

# 1

Long before we left Sugar Creek for our winter vacation along the Rio Grande River, I had been sure that when we went fishing down there we'd catch a fish as big as a boy.

I was *so* sure of it that I started telling nearly everybody I met about it. Why, that great big fish we were going to land might be as big as Little Jim, the smallest member of our gang, or maybe as big around as Poetry, the barrel-shaped member and the most mischievous one of us, who, because he wants to be a detective someday, is always getting us mixed up in some mysterious and exciting adventure.

But when, instead of a big fish, we caught something else just as big and had to pounce upon it and hold onto it for dear life or it would have gotten away—and also had to keep on holding on or we'd maybe have gotten our eyes scratched out or ourselves badly slashed up—well, I just couldn't have imagined anything so excitingly different happening to a gang of ordinary boys.

Of course, our gang wasn't exactly ordinary. Anyway, Circus, our acrobat and expert wrestler, wasn't. Big Jim, our fuzzy-mustached leader, wasn't either. Neither was Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member, who was always seeing exciting

things first and also was always sneezing at the wrong time because he was allergic to nearly everything.

Certainly Little Jim, the smallest one of us, wasn't ordinary. He was an especially good boy, which any ordinary boy knows isn't exactly ordinary. He wasn't any sissy, though, as you'll see for yourself when I get to that part of the story where Little Jim joined in the struggle we were having with a very savage, wild, mad something-or-other one moonlit night on the American side of the Rio Grande.

Even I myself, Bill Collins, red haired and freckle faced and a little bit fiery tempered part of the time, wasn't exactly ordinary. My mother says that most of the time I don't even act like what is called "normal"—whatever that is.

Well, here goes with the story of the Sugar Creek Gang along the Rio Grande.

The Rio Grande is a wet boundary between Mexico and the United States and is a long, wide, reddish-brown river that the people who live down at the bottom of Texas have harnessed up and put to work for them—kind of the way Dad harnesses old Topsy, our mud-colored horse, and drives her around all over the Sugar Creek territory wherever he wants to.

The way they harnessed the river was by digging miles and miles of ditches for its water to flow all around through the Rio Grande Valley to irrigate their orange and lemon and grapefruit groves and patches where they grow cabbage and lettuce and carrots and other gar-

den stuff. They also purify some of the water to make it safe for drinking and cooking.

Of course, a lot of interesting things happened to our gang before that last exciting night—but I'll just sort of skim over those so I can get to the most dangerous part in less than maybe a couple dozen pages. Soon I'll be galloping with you right through the—but you wait and see what.

“Maybe my dad will decide to buy a grapefruit grove down along the Rio Grande, and maybe we'll move down there to live,” Dragonfly said to me sadly about two days before we left for Texas.

He had come over to my house to play with me that snowy morning, and he and I were out in the barn cracking black walnuts and gobbling up the kernels as fast as we could. Every now and then his face would get a messed-up expression on it, and he would sneeze, which meant he either had a cold or was allergic to something or other in our barn.

Hearing him say that didn't make me feel very happy. Even though he sometimes was sort of a nuisance to the gang, he'd been one of us as long as any of us had, and it would make a very sad hole in our gang if he left us for good.

“Daddy says we'll have to try out the climate first to see if we like it,” he said, still sad in his voice and sad on his face. Then he added hopefully, “I hope I have to sneeze every five minutes after we get there.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I’d rather live up here at Sugar Creek where I only have to sneeze every *seven* minutes”—which would have been funny if it hadn’t been almost true.

Just that minute Mom’s voice came quavering out across our cold, snowy barnyard the way it does when she is calling me to come to the house for a while for something. So in only a few jiffies, Dragonfly and I were both diving headfirst through the snow to our back door.

When we got inside the house, Dragonfly started sneezing again like a house afire, and it wasn’t because of the good-smelling dinner Mom was cooking on our kitchen stove, either.

