

# 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"Jasper!"*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well?" Dad demanded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2

It happened this way. Roy and I were lying there in the grass on the bank of the creek just as I told you we would. Our fishing poles reached far out over the water, and funny-looking, enormous-eyed, four-winged dragonflies nosed around the lines like hummingbirds around Mom's morning glories.

All of a sudden my bobber, which was nothing more than a big cork out of Mom's vinegar jug, started acting as if it was alive. It moved around in a funny little half circle, kind of slow at first, and then *plunk!* Just like that, it ducked under, making a big splash. The end of my pole bent down and struck the water with a smack. I knew that I'd hooked a fish.

I grabbed my end of the pole and held on tight. Roy told me afterward that my eyes stuck out like a dragonfly's when I was pulling that fish in. And my line didn't break either, because I had a brand new one.

That's another reason I knew my dad liked me, maybe better than any dad ever liked his boy before. When I'd gone to get my fishing pole out of the toolshed an hour before, it had a brand new line on it with a reel and everything. Dad acted surprised when he saw it, but

there was a twinkle in his gray eyes. And I knew he'd bought it for me.

Maybe you think I wasn't scared enough when my bare feet slipped on the edge of the bank and flew right out from under me and I went down *kersplash* into the water. But I still was holding onto that fishing pole for dear life.

Roy was standing on shore, jumping up and down, yelling at the top of his lungs, and screaming at me what to do and not to let go of the pole. "I saw him!" he cried. "He was a big black bass two feet long!"

I could barely touch the bottom of the creek with my feet. While I was feeling the heavy pulling and jerking of that fish on the end of the line—and thinking about my new overalls being all wet and what Mom would say when I got home—Roy got hold of one of my hands and started to pull me out.

"Give me the pole, quick!" he screamed.

And then, just as it had happened to me, it happened to him. His feet slipped, and there we were, both of us in the water. Of course, we could both swim, so there wasn't any danger of drowning. You know, everybody ought to learn how to swim when he's little because you can never tell when you'll need to know.

Well, between the two of us we landed the fish. It was a black bass, all right, only it was about fourteen inches long—or maybe twelve—instead of two feet. And that's how Roy came to get the nickname "Dragonfly." His eyes were bigger than his head! He was always seeing

things twice as big as they were. He kind of liked the name, and so did I. I felt quite proud that I'd thought of it first.

But I tell you, that water felt good!

"Now that we're all wet, we'd just as well go swimming," Dragonfly said. "Besides, we'll have to let our clothes dry, won't we? And they'll dry quicker than anything hanging out on those bushes while we swim."

Dad hadn't told me I *couldn't* go swimming. I guess he figured maybe I'd like to, and he didn't want me to be tempted to disobey him. Dragonfly's parents hadn't told him not to either.

So in about a minute and a half we had that twelve-inch bass—oh, well, maybe he was only eleven inches long—fastened on a stringer and swimming around in his jail over in the branch that empties into the creek right near where we'd been fishing. Our clothes were hanging on some bushes drying, and we were out there in that fine, clean water, splashing, swimming, diving, and having the time of our lives. Understand, we were waiting for our clothes to dry. We weren't just swimming for the fun of it, of course!

We stayed in for maybe a half hour, having a grand time and wishing all the gang was there. Let me tell you about our gang, the finest bunch of boys you ever heard of. I reckon there will never be a gang of boys in the whole world that'll have any more fun than we did.

There was little Jimmy Foote, who was the littlest one of us and who always obeyed his par-

ents and was a sort of mascot for us because he was so likable. And he wasn't any sissy either! That little fellow was brave! Once when there was a rifle—but that's another story, which I can't tell you till a little later.

Well, there were Little Jim and Poetry and—but let me tell you about Leslie Thompson. We called him "Poetry" because he was always quoting a verse or two of poetry. Everything he saw would start him off, and sometimes we'd have to shut him up or the rest of us wouldn't get a chance to say a word. He was almost as broad as he was tall, and his voice was changing so that it sounded squawky. He used to sing soprano in the junior choir in our church, but now he wouldn't sing at all. And folks just don't seem to understand that when a boy's voice gets all squawky like a duck with a bad cold, he's terribly bashful about singing in public. It didn't mean that Poetry was any less interested in church.

I know because once I stayed all night at his house, and before we went to bed he got right down on his knees and prayed. And when he got through saying his little poem prayer, which he'd learned when he was little, he added a lot of words of his own, just like he was talking to somebody right in the room. And I guess he was. It kind of scared me at first, but I didn't let him see the stubborn tear that got in my eyes about that time. Anyway, that's how I learned to add things to my memorized prayer too.

Poetry was always acting mysterious. He was

going to be a detective someday, he said. And he was always getting into mischief.

And then there was Circus Browne, whose real name was Daniel August Browne. Whatever his parents wanted to give him such a long-legged name for, I don't know. We called him "Circus" because he was so acrobatic. He could turn handsprings, walk on his hands, and shinny up a tree quicker than anybody I ever saw.

Then, besides Dragonfly, Poetry, Little Jim, Circus, and me, there was Big Jim. We called him Big Jim because he and Little Jim had the same name and we didn't want to get them mixed up. Big Jim was the leader of the gang, and he knew all the things a leader ought to know. He'd belonged to a Boy Scout patrol before he moved into our neighborhood and was what they call a first class Scout. First he'd been a tenderfoot, then second class, then first class. He could have gone on to qualify for star or life or eagle rank, but his folks had had to move, and there wasn't any Scout troop where we lived. Besides, you have to be twelve years old to be even a tenderfoot. That meant that Dragonfly, Poetry, Little Jim, and I would have been left out. So Big Jim just called us The Gang.

Big Jim was strong, almost as strong as my dad, I reckon, and he used almost perfect English. He could make a tourniquet for stopping the flow of blood when anybody was bleeding terribly. He could tie twenty-one different kinds of knots, such as the fisherman's bend, the half hitch, and the bowline. He was the catcher of

our ball team and could knock in more home runs than any of us. He could jump the farthest and was the best fighter I ever saw—except we didn't get into many fights because Big Jim kept the other boys in the neighborhood from starting anything. They were all scared of him.

So Poetry could quote more rhymes than any of us. Circus could climb a tree the fastest and do more acrobatic stunts. Dragonfly was able to see the farthest. Little Jim acted more like a Christian should than all the rest of us put together. And Big Jim was our leader. As for me, I guess I was just an ordinary boy. I didn't even have a nickname except just plain Bill, which is short for William.

As I said, Dragonfly and I must have stayed in the water for about a half hour. Anyway, when you haven't been in swimming for a long time and it's such a terribly hot day, time goes pretty fast. You forget about everything except how much fun you're having.

It was Dragonfly who saw it first—saw *him*, rather. All of a sudden he stopped splashing and yelling and muttered to me, “Quick, Bill! Get down under the water! Somebody's comin'.”

We both dropped down so that only our chins and noses were sticking out, looking maybe like a couple of turtles with only their noses showing above the water.

“It's an old man with long white whiskers,” Dragonfly whispered, “and he's coming right straight this way.”

I peeked. “I don't see anything,” I said. And

then I saw him—a short man, round like a barrel, bareheaded, with whiskers and long, shaggy white hair that reached down to his belt. Except that he didn't have on any belt, on account of he was wearing a pair of old overalls. He had on dark glasses, and he shuffled along as though he couldn't see very well.

He looked just like the people we call tramps sometimes look. "Itinerants," Dad calls them, which doesn't sound so bad. But I guess there never was a boy who wasn't a little bit scared of one that looked as fierce as that one did.