

# 1

We first learned about the mystery of Wild Horse Canyon while we were still at Sugar Creek, three days before starting for our summer vacation in the Rockies.

It was half past one, Friday afternoon. In a few minutes, just as soon as Little Jim got there, we would open our gang meeting, decide a few important things, then go in swimming. It would be our last happy-go-lucky swim until we got back, because while we were out West, we'd have to use hotel or motel pools where there'd be a lot of other people. Mountain streams would be too cold to swim in and really enjoy it.

We were all lying in the shade of the Snatzerpazooka tree, about twenty feet from the sandy beach of our swimming hole. Snatzerpazooka himself, the scarecrow we'd hung up early that summer to keep the crows from gobbling up the new shoots of corn in Dragonfly's father's cornfield, was swaying in the lazy afternoon breeze. Dragonfly's new Stetson cowboy hat was hanging on his left wooden shoulder.

Circus, our acrobat, was up in the tree. In fact, he was sitting on an overhanging branch close to the tree's trunk, using the trunk for a backrest.

Little Jim kept on not coming, and we kept

on feeling impatient, waiting for him. In a way, Little Jim was the most important member of the gang. That is, it was extra-important that he be there at this meeting. It was his folks—his township trustee father and his very musical mother—who were taking us with them on the out-West vacation. They were going to spend two weeks at a famous music festival in the mountains, and we were all getting to go along. I could hardly wait till next Monday.

Little Jim, the cutest member of the gang and maybe the most cheerful, was one of the best boys there ever was, I thought, as right that second I saw him coming along the path that leads from the spring to the Snatzerpazooka tree.

“Here he comes!” I exclaimed to the rest of us. “Hurry up!” I yelled down the narrow, weed-bordered winding path to him and expected to hear him call back cheerfully, “I’m coming!” as he nearly always does whenever anybody yells to him like that.

He came puffing up to where we were, but there wasn’t any usual cute little grin on his cute little mouse-shaped face. Instead, his lips were set, and he was either sad or mad about something. I couldn’t tell which.

“S’matter?” Poetry asked him. “How come you’re so late?”

Little Jim’s worried, teary-voiced answer cut like a knife into my heart when he said, “It’s Crescendo! Something’s happened to her. We can’t find her anywhere. She didn’t sleep in

her box last night or the night before, and she didn't come home this morning. She's been gone two whole days!"

We all knew what he meant when he said "Crescendo." He meant the very cute calico cat that had been Little Jim's pet ever since he was only five.

Little Jim was sad all right; he was also mad. He took a swipe at a tall mullein stalk with the striped walking stick he always had with him. He broke the mullein stalk, and its yellow-flowered head bent over and hung upside down.

"We wanted to give her to the animal shelter to feed and look after till we got back—and now she's gone!"

While Little Jim was getting his breath and telling us about Crescendo's being lost, strayed, or stolen, Dragonfly cut in to exclaim, "Who cares about a calico cat? Let's get started swimming!"

Big Jim growled back at him, "We're having an important meeting! Besides—don't you remember?—we have to examine the creek bottom first!"

"Why?" Dragonfly whined, pretending he didn't already know, and sneezed. In fact, he sneezed three times in rapid-fire succession—which meant we weren't starting on our mountain vacation any too soon for him. Hay fever season was already here.

"Because," Circus called down from his tree seat, "the heavy rains we've been having lately may have washed a lot of junk into the swim-

ming hole, that's why. A waterlogged old stump, sharp rocks, or broken bottles or tin cans we might get hurt on. Or maybe the water washed out a few dangerous holes."

I knew what he was talking about. Every year after the spring floods and also after every big summer rain had sent a rush of water swirling down the creek, we tested the bottom to be sure our swimming hole was still a safe place to swim. Sometimes it wasn't until we'd taken out quite a lot of junk that had been washed in.

Anyway, while we were waiting to test the creek bottom—and also trying to cheer up Little Jim, who was really worried about his calico pet, which was one of the prettiest cats I ever saw—we decided to look over some of the out-West advertising Big Jim had brought with him. It was some he had gotten in the mail that very morning from the town near which we were going to camp for two whole weeks, high in the Rockies. We would go into town every day to a big tent in a meadow there to hear the wonderful music of some of the world's greatest musicians.

