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The first time I saw that big dangerous-looking snake, it almost scared me half to death. It flattened out its ugly head, with its fierce-looking, shovel-shaped nose, and at the same time expanded its neck until it was almost three times as big as it had been. The snake was making a hissing sound like air being let out of a tire of my blue-and-white bicycle.

I stood stock-still and stared at it, my whole body tense with fright. It was lying in a half coil and had been sunning itself on the sandy path that leads from the two big pignut trees above our garden to an old iron pitcher pump at the other side of our farm.

If anybody had seen me staring at that savage-looking, mad-looking, mad-acting, reddish-yellow, thick-bodied snake with irregular-shaped brownish-black blotches scattered all the way down its length from neck to tail, he'd have said my eyes had widened until they were as big as the puffed-out head and neck of that snake.

I was barefoot too, so if the snake had wanted to, it could have bitten my foot or my ankle or one of my ten bare toes—I was that close to it. I didn't even have a stick in my hand as I sometimes have when I walk around our

farm, so I couldn't sock the snake the way a boy likes to do when he sees one.

"*Hiss-s-s!*" the big-bodied snake said to me fiercely.

Its ugly head was shaped like a triangle in our arithmetic book in school, and its nose turned up at the tip as if it was trying to smell to see what kind of strange animal I was myself.

As I said, I was scared stiff. My greenish-gray eyes must have been almost bulging out of their sockets as I wondered what on earth to do to kill the snake. If I tried to jump back, would it make a lunge for me and strike me with its fangs?

I couldn't help but think of one of the members of the Sugar Creek Gang whose name is Dragonfly. When he sees something exciting before the rest of us do, he always hisses like a snake, and his own eyes get big and round like a dragonfly's eyes are all the time, which is why we call him by that name.

Well, not having a stick to sock the snake, and not knowing what else to do, and being scared anyway, I let out several screams. In fact, I screamed maybe a half-dozen times, because the snake was not only puffing out its neck and hissing, but its triangle-shaped head was darting in and out in my direction very fiercely.

I must have come to life all of a sudden, for the next thing I knew, I had leaped back about six feet and was looking all around for a rock to hit the snake with. But I couldn't find any because Dad and I had been picking up all the

rocks from our farm for years and taking them out of the fields so we could raise better crops.

Even though I didn't find any rock, I did spy a big clod of dirt almost as big as my little sister Charlotte Ann's pretty round head, so I quick stooped, grabbed it up in my big-for-a-boy's hands, lifted it high over my head, and with all my fierce, half-scared, half-mad strength hurled it down toward the snake's shovel-shaped snout.

But as much as I hate to have to admit it, I missed. The dirt clod squished itself into a million particles of dirt and dust right beside where the snake's head had been a second before the clod got there.

And then the queerest thing I ever saw happened. That big forty-inch-long, yellowish-red snake all of a sudden opened its mouth wide and began to twist itself into and out of several kinds of knots as though I had actually hit it and injured it terribly. The next thing I knew, it gave itself a sideways flip-flop and landed on its back, exposing its pretty yellowish-green snake's stomach to the hot sun, which was shining down on both of us.

And the second it got on its back, it all of a sudden quit wriggling and twisting and just lay there as if it was absolutely dead.

What on earth! I thought. *I must have hit it after all!* And yet, I knew I hadn't, because I'd seen my clod of dirt miss by almost six inches. All that had happened to it was that maybe a lot of dust and dirt had spattered it in the eyes

and on the side of its angry head and three-inch-wide puffed-out neck.

But there it lay, not making a move and looking like a terribly big fishing worm that was as lifeless as a fishing worm is when a robin has pecked it to death, just before feeding it to one of her babies.

Well, what do you know? I thought. *I scared him to death!* I didn't know if it was my clod of dirt or the way I had yelled at it. But, of course, it couldn't actually be dead.

I looked around and saw a long stick, which I hadn't seen before, and, just to make sure, I picked up the stick and poked at the snake. It didn't even move the end of its tail but lay absolutely quiet.

I don't know what made me do what I did just then, but I all of a sudden felt very brave, sort of like maybe David in the Bible story, when he had killed a giant with one little stone out of his slingshot. I remembered that David was supposed to have had red hair, like mine, so I looked down at that giant shovel-nosed snake and yelled down at it, "Get up, you coward! Get up and fight like a man!"

Having the long stick in my hand, I knew I could kill it, as I had a lot of garter snakes and water snakes around Sugar Creek. So I yelled at it again, calling it a coward to let a ten-year-old boy scare it to death.

And then I got another surprise. From the direction of the iron pitcher pump, which is right close by the stile that we go over to go to

school in the fall and winter and spring, I heard a boy's yell. I knew it was the voice of my friend Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of our gang, who was my almost best friend and whose house I was on my way to when I had run into the snake.