It was after we went into the living room, where Mom and Charlotte Ann, my baby sister, were that Dragonfly let out those stormy sneezes, six or seven of them in fast succession. Right away he exclaimed, “I smell somebody’s powder!”

I quick looked at Mom’s friendly, motherly face to see if her nose had any shine on it, the way it sometimes has when she’s been working in the kitchen and hasn’t remembered to powder it. It was a little bit shiny, so maybe Dragonfly was mistaken, I thought.

“The doctor says I’m allergic to some kinds of face powder,” he said. He screwed up his face and sneezed three more times in even quicker succession than he had the other time. He looked with worried eyes first at Mom and then at Charlotte Ann.

My little sister, I noticed, was over in the corner, sitting on the floor. And she had Mom’s

face powder box open and some of the powder had spilled out, making it look as if somebody had scattered peach-colored dust over about three square feet of the rug.

Right away, Dragonfly and I were out of doors again, getting there quicker than our old Mixy-cat could have gone if Dragonfly's Airedale dog had been chasing her.

All of a sudden, I got what wasn't a very bright idea. "You don't *have* to stay down South if you don't want to," I said to him.

"Why?"

"If you can *really* sneeze a lot while you're there, your folks won't move down to stay, will they?"

"No, but what if I *can't*? I can only sneeze when I'm close to something I'm allergic to." He scooped up a double handful of snow, made a ball of it, whirled, and threw it across the barnyard through the fast-falling flakes toward Topsy, our old horse, who was standing on the east side of the barn with her tail to the wind, the way horses do if they're standing outdoors in a storm.

"Look," I said, "let me fix you up a little box of Mom's face powder. And when you get down there, you—well, you'll know what to do with it."

He looked at me with a sneezy expression on his face and said, "I couldn't fool Dad. Besides, my mother would smell the powder on me and wonder if I was turning into a girl or something. She might even be allergic to it herself. She says I inherited the sneezes from her."

I knew several other things Dragonfly had maybe inherited from her, such as believing it meant bad luck if a black cat crossed your path or if you broke a looking glass, and good luck if you found a horseshoe. He also had a hard time not believing in ghosts, even though he went to our church and had become a Christian one day when he was sliding down a sycamore tree along Sugar Creek, like Zaccheus in the Bible. Because his mother believed in ghosts—or almost did anyway—it made it hard for him not to.

Dragonfly had a nice mother though, but he being her only boy, she worried about him too much, and that worried *him*.

Well, even my dad got what Mom called the “warm climate bug,” and because Mom hadn’t had any vacation for years, they decided we’d take our car and drive down to the bottom of Texas, too. That meant that with *two* cars going, there’d be room in the backseats for six boys to go along—which is how many of us there are in our gang except for little Tom Till, the seventh one of us, who had to stay home and help take care of his mother. He also was going to help his father do the chores for us while my family was gone.

Before I go any farther, maybe I had better explain to you how in the world a gang of school-age boys could get to go on a great warm-climate vacation in the middle of winter. If I don’t, nearly every mother who reads about us getting to go will wonder, *What on earth—*

*and why?* And some of them might even start to worry about us.

Well, it just so happened that a lot of coal miners in the United States, not even knowing how bad we all needed a vacation from school, went on what is called a “strike.” They didn’t work for so long that the schools around Sugar Creek got low on coal, and most of them had to close for a while.

You could have knocked us over with a snowflake when we found out that the Sugar Creek School was going to close, too. Of course, the school could have burned wood, but the school board decided not to do that, so we almost *had* to go on a vacation to show the coal miners how much we appreciated their not working.

My parents, especially Mom, felt sorry for the coal miners’ wives, who might not have enough money to buy their groceries, and she hoped the miners’ little children wouldn’t have to go hungry.

Dad didn’t say much except that coal mining was very hard work and any man who had to work all day in a mine, wearing out his muscles and sometimes his lungs away down under the earth, certainly ought to have good wages—as much as his boss could afford to pay.