Big Jim hadn't any sooner opened the *Aspen Avalanche* than Dragonfly let out a happy exclamation, saying, "Look! There's a cowboy wearing a hat just like mine!"

What he was looking at and exclaiming about was a full-page advertisement for a rodeo that was going to be held in Aspen. Right in the middle of the page, sitting on a very pretty

horse, was a man in a Western outfit, and on the man's head was a swept-brim hat, which, I noticed, *was* just like Dragonfly's. For half a second, I envied the spindle-legged little guy that his folks had let him have a big broad-brimmed Stetson while mine hadn't let *me*.

Then I saw the name of the cowboy and let out an exclamation myself. "Hey!" I cut loose with. "It's Cranberry Jones!"

*Boy oh boy, oh boy oh boy!* my mind exclaimed. Cranberry Jones, whose voice I'd heard on the radio and had seen different pictures of riding his famous palomino horse, was going to be one of the stars at the Aspen rodeo, and we would get to see him ourselves!

Dragonfly sprang to his cowboy-booted feet, swept his swept-brim hat from Snatzerpazooka's left shoulder, shoved it into our circle, and exclaimed, "See! His hat's just like mine!"

Poetry grunted, shrugged, and in his duck-like, squawky voice answered, "Yours is like *his*, you mean."

Dragonfly pouted back, "What's the difference? Just so they're alike!"

I looked at his chimpanzee-like face and at the hat he had just put on and liked him in spite of him.

Big Jim broke up our nonsensical argument then by saying, "Look, you guys! Want a mystery to solve while we're out there?"

Just the word "mystery" brought my mind to excited life. Big Jim had turned back to the front page, where there was a column of news

items with a heading that said: "Rolling Stones from the Avalanche."

Below the heading were interesting stories of things that had happened long ago. Each had a different date. One was "Thirty Years Ago This Week." Another was "Twenty Years Ago." Another, "Ten Years Ago." And down near the bottom were a few lines about an old man named Joe Campbell, Cranberry Jones's stableman, who had died of a heart attack last New Year's morning. Joe's body was found in a snowdrift just outside the stable door only a few yards from where one of Cranberry's palominos was standing, saddled and showing evidence of having been ridden.

"Joe's habit of taking very early morning rides 'for my health,' as he always expressed it, had been the cause of his death. The weather had been just too cold for an old man to venture out." That was the way the story ended.

But the mystery that Big Jim had just pointed out had happened the night before on New Year's *Eve* and had a heading that said:

BLONDE DISAPPEARS AFTER MIDNIGHT  
DRINKING SPREE IN WILD HORSE TAVERN

Circus right that second came scrambling down the tree, shaking the branch Snatzerpazooka was hanging on and knocking some of the sawdust out of his stuffed head—Snatzerpazooka's stuffed head, I mean. Some of it fell

into my eyes so that for a second I couldn't see what I was seeing.

Besides, some of the print in the story was blurred and several lines were worn. Even some of the words were missing. It was a spooky story about a young lady who had come to the Winter Ski Festival. The story said, "She took a few lessons on the Little Nell Beginner's Slope, then was away to the more dangerous runs: The Cork Screw, Ruthie's Run, and even the treacherous FIS. Yesterday, after the morning mail . . ."

Big Jim, who was reading aloud to us, stopped. "Her name's worn off," he said, squinting at the paper, holding it close to his eyes and trying to make out the missing word.

"Let *me* see," Poetry said. "I've got twenty-twenty vision without glasses." He studied the story, then in his usual mischievous tone, remarked, "Like it says, she's *missing*"—which wasn't very funny.

Big Jim read on. "Yesterday after the morning mail . . . seemed despondent and spent most of the day alone. She was seen late at night at the Wild Horse Tavern bar. About midnight she left the bar and was last seen fighting her way through the blizzard toward her motel four blocks away. She did not arrive at the Snow-slide and at press time still had not been found."