"Who's a coward?" Poetry yelled to me from the top of the stile, where he was when I looked up and saw him. Then he scrambled his roly-poly self down the stile's four steps and came puffing toward me, walking up the dusty path.

"I just killed a great big snake." I said. "A fierce-looking one about six feet long and as big around as your wrist." It wasn't quite that big, but now that I was a hero, it seemed the snake was bigger than it was. Besides, I wanted Poetry to *think* it was until he got to where he could see it himself. Then I'd tell him I was only fooling, which different members of the gang were always doing to each other anyway.

I stood there, looking at Poetry lumbering toward me. Also I kept glancing at my defeated enemy, wondering how on earth I'd managed to scare it to death.

In a minute Poetry was there, and both of us were standing back about eight or ten feet and looking down at the yellowish-green, up-turned stomach of the snake.

"How'd you do it?" Poetry asked. "What'd you hit him with—that stick?"

"I scared him to death!"

"*Scared* him to death! That's just plain dumb.

You can't do that to a snake. You have to hit him with something."

"I did," I said with a mischievous grin in my mind. "I threw my voice at him, and it hit him, and he just twisted himself up into a couple of knots, like a boy does when he gets the cramps from eating green apples, and he plopped himself over on his back and died, right in front of my eyes. I'm a ventriloquist. I can throw my voice, you know."

Well, it was fun kidding Poetry. Then I told him I'd missed the snake with a clod of dirt but that he'd died anyway.

"Maybe there was a rock in the clod," Poetry said, "and when the clod hit the ground six inches from his head, and burst in pieces, the rock flew out and hit him on the head, and it just sort of accidentally killed him."

That reminded me again of red-haired David. If there was anything in the world I'd rather do than anything else, it was to imagine myself to be somebody else—like a hero in our history books at school or a brave character in the Bible. Right that second, I remembered that David's one small smooth stone had socked Giant Goliath, killing him deader than a doornail. David had rushed up to the fallen giant and had stood on him, and it seemed maybe I ought to do that to my giant-sized, shovel-nosed snake.

"That's Giant Goliath," I said to Poetry, "and I'm David. I'm going to stand on him and cut off his head and—"

“*Stop!*” Poetry said. “He might *not* be dead. Here, give me that stick.”

He took my stick, eased himself up closer to the snake, and poked at it. But it didn’t move at all, not even its tail.

“It’s dead, all right,” I said, feeling even prouder of myself than I had been, because of what I had done.

Right that second, Poetry looked at his wristwatch and frowned at it and said, “Hey, we’ve got to get going! There’s a gang meeting down at the spring. Big Jim just phoned our house, and it’s very important. He tried to call you, but nobody answered your phone, so I was on my way over to get you.”

2

I forgot to tell you that my folks had gone to town, and they had told me I could go over to Poetry's house that afternoon just as soon as I had finished hoeing a few rows of potatoes. Dad hadn't said how many rows, so I asked him, and he said, "Let your conscience be your guide. But there are several that ought to be done."

My conscience wasn't sure how to be a guide to a boy that didn't like to hoe potatoes. So I thought I ought to know exactly how many "several" was and maybe that would help. As soon as Dad and Mom and Charlotte Ann had gone, I looked up the word in our brand-new dictionary, and it said, "Indefinite: more than one or two, but not many." The only thing was, I forgot and left the dictionary open right where I had been looking, and when Dad came home later, he found out what I had done and—but that's getting ahead of the story.

Anyway, just to be sure I'd hoed several, I actually hoed three, which was more than one or two but wasn't many.

Then I had left my hoe in the shade, leaning it up against one of the big pignut trees at the end of the garden, and had started down the dusty path toward the stile, over which I was

going to climb and then hurry as fast as I could to Poetry's house. That's when I had run into the snake on that dry, sunny path.

Whenever Big Jim called a meeting and wanted it in a hurry, we all tried to get there as quick as we could. So when Poetry told me about the gang meeting, we decided to go right away.

"What kind of a snake is it?" Poetry asked.

I said, "I don't know, but maybe Dad will know. He knows pretty near everything there is to know about snakes and birds and toads and fish and things."

"My pop does too," Poetry said.

And even though I knew that my dad knew more than Poetry's dad any day, I didn't say so.

We started to go back up the path toward the pignut trees and our garden. In a little while we'd be going past our house with its big green ivy that covers nearly all the south side—it had just a little open space upstairs where my bedroom window is—and also past another iron pitcher pump at the end of a board walk about twenty feet from our back door. Then we'd go on past the mailbox at the side of the road that says on it "Theodore Collins," which is my dad's name. And then we'd swish across that dusty gravel road and vault over a rail fence. Once in the woods, we'd start running, and quicker than a jackrabbit could do it, we'd be at the spring where the gang was going to meet.

