprints?" he called back. "Come on down and take a look at these *footprints!*"

I left my upset wagon where it was and clambered backwards to where Poetry was. "What footprints? Where?" I asked him, not seeing anybody's tracks.

"Right there!" he said. "At the edge of the water!"

I looked again and saw what he was stooped over and pointing at with his right forefinger. "That," I objected, "is a muskrat's track!"

I was looking at a three-inch-long, web-footed track—several of them, in fact—at the water's edge, and I knew that the webbed tracks had been made by the hind feet of one of the cutest wild animals there is in the Sugar Creek territory, a chuckle-headed, beady-eyed, stocky-bodied, nearly naked-tailed rodent.

Next, my eyes searched all along the bank of the pond where we'd found the red shoe. I saw only muskrat tracks—not one single human being's tracks anywhere.

"I guess we have stumbled onto a mystery," Poetry was willing to admit. Then he yawned, as if it wasn't too important, and, handing the

red leather shoe to me, he added, "Let's get going. We have to get the tree dug and balled and back and set out before your folks get home."

Now my mind was divided. An hour ago, when we'd started from home, pulling my red wagon along, it seemed I was on the way to do one of the most important things a boy could do—plan a big birthday surprise for his mother.

In fact, Dad and I had planned it together and had managed to keep it a secret for a whole week. It had been easy to keep the secret that long because Mom had been away from home that long. And when she would get back to the Collins place late this afternoon, the surprise would be waiting for her in the backyard just outside the dining room window.

The cute little two-foot-high blue spruce tree Poetry and I were on our way up to Old Man Paddler's to get would be standing green and straight and proud halfway between the two cherry trees at the end of the row of hollyhocks that grew along our orchard fence. Would my wonderful mother ever be pleased!

That's why Poetry and I were taking the path through the swamp instead of the shortcut through the cave. The cave actually comes out in the old man's cellar, but we never could have pulled the wagon through the cave.

As I said, my mind was divided. I had a birthday surprise to hurry up and get for Mom, and maybe I had a kidnap mystery to solve. Somebody somewhere—maybe close by—needed a boy's help.

“How,” I demanded of Poetry, as if he knew and didn’t want to tell me, “how in the world did the shoe get *here*? There isn’t a human being’s tracks anywhere except ours!”

“It fell here, of course. How else?”

“From where?” I asked and looked up at the overhanging branches of a big elm. “Shoes don’t grow on trees!”

“All right,” he said loftily. “I’ll get going on the mystery myself. Somebody’s got to solve it, and it may just as well be the best detective in the whole county.”

He meant himself, Leslie Thompson, which, even though I knew he was joking, was almost the truth. His mind was always ferreting out the answer to some knotty problem.

“First things first, though,” Detective Thompson began, and the tone of his ducklike voice told me he had taken charge of the mystery and I was to take orders from him from now on. “You carry the shoe. I’ll pull the wagon this time, and you follow behind. Keep your eyes peeled for anything suspicious such as a red dress with a girl in it and another red shoe with a girl’s foot in it.”

Of course, Poetry was right about our needing to get going. We had to get going to get done what we had to do, shoe or no shoe, girl or no girl.

Even though in a few minutes we were quite a way from where we had found the red shoe and were hurrying along on the winding narrow path, leaving the pond behind, my

mind was still back where it had been. Who, maybe last night, maybe early this morning, maybe only a few hours ago, had been in such a hurry that she had lost a shoe and hadn't dared stop to get it?

Also, Poetry's little ditty was repeating itself in my mind:

*For want of a nail, the shoe was lost;
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost;
For want of a horse, the rider was lost.*

I wasn't thinking of a lost horseshoe, though, but of a lost, left red shoe and the girl who had been wearing it.

I kept my eyes peeled in a circle of directions as we hurried along, looking and hoping to see a red dress with a girl in it. Whoever she was, did she need the kind of help two boys with work-and-play-hardened muscles could give?

Where was the other shoe, and why had this one been tossed away, if it had? I decided to wipe off the mud, using the gunnysack we'd brought along in the wagon for balling the tree.

The shoe, as I'd first decided, was almost new. "Hey!" I gasped to Poetry. "Look at the sole! It doesn't have any mud on it! Only on the side! She *wasn't* wearing it when it got left in the mud! It wasn't even on her foot!"

But Detective Thompson wasn't impressed. "Like I said," he called back over his shoulder, "it fell or was thrown from somewhere!"

Ahead of us I could see more light through the trees. That meant that soon we'd be through the swamp, into Old Man Paddler's woods, and on the way to his cabin and the stream behind his woodshed where the spruce tree would be waiting for us. In a little while, I started to think, we'd—

And that was as far as I got to think. At right that second, as plain as a white cloud in a clear blue sky, I heard a bloodcurdling scream, the kind a wildcat makes when it's hunting or maybe like a mountain lion makes. It was that loud.

"Wildcat!" I whispered to Poetry, who'd stopped stock-still so suddenly that I whammed into the wagon with my own shins, and we almost had another upset.

"Not a wildcat!" he corrected me. "They do their roaming and hunting in the morning and evening twilight. In the hot afternoons they sleep. Besides, last summer we killed the only wildcat there ever was in this part of the country. Remember?"

I remembered, all right, one of the most dangerous adventures we'd had in our whole lives. But right then I thought of something I'd not thought of for a long time. "She had two little kitten wildcats, didn't she? And we took them to the zoo in Memory City?"

"That's what I said," Poetry countered. "First, we killed the mother, and then we gave her babies away."

"Yeah," I came back, "but whoever heard of

a family of wildcats without there being a father as well as a mother! Old Stubtail's babies had to have a father!"

Already I was cringing at the idea, and my eyes were alert for a reddish brown fur coat with a wildcat in it. "There! There it is again!" I half whispered, half yelled to Poetry. This time the sound wasn't a scream, though. It was a wolflike cry that was half howl and half laugh with a little mournful wail all through it.

"It's a loon!" Poetry decided emphatically.

"But it can't be. We've never seen any loons around here. Only when we've been on camping trips in the northern lake country!"

But sounds such as the two bloodcurdling howls we'd just heard had to come from something or somebody. I wished Big Jim were with us with his rifle. Or Circus with his bow and arrow. Or even Little Jim, with his long walking stick, which he'd made himself and always carried. Or Dragonfly, who was good with his slingshot. Anybody, just so there would be more of us if we accidentally did run into a situation that would need the whole gang to solve it or to fight it out.

I was actually trembling inside as, with the red shoe in my hand, I hurried along after Poetry. I just knew there was something wrong somewhere. Somebody somewhere needed our help.

36

SUGAR CREEK GANG

The **CASE OF THE
MISSING CALF**

Paul Hutchens

MOODY PUBLISHERS

CHICAGO

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the way to the top of the stairs, where

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I knew from the different buzzards I had

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Seagulls are scavengers, too,” Dad went on.

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

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

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

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

It seemed all right to tell my folks what I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As I sliced away with my hoe, thinking

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

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

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

Boy oh boy!