But anyway, the coal miners’ strike was good for the Sugar Creek Gang, for as soon as our school closed, we quick packed up, and away we went.

On the way to the Mexican border, we

stopped to see some interesting places, one of which was Turkey Run State Park. In the summertime it is one of the most beautiful places in the world, having deep canyons and gorges cut right through sandstone rock.

“We’ll have to come here sometime in the summer,” Dad said, “when old Sugar Creek isn’t all chained with ice and snow.”

“*Sugar Creek!*” Dragonfly exclaimed. “*Is that Sugar Creek?*”

“Sure,” Poetry said. He was in the backseat of our car with Dragonfly and me. “Don’t you know your geography?”

“What’s geography got to do with Sugar Creek?” Dragonfly asked. He was not very good in that subject.

Poetry answered, “Don’t you know that Sugar Creek is the very center of the geographical world? Anybody knows that!”

Sometimes Poetry used such an argumentative tone of voice that it made me want to talk back even when I agreed with him, but this time I didn’t let myself. I said to Dragonfly, “Sure, anybody knows that”—which anybody does.

The next place we stopped was at one of my cousins’ houses, not very far from Turkey Run. There we left Charlotte Ann so that the coal miners’ strike would be good for Mom as well as for the rest of us. When Charlotte Ann’s around and not asleep, there isn’t a moment of peace for anybody. She is what is called a “normal” two-year-old girl, which means it is very hard on her nerves to have to be quiet.

As soon as Mom and Charlotte Ann had finished crying, we started on, and Dad drove a little faster to make up for lost time, which Mom said wasn't lost.

When we were going through Vincennes, Indiana, Dad reminded us that it was the first capital of what our history books call Indian Territory.

Then we crossed a big river to go into Illinois, and Dragonfly looked out and down at the water and said, "Old Sugar Creek's water certainly looks good this far from home."

"You're crazy," Poetry said. "That's the Wabash River."

"I know it," Dragonfly said, "but our geography book has a map in it that shows Sugar Creek emptying its water into the Wabash away back up there somewhere not far from Turkey Run, so some of that water down here is Sugar Creek water."

It kind of pleased me that Dragonfly was smart enough to think of that. And of course he was right. Some of the water in the Wabash River had been given to it absolutely free by good old Sugar Creek.

At a smallish town called Samburg in Tennessee, which we drove out of our way to go through the next day, Dad stopped while we looked at a terribly big lake and told us, "That's Reelfoot Lake, boys. It was made by an earthquake in 1811—supposed to be the biggest earthquake America ever had."

It certainly was the strangest-looking lake I

ever saw. It looked as if there were maybe ten thousand old tree stumps sticking up all over it. There were also a lot of whole trees, especially cypress, making it look like a forest growing in a lake. Part of it looked like a Sugar Creek cemetery with a lot of black ghosts standing around in it.

“That’s probably some of Sugar Creek’s water, too,” Dragonfly said. “Let’s go in swimming.”

“Don’t carry a good joke too far,” Poetry said, scowling.

But Dad heard what Dragonfly had said. “You’re right, Roy”—that being Dragonfly’s civilized name. “At the time of the earthquake, the Mississippi River had something like an epileptic fit. Its water backed up and filled all the huge cracks and crevices which the earthquake had made. Some of that water was probably Sugar Creek water, because Sugar Creek flows into the Wabash and the Wabash into the Ohio and the Ohio into the Mississippi. Yes, that’s probably partly Sugar Creek water.”

All of a sudden Little Jim, who had been standing beside me, broke away, made a dash down to the lake, scooped up a double handful of water, and, with a grin on his mouselike face, tossed the water up in the air over our heads. A second later some of it splattered on my freckled face, while he yelled, “Hurrah, it’s raining Sugar Creek water!”

It was time to drive on, so we did, not stopping at any place very important. And then we

came to Houston, a big city in Texas, where there was a natural history museum and a zoo, called the Hermann Park Zoo.

