

# 1

**T**he trouble the Sugar Creek Gang had with our new teacher started the very first day we started to school again after Christmas vacation. As you maybe know, we all had flown down to Palm Tree Island and came back to find that, while we were gone, our pretty lady teacher had gotten married and had resigned from being teacher. We were going to have a *man* teacher instead to finish out the year. Imagine that! A *man* teacher for the Sugar Creek School, when all we'd ever had had been *lady* teachers whom we'd all liked. We were all plenty mad. Plenty!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Can I go now, then?” I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Almost right away I wondered if there was

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A divorce?” I said. “What for?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then the bell rang, and in we went.

## 2

It's a crazy feeling, coming back to school after a super Christmas vacation and having a new teacher, a *man* teacher with shell-rimmed glasses and a head that is bald in the middle, and who has one all-gold tooth right in front. Seeing that gold tooth made me think of Dragonfly, whose large front teeth were much too large for his very small face.

School had been going on for a while, and it was maybe after eleven o'clock, and the first grade was up on the long bench in front of Mr. Black's desk, with different ones in the first grade standing whenever Mr. Black told them to and coming to stand beside him, where he sat at his big desk, and reading out loud, making it hard for the rest of us to study, which it always is in a one-room school anyway.

I looked across the schoolroom to Dragonfly, who was next to the wall beside the front window, and he happened to be looking at me at the same time. He had a mischievous grin on his always mischievous face, and just as I looked he folded a little piece of paper and slipped it across the aisle to Poetry, who slipped it across another aisle to Circus, who slipped it across to me.

Mr. Black was very busy, and I had already

made up my mind that because the lenses of his glasses were very thick, he probably couldn't see back in the schoolroom very far but could see better while he was reading.

I was supposed to be studying geography at the time, and I had my big geography book standing up on my desk in front of me. It was the easiest thing in the world for me to unfold the note Dragonfly had sent across to me and read it without Mr. Black seeing me do it, and this is what I read in Dragonfly's crazy handwriting: "Some people have their hair parted on the left side, some have it parted on the right, others have it parted in the middle, and still others have it *departed*."

Well, it was an old joke, which I'd heard before, but it was the funniest thing I had thought of for a long time. And because I had been sad or mad nearly all morning, when I read that crazy note in Dragonfly's crazy handwriting, I couldn't help but snicker out loud, which I did.

Well, I'm sorry to say, Mr. Black was not only able to *see* all over that one-room schoolroom, but he was able to *hear* all over it too.

All of a sudden he jerked up his bald head and looked right straight toward me and said, "Young man! You may stay in after school tonight!"—which didn't sound very good on account of my dad's wanting me to come home early for some reason.

"Also," Mr. Black said—and his voice was a

little kinder than it had been—"you may lay your book down flat on the desk!"

Then he let the little girl Elfinita, who was one of Circus's smaller sisters, sit down on the recitation bench beside another little girl whose name was Suzanna. And then Mr. Black pushed back his big swivel chair, stood up, looked out over the schoolroom, cleared his throat, and said to all of us, and maybe to me in particular, "Students of the Sugar Creek School, there is only one rule for you to obey. I will write that rule on the blackboard."

He whirled around as though he meant business, looked for and found an eraser, swished it across some arithmetic problems that were there, and, taking a piece of chalk, wrote the rule in big letters that could be seen from every corner of the room, "Behave Yourselves!" Then he laid the chalk down, sat down in his noisy chair, and went on with his class.

But every two or three minutes, it seemed, he would look in my direction, and I knew that I had started off on the wrong foot—in fact, it was Dragonfly's wrong foot I'd started off on. I was wondering if Shorty Long's pop had not only told Mr. Black we were a bunch of rough-necks but also maybe that I was the worst one.

I tucked the note into my pocket when I could, making up my mind that the first chance I had I'd tear it into a thousand pieces and toss it into the big, round Poetry-shaped stove in the center of the room, which was

going full blast that morning, making the schoolroom almost too hot for all of us.

But the real trouble came when it was time for my arithmetic class to recite. Mr. Black called us to come to the recitation bench, and all of us boys who were in that group—there were no girls—got up out of our seats and went forward and sat down in front of his desk. There were just three of us in that arithmetic class—Poetry, Circus, and I. Shorty Long was not in the same class I was, and I was glad.

Well, I was still feeling pretty bad and pretty mad and also was trying not to remember the note Dragonfly had sent to me and which was still in my pocket, that note about some men's hair being parted on the left side, some parted on the right, other men's hair being parted in the middle, and still others having it *departed*.