Big Jim finished reading the news article to us. It was like reading the first chapter of an exciting mystery story in a magazine and seeing

at the bottom of the page the words "To Be Continued."

"Look!" Circus exclaimed. "There's an editor's note!"

And there was. It began, "The mystery is still unsolved. The story has been pointed up this week by the owners of the Snow-slide, The Cranberry Jones Enterprises. Jones himself has offered a \$500 reward for any information . . ."

That was as much of the editor's note as there was. The rest was worn away, maybe by the paper's being much handled in the mail.

Well, it wasn't any ordinary mystery story, and it wouldn't be continued in next week's *Avalanche*. If there was ever any new chapter, somebody would have to find the disappearing woman.

Already my mind was out there in the mountains in last winter's blinding blizzard, trying to imagine who the woman was and what had happened to her. I was wishing that when we got there we would stumble onto a clue of some kind that would help us solve the mystery.

"I know what I'll do with the five hundred dollars, if I get it," Dragonfly piped up. "I'll get me a palomino just like Cranberry Jones's. I'll—"

"If *we* solve the mystery," Poetry countered, "*we'll* divide it six ways between us, and your share'll be eighty-three dollars and thirty-three and one-third cents."

Little Jim chimed in then. "I wonder what was in her letter that made the woman so sad."

Poetry came back with another idea, which was, “When we get out there, I’ll bet we’ll find the missing body ourselves.”

Big Jim, who had been lying on his stomach, rolled over, straightened to a sitting position, and with a puzzled expression on his face, asked, “Who said anything about a *body*? It just said the woman disappeared in a blizzard at midnight, New Year’s Eve.”

Poetry scowled. “But she had to have a body to disappear in, didn’t she? Here, let me see the paper.”

Big Jim handed him the *Avalanche*, and after Poetry had read awhile, he yawned and said to us, “Well, gang, we’ll have to solve the mystery ourselves. A woman just doesn’t go up in smoke or disappear into thin air!”

Big Jim must have felt a little irked at our barrel-shaped friend because he answered him, “Who said anything about thin air! She disappeared in air that was full of swirling snow!”

Poetry grinned back, looked at his wristwatch and quacked, “High altitude air is always thin.” Then he added, “Time to go in swimming”—which it was.

Going in didn’t seem as important as it had, though, because all our minds were probably out in the Rockies with a mystery running around in them. In less than a week we’d be out there for real, having a wonderful vacation. One of the first things I was going to do, I thought and said so, was to walk past the Wild Horse Tavern where the golden-haired woman

had been drinking the night she disappeared. After we had our tent pitched away back in the mountains somewhere along Maroon Creek or maybe on the Roaring Fork, we'd all put our heads together and see if we could help solve the mystery. Maybe we could solve it, and maybe we couldn't.

## 2

As I watched Dragonfly carefully hang his hat on the swaying shoulder of Scarecrow Snatzerpazooka again, I couldn't help but think of Cranberry Jones and his own swept-brim hat and wonder how come he had offered \$500 to anybody who could give any information about a disappeared woman who had just stayed for a while in his motel. Maybe he knew who she was.

I quick was on my way to the sandy beach. In a minute we'd all be in.

Testing the bottom of the swimming hole to see if it was safe was part of what Scouts call their Eight Defense Plan. Big Jim, who had a Scout manual, had told us about it. Some of the rules of the Eight Defense Plan were for large groups of boys and were not needed for a gang as small as ours.

But one thing we always watched out for especially was if any of us seemed to be having any trouble such as cramps while we were in the water, which so far none of us had had. The only problem we had once in awhile was when we were having so much fun we accidentally stayed in too long, and Dragonfly or Little Jim got the shivers, and their lips turned blue. They'd have to quick leave the water and sit in the sun awhile to get warmed up.

Also, once I had done too much diving when I wasn't quite over a summer cold and had gotten an earache. My ear drained for almost a week after that—and it was my own fault. A boy shouldn't go in swimming with a full stomach or a bad cold.

“Everybody ready?” Big Jim asked then, and we all were.