## 2

It had been a long time since any of us had been to a zoo, and because most of us were tired almost to death of riding and wanted to take a walk, our two sets of parents drove us out to Hermann Park. There we walked around the grounds and saw a lot of wild animals and snakes and strange-looking birds. It was more fun than a barrel of monkeys to see everything—*especially* the different kinds of monkeys. There wasn't any snow on the ground here, so we walked around with our coats off like everyone else and felt as warm as if we were in the middle of a Sugar Creek summer. Dragonfly wasn't sneezing a bit and felt wonderful.

I noticed that lots of people were walking around looking at the different exhibits, but the thing I liked best, for a while anyway, was a very small lake with palm trees and a banana plant growing on a little island in the middle of it. All around the shore and on the island, big, ugly-looking alligators were sleeping in the sun.

That reminded Poetry of a poem, which he started to quote:

“Lazy bones, sleepin’ in the sun,  
How you ’specs to get your day’s work done?”

Some of the alligators were sleeping only a few feet from us on the other side of a low fence, which they could have knocked down if they had wanted to. Maybe they would have if they had been hungry for fresh boy meat.

Circus yelled down at one that was about eight feet long and said, "Wake up, you lazy, good-for-nothing *mississippiensis!*"

"Wake up *what?*" Dragonfly wanted to know.

And Circus answered, "That is the scientific name for him."

*Mississippiensis* certainly was a terrible-looking animal. It had a very broad head with a rounded snout and was black all over except for some dull yellow markings the color of a boy's faded straw hat after it has been in the sun and wind for maybe five summers.

"How would you like to get a fish like that on your line when we go fishing down in the Gulf of Mexico?" Big Jim asked Little Jim.

That little guy looked up from where he was standing beside me and said, "That is no fish; that is a crocodilian reptile," which I happened to know it was, from a book I had in my library at home. "Besides," Little Jim added, "alligators don't live in the Gulf of Mexico but in swamps and rivers"—which I also knew, probably before Little Jim did.

"How about the Rio Grande River?" Poetry asked. "We might go fishing there too."

None of us knew for sure whether there were alligators in the Rio Grande. But I sort of hoped there wouldn't be, because a *wild* alliga-

tor might be hungrier than one that was sleeping in the Houston sun, acting the way my dad does sometimes when he has just had a chicken dinner and wants to take a nap and Mom wants him to help with the dishes and I get to help instead.

Right that second, Dragonfly started to get a messed-up expression on his face. He quick grabbed his nose, looked around worriedly, and sneezed in the direction of a pen of wolves and coyotes.

Circus looked toward the wolves, too, and let out a fierce, wild-sounding, high-pitched wail that was supposed to be like a wolf making a wolf call.

And that started things. In a second there was a wild hullabaloo of wolves' and coyotes' voices, howling and yelping and making a bloodcurdling chorus of cries.

Well, Hermann Park Zoo was certainly a very interesting place to visit, and it felt good to be walking around without our coats and hats. It made me feel sorry for all the people at Sugar Creek who had to live in cold weather.

That night when we were all in our motel cabins and I was in bed with Little Jim in another bed about four feet from mine, all of a sudden he started to mumble something in his sleep. I had been lying there looking out at a very bright moon, which was shining on me through a window, and listening to the rasping sound that the wind made blowing through the leaves of a palm tree. One of the palm's long,

turkey-feather-shaped branches was brushing against the tiled roof of our cabin.

I strained my ears to hear what Little Jim might be dreaming about. He groaned as if he was having trouble of some kind. Then his bed-springs jiggled as though he was turning over, which he did with an impatient flip-flop, the way a boy does when something wakes him up too early in the morning and he doesn't want to get up. I heard him let out an extralong tired-out sigh, and then he was breathing a very regular noisy-boy kind of breathing, which meant he was asleep again.

Generally, not very much can wake me up once I drop off to sleep.