Poetry, being as sure as I was that the snake was dead, did what lots of boys do to dead

snakes. He picked it up by the tail and dragged it along behind him till we got to the pignut tree. Then he draped it over the rail fence at the edge of our garden, and we left it there till Dad should get home in the late afternoon. I was going to show it to him and ask him what kind of a snake a boy could scare to death with just his voice or by missing him with a big clod of dirt.

We stopped to look at the snake, hanging there with its head on one side and its tail on the other, and it really looked BIG—almost as long as Little Jim is tall. Little Jim was the littlest member of the Sugar Creek Gang, a super guy with brown curls on the top of his round head, and blue eyes, and a very serious face, though sometimes his face was mischievous.

All of a sudden Poetry looked at our garden and said, “You been hoeing potatoes this afternoon?”

“Sure,” I said, half proud of myself.

“It’s hard to believe,” Poetry said and ducked to get out of the way of my flying fist, which I wouldn’t have hit him hard with, since he was my almost best friend.

“Well, I’m surprised,” he said.

But it wasn’t funny, and I wouldn’t laugh.

Just that second there was a heavy, clumsy movement at my feet. Looking down, I saw a big, fat, friendly-looking garden toad, which I had almost stepped on and smashed.

“Hi, Warty,” I said down to him.

“Hi, who?” Poetry exclaimed.

“Warty,” I said, “Dad’s pet toad. He lives here in the garden and eats cutworms and mosquitoes and bugs and stuff. Last night Dad and I made a big supper for him.”

“Supper! For a *toad!*” Poetry looked down at Warty, who was sitting as quiet as an old setting hen on a nest, all widened out like a mother chicken covering a nest full of eggs.

“Sure,” I said and explained. “Dad hung a sheet over the fence right here, close to where Warty hangs out, and turned his big electric lantern on the sheet for fifteen minutes. And all kinds of bugs and night moths and things flew against it, and those that plopped down to the ground, Warty gobbled up. Look—he’s as fat as a stuffed toad today”—which Warty was. I’d never seen him so fat.

When I was littler, Pop had taught me to be very glad if we had a toad living in our garden, because toads are the farmer’s friends. “A toad will eat over ten thousand injurious insects in one summer,” he had told me.

“Let’s see you throw your voice at *him* and kill *him*,” Poetry said.

But I wouldn’t. Besides, I thought Poetry was just making fun of me.

So he decided to try it himself, which he did, yelling down at Warty in his half-man-half-boy’s voice, which is the kind of voice he had, he being at the age in his life when a boy is part boy and part man, like a tadpole about to turn into a frog.

But Warty, who had dived halfway under a

rhubarb leaf, just blinked his lazy-looking eyes at us or at nothing and didn't move a muscle.

Well, we had to hurry on. Just as we reached our henhouse, I turned around to take a final look at the big fierce-looking snake hanging on the garden fence, and it wasn't there!

Poetry looked at the same time and said, "Your dead snake doesn't like hanging on a fence in the hot sun for people to look at, or else he lost his balance and fell off"—which was probably right, I thought.

Anyway, when Dad came home, I could remember where the snake had been hanging, and it'd be as easy as falling off a rail fence to find it lying there in the weeds.

"What's that song you're whistling?" Poetry asked me all of a sudden.

"What song?" I listened to my thoughts, and, sure enough, I had been whistling a song and didn't know it. In a second I remembered what it was. It was one of the hymns we sometimes sing in the Sugar Creek church on Sunday mornings, when Mom and Dad and Charlotte Ann and I are all sitting together in a row. I could hardly believe my astonished thoughts when I realized that it was a song called "A Mighty Fortress," which I remembered was written by a man who, our minister said, was a converted priest named Martin Luther. The place in the song that I had been whistling was where it tells about Satan, and the words were "One little word shall fell him."

I didn't understand it very well, but I could

sort of feel that it was the Savior of the world whose word was strong enough to hit the Devil and knock the living daylights out of him—even if He threw at him only one little word.

Anyway, I felt kind of good inside for some reason.

But it was time to get going to the gang meeting.

“I wonder what Big Jim wants a meeting for?” I asked Poetry, as we decided to run to make up the lost time.

Boy oh boy, if I had known what that gang meeting was going to be about, and also what was going to happen to us before the things we had planned at that meeting were finally all finished, I’d *really* have been excited.

If I had known that, later that year, when summer was over and winter came and there was a lot of snow everywhere, the gang would have to make a very important trip up into the hills to the old haunted house I told you about in the last story of the Sugar Creek Gang—if I had only known . . .

But I didn’t, so Poetry and I weren’t even excited as we hurried on to the spring where we were to meet the gang.

I can hardly wait till I write that far in the story before telling you about that terribly exciting experience. If we hadn’t had Big Jim’s rifle along with us, every one of us might have died.