Maybe I ought to tell you that the very first thing Mr. Black had done when school started that morning was to have each one of us write his name on a blank sheet of paper and hand it in to him. I could tell that he had a good memory and that he would be able to remember who all of us were. Most schoolteachers are very smart.

I guess I didn't realize that I was only half sitting. I'd slid down so far on the bench that I was almost lying on my back, with my feet sticking out in front of me and the heels resting on the edge of the platform. In fact, I had one shoe on top of the other one, thinking about how long my feet looked, and Poetry, who was

sitting beside me, had his feet the same way. Each of us knew that the teacher couldn't see our feet because he was on the other side of the desk.

Poetry had the biggest feet of any of the Sugar Creek Gang, as you maybe know. The toe of his top foot was almost three inches higher than the toe of mine, but we were being very careful not to touch the back of the desk because that would scratch it and also because the teacher might hear our feet and know what we were doing.

All of a sudden Mr. Black's big voice said, "Long, sit up!"

In my mind's eye I could see Shorty Long, whose seat was right behind the recitation bench, all slumped in his seat, and I felt good inside that he was getting called down.

I guess I didn't realize that I'd slid down as much as I had because I'd just been thinking about how long Poetry's and my feet were. And since it was arithmetic class, I was dividing by two the three inches Poetry's feet were longer than mine and was thinking that each one of his feet was one and one-half inches longer than mine.

Mr. Black looked as though he was looking right straight at me through those thick-lensed glasses, and he said again, "*Long!* I said *sit up!*"

Well, there was a shuffling noise behind me, and in my mind's eye I could see Shorty Long sitting up as straight as his body could. All of us were sitting very still when, all of a sud-

den, Mr. Black pushed back his big chair, stood to his feet, swished around the corner of the desk over to where I was, stepped down off the platform, glared down at me, and shouted, "When I tell you to sit up, I mean *sit up!*"

I spoke up quick and said, "Mr.—Mr.—" and then I jerked myself up into a straight position and said, "Honest, Mr. Black, I didn't know you were talking to *me!* I thought you were talking to Shorty Long!"

He glared at me and said, "Isn't your name *William?*"

"Uh—yes," I said, "my name's William, but not W-William *Long*. My name's William Collins!"

And then it dawned on me what had happened. When we had handed in our names that morning on blank pieces of paper, Shorty Long had written his name down as William *Long*, and I had written mine as William *Collins*, and Mr. Black had got our names mixed up. And that's how I happened to get into trouble.

Mr. Black just stood there and looked at me and kept on looking, and all the time I was feeling worse because things were all so mixed up. I guess he was still angry too. Anyway, he didn't seem to be sorry he had made such a terrible mistake. All he said was "The recitation bench is *not* a place for a midmorning nap!"

"Y-yes, sir," I said, as politely as I could. I was trying to remember something my dad had told me, quoting from the Bible. It goes something like this: "A harsh word stirs up anger,"

which means if you say angry words to people, it'll make *them* mad too. Also, if you say angry words to people, it helps to make you still madder yourself. The way to cool off after a fight is to start using kind words instead of angry ones.

The fierce look in Mr. Black's eyes made me realize I ought to start making up with him right away. He was still glaring at me. Then he folded his arms and stared straight through me, saying, "William Collins, you may hand me that note in your pocket!"

Well, that was too much. All of a sudden I could see the whole world falling upside down, not only for me but for the rest of us. But I remembered about using kind and respectful words, so I said politely, "What note, sir?"

"The one in your pocket. I was going to wait until after school for it, but I'll take it now, since it was passed during school hours and since so many boys had a share in passing it on to you."

Suddenly Big Jim spoke up from the back of the room. "Mr. Black, may I say a word?"

Mr. Black raised his eyes and looked toward the back where Big Jim was sitting. He said, "You may stand up and say it."

I looked around and saw Big Jim standing up straight and tall. His jaw was set as though he was thinking, and he said in a polite but very firm voice, "May I have the note, Mr. Black? I'm the leader of the Sugar Creek Gang. And that's one of our rules—no note writing or passing in

school. If you don't mind, the Sugar Creek Gang will discipline William Collins."

It surely sounded funny to hear Big Jim call me "William." And the way I felt, you could have knocked me over with a feather. It certainly was a great idea, if only it would work.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Black said, "but I insist on having the note. You may be seated."

Big Jim didn't be seated. He kept on standing. Then he spoke again, and this is what he said very politely: "In the United States we respect the personal property of others. Isn't that note William Collins's personal property?"

Mr. Black didn't seem to like that. He said to Big Jim, "You sit down," and I saw Big Jim's face turn as white as a new snowdrift. He kept on standing, and Mr. Black kept on standing, and they were glaring at each other the way two angry dogs do when they meet for the first time and each is trying to let the other one know which one of them is going to be the boss. Except that I knew Big Jim didn't want to be anybody's boss. He only wanted what he would call "justice."