It had been such a wonderful trip so far, I thought. We'd seen so many things and had so much fun. Also, it seemed wonderful to be in a warm place right here in the United States. I got to thinking about all the wild animals I had seen in their cages, and I was glad the Sugar Creek Gang didn't have to live in cages but were as free as the red-winged blackbirds that make their nests along the Sugar Creek bank and whose songs are so pretty to listen to that it almost makes a boy's heart hurt to hear them.

Up above the telephone-pole-shaped palm tree outside, I could see—when the wind whipped the branches around just right—the whole big, round face of the moon, which right that same minute was also shining down on a lot of terribly cold snowdrifts and bare trees up

North and also on old frozen-faced Sugar Creek itself.

I drifted off into a strange sort of dream then. A big ugly, scaly, black alligator with straw-hat-colored markings on him raised his head up out of Sugar Creek, opened his mouth, and made a lunge for Little Jim, who was in swimming with the rest of us. It was a terrible dream, and I was still scared when I woke up. But Little Jim was there in his bed beside me, still sleeping, so right away I felt good again. Later, when I told Dad about my dream, he sort of laughed and said, "That is because you ate too big a supper."

It took us a day of driving to get from Houston to the Rio Grande Valley, that very pretty territory at the bottom of the United States map. But all of a sudden we were there, and our cars were flying along a road with palm trees and orange and lemon and grapefruit groves on each side.

Dragonfly and Poetry were in the backseat with me at the time. "Look," Dragonfly said, "there are a lot of people working out in the field."

"Migrant workers," my dad said from behind the steering wheel. "There are thousands of them working in the Rio Grande Valley between Brownsville and El Paso. People used to call them 'wetbacks.'"

"What's a wetback?" Dragonfly asked.

Dad, who always seemed to know something about everything because he was always

reading and learning, said, “A wetback is a Mexican who has entered our country illegally by wading or swimming across the Rio Grande. They get jobs here and make a lot more money than they can in their own country. Some of them go back to Mexico later, where they spend the money.”

Poetry and Dragonfly and I got interested in something else just then, while Mom and Dad talked about different things. I didn’t realize what kind of things until I heard Dad say, “They found thirty-eight dead illegal immigrants in the Rio Grande in one year.”

Mom gasped, and I sat up straight to listen, especially since Poetry’s elbow pushed itself against my ribs and he raised a mysterious finger to his lips.

But I spoke up quick and said to Dad, “What’s that?”

“Oh, nothing,” Mom said, not wanting me to hear anything she called “gruesome” and not remembering that I wasn’t little anymore.

“Did they drown trying to swim across?” Dragonfly asked. He *was* maybe too little to hear about such things.

Dad must have decided we could stand it, so he said, “They were murdered.”

“*Murdered!*” Mom exclaimed, and the way she said it made me think maybe she was too little herself.

“It’s this way,” Dad explained. “After an illegal immigrant has been in our country long enough to have a nice little sum of money, he

tries to go back secretly, sometimes swimming or wading or being rowed across the river. Evidently some criminals were hiding out along the river, watching for any illegals who were going home. They waylaid them at the border either on the Texas or the Mexico side, robbed and killed them, and threw their bodies into the river.”

“How did they kill them?” Dragonfly asked.

“In different ways,” Dad said and changed the subject. “Look, here’s where we turn off to go to McAllen. This road goes on to Brownsville.”

Dad slowed down, turned right, and away we went west on a road that was numbered Routes 83 and 281. We went zipping along between orange and grapefruit orchards. Tall palm trees were on either side of the road the way maples and elms border the roads back home. Our car window was open, and the cool, friendly breeze that came in felt wonderful on my warm freckled face.

The towns seemed so close together that you were in the middle of the next one almost before you left the end of the last—towns such as Mercedes, Welasco, Donna, and Pharr. And then in a little while we were in McAllen, where I noticed that most of the people were Mexicans. They had dark hair, and everybody was busy and looked happy, and the stores were nearly all new.