Pretty soon we were in the shallow water at the edge of the bank, holding hands, making a line about ten feet long—or wide, whichever you want to say it was—and were slowly wading out toward deeper water, carefully feeling our way along the bottom with our twelve bare feet, not stepping on anything until we had first tested to see what it was.

It certainly was a wonderful afternoon. A lazy breeze was blowing, and the sun on the rifle downstream made it look like gold dancing cheerfully along, not caring whether it got anywhere or not.

Even though my mind was out in the Rockies in a blinding blizzard searching for a clue, and I was hardly aware of the gang at all or of Poetry's hand, which was holding onto mine—he was on the right end of our line—my ears couldn't help but hear the cheerful, very musical “*Oucher-la-re-e-eee*” of the red-winged blackbirds in the bayou behind us. At the same time, my eyes kept watching about a hundred whirligig beetles cruising around in worried circles on the water. Their flat, black oval bodies were shining and making the whole place smell like

a bushel of very ripe apples, which is the way whirligig beetles smell when they're worried or excited or scared. Their bodies give off a milky fluid, which is what makes the odor—kind of like a skunk's body does when it is excited or worried or scared or angry. Except that a skunk's scent doesn't make a boy think of ripe apples but of apples that have been too ripe too long.

We hadn't waded out into the creek more than five yards when Circus's feet found something on the bottom. He quickly stooped, reached down a long arm, and brought up a whiskey bottle that was full of water. He looked at it, the jaw muscles below his ears tensing and relaxing, his face grim. I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking that whiskey and other alcoholic drinks had been his father's boss for many years and had been the cause of their family's having so many heartaches.

He was maybe remembering also that the One who had made the world had saved his father one night in a Good News Crusade, and Mr. Browne hadn't taken even one drink since.

Quick as a flash, Circus swung back his strong right arm and gave that flask a fierce throw down the shore. For a few seconds my eyes followed the bottle flashing in the sunlight, then I heard it crash as it struck a rock at the head of the riffle. That was maybe the twenty-fifth time I'd seen Circus do that to a bottle like that. Not a one of us said a word, but we were thinking.

We all caught hands again and waded on out

across the swimming hole. We'd taken only a few more slow, cautious steps when Poetry suddenly squeezed my hand three or four times to get my attention. Leaning over, he whispered, "I know what could have happened to the woman."

Just that second, Dragonfly on the opposite end of our hand-to-hand line, let out a couple of explosive sneezes and broke loose with a yell, crying, "Hey, everybody! I've found something down on the bottom! It feels like an old gunnysack with . . . with . . . with . . . *ouch!* Something bit me on the big toe!"

Dragonfly's scared yell, exploding in the middle of our safe swimming exploration of the bottom of the creek, sent us on a *splashety-sizzle* dash to where he was.

The water there was almost waist high to Dragonfly and a little more than hip high to Big Jim.

Even while Big Jim was going over to see what it was, my mind was trying to imagine what kind of wild animal with sharp teeth would be alive in a gunnysack on the bottom of our swimming hole—and why?

And how could it be *alive*?

Big Jim's feet told him Dragonfly had really discovered *something* strange down there, and in seconds he was down and up again with a sure-enough gunnysack with something in it. The neck of the sack was drawn shut and tied with several twists of binder twine wrapped round and round.

"Look!" Poetry exclaimed, puffing for breath

from the excitement and because of the fast trip he'd made from the other end of the line to where we were. "There are two bricks tied to it! That's what Dragonfly bumped into."

I'd already seen two red bricks, each the kind with a hole in the center, wired to the neck of the sack. And already I was guessing what was inside.

In a little while we had splashed our way to shore, none of us stopping until we got to the Snatzerpazooka tree, where our clothes were and where, on the old scarecrow's wooden left shoulder, Dragonfly's hat still was.

Little Jim was shaking as though he had the shivers. His fists were doubled up, and there were tears in his eyes.

Now the sack was open—and that's when Little Jim let out a heartrending cry. "That's my kitty! That's Crescendo! Somebody stole her and drowned her!" Then he broke out into the saddest crying I ever heard.