Then Big Jim said, "I *will* be seated, Mr. Black. You have a right to tell me that because you are the teacher, but I respectfully repeat, I think that note is William Collins's personal property!"

Big Jim sat down in a dignified way, like a soldier obeying an officer. He sat there with his pencil in his hand, making fierce little jabs on the yellow writing tablet on his desk, and I

know he was doing what people call “doodling.”

I always liked to see what Big Jim’s doodling looked like, because he made the most interesting doodles when he was making marks and talking to other people at the same time. He actually drew interesting pictures and didn’t know he was doing it.

Mr. Black held out one of his big, pudgy hands toward me and said, “All right, William Collins, I’ll take the note. Now!”

Well, what was I to do? Big Jim was the leader of the Sugar Creek Gang, and I had always done what Big Jim told me to. Mr. Black was the teacher of Sugar Creek School, and all of us boys were supposed to obey the teacher. Also, I had my dad’s orders to behave myself. And not only that, my parents had taught me that the Bible itself teaches that a Christian ought to obey those who have the rule over him. But the whole question that was mixed up in my red head (which wasn’t thinking very clearly that day anyway) was, who *did* have the rule over me—Mr. Black or Big Jim?

I had my hand in my pocket, gripping the note tight. I was wishing I could tear it up with one hand but knew I couldn’t. Without knowing I was going to, I turned around quick to Big Jim and said, “What’ll I do, Big Jim?”

His face was still white, and I knew that, if he felt the way I did, he was trembling inside and was in the right kind of mood for a good fight. And if it had been another gang instead

of Mr. Black that was causing all the trouble, there would probably have been a real old-fashioned rough-and-tumble before noon.

While I was turned around, I could see that the rest of the boys and girls in that one-room school were feeling just as funny on the inside as I was. Some of the girls were crying a little—except for Circus’s sister Lucille, who didn’t cry easily. Poetry had his big hands doubled up on the desk in front of him. Dragonfly’s very small face looked even smaller, and his mussed-up hair looked as though it was trying to stand on end. He had a colored pencil in one hand and, without knowing what he was doing, had its purple point pressed against his two large front teeth. Little Jim sat there holding onto his long, new yellow pencil just the way he does when we’re out in the woods and there is danger and he holds onto a stick, which he nearly always carries when we go on hikes. Circus’s monkeylike face didn’t look mischievous, and I could see the muscles in his jaw moving as if he was almost wishing he could get into a fight with somebody.

Then Big Jim said, “Bill, I think you’d better let Mr. Black have your personal property.”

Well, my right hand still held onto that note Dragonfly had written. All of a sudden I realized that it was not only Bill Collins who was in trouble, but it was Dragonfly, the greatest little guy in the gang, except maybe Little Jim.

While I was trying to make up my mind

whether or not to do what Big Jim said, Mr. Black glared down at me with his jaw set and said very firmly, "It's the last time I'm asking you, William Collins! Give it to me *now* or take the consequences!"

Well, I didn't know what the consequences might be, so I pulled my hand out of my pocket and tossed the folded-up note onto the teacher's desk.

And that must have proved to him I *was* a roughneck, for he turned quick as a flash and said, "Stand up, William Collins! Get the note and *hand* it to me," which, for some reason, I did almost right away.

He stood there, the folded note in his hand, behind his big desk and looked out over the schoolroom through his thick-lensed glasses. He said, "Students of Sugar Creek School, the leader of the Sugar Creek Gang is right. This note *was* the personal property of William Collins. However, since it was passed contrary to the rules of this school, it now belongs to me. Also since Roy Gilbert *wrote* the note, I'll ask you to stand up, Roy!" He looked straight over to where Dragonfly was sitting.

I hadn't heard Dragonfly's real name for so long that I hardly knew who Mr. Black meant until I saw Dragonfly jump, shuffle to his feet, and stand looking down at his hands. He was actually shaking, because he knew what I also knew—that the note was making fun of Mr. Black's bald head.

“You may come to the platform, Roy,” Mr. Black said, and his face was very set.

“Y-yes, sir,” Dragonfly said and started to shuffle down the aisle past the first-grade girls near the front and to the desk.

“You wrote this note, Roy?” Mr. Black asked.

Dragonfly’s voice was trembling so badly it was pitiful. “Y-yes, s-sir!” he stuttered, and his voice certainly didn’t sound like a roughneck’s voice, not nearly as much as Mr. Black’s did when he said, “All right, you may read it to the school!”