Dad drove straight to a hotel, which was named Casa de Palmas. That means “House of

Palms.” He and Mom and Dragonfly’s parents went in to register, while we six boys climbed out of the cars. We roamed around kind of bashfully, looking at different things, especially the big palm trees and the red double-sized poinsettias blossoming at the tops of flower stalks higher than our heads. We also looked at a beautiful vine with brilliant purplish-red flowers, which Little Jim, who had a book of garden flowers at home, said was bougainvillea.

Circus didn’t seem very happy. He had a dark scowl on his face, so I said, “‘S’matter, Circus?”

He said gloomily, “Who wants to climb a palm tree?”

As you know, Circus would rather climb a tree than do anything else, and if ever we don’t know where he is at Sugar Creek, we always look *up* when we try to find him.

“Yeah,” Poetry said, being so chubby he couldn’t climb one anyway. “Who does?”

We were standing right beside a palm whose smooth, gray trunk zoomed straight up almost forty feet before there were any limbs. In fact, there weren’t any limbs at all but only a lot of dark green fan-shaped leaves as big as an elephant’s ears in the Hermann Park Zoo. Circus was right, I thought. A palm tree might be very pretty to look at, but no tree seemed like a good tree to a boy if he couldn’t climb it or swing on its branches or pick mulberries or cherries or something from it. And you couldn’t

do any of that to the prettiest, straightest palm tree in the world.

Dragonfly's dad and my dad arranged for all of us six boys to sleep in an apartment over somebody's garage away out at the edge of town, not far from what is called the "brush." That's the name of the thick forestlike woods that grow all along the Rio Grande River. The garage and apartment belonged to a man who had lived at Sugar Creek a long time ago before any of our gang was born. He had been a special friend of Dragonfly's parents and had been trying to get them to move down there. They had fixed up enough beds for all of the gang to sleep.

Mom didn't exactly want to stay in the fancy hotel that Dad had picked out for her, but Dad had decided she had to. "You're going to live in luxury and be waited on and not have to cook a single meal or wash a dish for a whole week," he'd said.

Even before we had left home, Dad told me about it, saying, "It's this way, Son. A man who really loves his wife ought to see to it that she gets a little variety in life, even if it seems to cost a lot of money, because a wife is worth more than the money it costs to take care of her. There is nothing a man can buy that is more important than his wife's goodwill and good health. And your mother needs a vacation pretty badly—a lot more than she thinks she does. She has worked very hard all these years, and I can tell it is beginning to get on her nerves. We

have a pretty wonderful wife and mother, Bill—you know that, don't you?"

He and I had been out in the barn at the time, and Mom had just called us to supper. I had known she was that kind of a mother all my life without anybody having to tell me. But when Dad said that, I looked up at his big bushy eyebrows and his gray-green eyes under them, and I think maybe for the first time I realized that Mom belonged to both of us. It was up to us to look after her, and take care of her, and not let her work too hard, and to see to it that she didn't have too much to worry about. Also it seemed maybe I ought to try to be a better boy than I had been.

"Sure," I said to Dad, and that evening when I had gone up to the haymow to throw down hay for old Topsy and the cows, I stayed up there a little longer than I sometimes do. As you maybe know, away off in a far corner of our haymow where there is a crack between the logs, I had a very special place in the hay where sometimes, when I felt lonesome and also when I was especially happy inside, I liked to go. I would take out from the crack in the logs my little brown leather New Testament, which I kept there, and would read a verse or two or more. Then I'd drop down on both knees in the hay and pray something to God, whom I liked even better than I liked my folks and who had made all the world we lived in and had sent His Son to be our Savior.

I can't remember exactly what I prayed that

late afternoon, but there was sort of an ache in my heart because maybe I had caused my mother too much worry that summer and winter. So I asked God to help me to do something about myself, to make me kinder to my mother, and also to help me actually look for things I could do to help her around the house and yard without being told to. I felt I wanted to be as kind to her as Dad was.