There certainly isn't anything musical about a boy's crying over a killed calico cat. Seeing Little Jim's tears and hearing his sobs woke up my temper. I could feel it getting hotter and hotter until, pretty soon maybe, it would be so hot it'd explode. I *did* ask a hot question with sizzling words, "*Who* would do it? Who would be mean enough to tie a beautiful cat in a sack, weight it with bricks, and throw it into the creek to drown?"

Even while I was asking, I thought I knew the answer. Sure. The heartless boy would have

to be Shorty Long, the meanest new boy in the neighborhood.

Little Jim stooped and stared through his tears at his dead pet. He sniffled and then astonished us all by saying under his breath—not to us but to Somebody who was everywhere and whom Little Jim liked with all his heart—“Forgive them for . . . for killing Crescendo, for they don’t know what they are doing!”

I knew what was in Little Jim’s mind right that second—the true story of something that had happened two thousand years ago on a hill close to a cemetery. For a second my thoughts flew out across the creek and over the trees past the white clouds floating in the bluest sky, across the United States, over the Atlantic Ocean, and back through history to the time and place where the Savior had died to take away the sins of the world. I saw Him in my mind’s eye, nailed to a cross, and heard with my mind’s ear the people jeering and calling Him names. I could almost hear Him say in a tone of voice that would break a boy’s heart to hear, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

Just when I was all stirred up in my mind to want to give Shorty Long a licking within an inch of his life, Little Jim, whose cat Crescendo had been killed, was ready to forgive whoever had done it!

It seemed kind of wonderful to have a boy like that as a member of the gang.

Having a funeral for Crescendo—which we

did, burying her in her burlap bag coffin under the Little Jim Tree up in the woods—took our minds off going swimming and, for a little while, off the mystery that was waiting for us out West when we would get there sometime next week.

Maybe I'd better explain that it was Circus who suggested we bury Crescendo under the Little Jim Tree at the bottom of Bumblebee Hill. "The tree where Little Jim killed the fierce old mad mother bear and saved all our lives that time would make a good memorial for her," he suggested.

Little Jim's face brightened a little at the idea.

Most of us weren't satisfied, though. It seemed we ought to form a posse, take a fast hike to Shorty Long's house, and avenge the murder of Little Jim's very pretty pet. But he wouldn't let us.

When the funeral was over, I watched for a chance to ask him why, and this is what that wonderful little guy answered: "My mother prays every night for Shorty Long's mother that she'll be saved." With that, Little Jim took a fierce fast swipe with his walking stick at a mayapple growing all by itself about two feet away from a family of other ten-inch-high mayapple plants. The end of the stick struck the mayapple's lemon-shaped yellowish fruit, which was overripe, squashed it to smithereens, and scattered its insides all over.

We wouldn't have time to go back and go in

swimming now. We had to begin getting our suitcases packed for the early Monday morning start for the West.

We did go down to the spring, though, to get a drink of water, and that was where Poetry, watching his chance to get me alone, finished what he'd started to tell me while we were wading around in our swimming hole—before he'd been interrupted by Dragonfly's excited yell about what his feet had found.

Poetry and I stopped at the Black Widow Stump while the rest of the gang went down the incline near the leaning linden tree to the spring below. "You want to know what I've figured out happened to the woman?" he asked me in a whisper.

Of course, I wanted to know, and said so.

And this is what he answered in the mysterious tone of voice he usually uses when he is talking detective stuff. "I've been studying maps of the Aspen territory and reading the folders. She could have stumbled along through the drifts, not seeing her way, and walked right out into one of the heated motel swimming pools and drowned, and—"

I cut in on him to say, "But then they'd have found her, and there wouldn't have been any mystery."

"That's what I say," he countered. "She *could* have, but she didn't. Also, she could have hired a taxi for only ten dollars and fifty cents to drive her to Glenwood Springs, where she

could have caught a train for Denver or somewhere and—”

I tried to cut in on him again, but he shushed me, holding up a forefinger to warn me the gang was on its way back up the incline. He went on. “*Or* she could have walked the four-and-a-half miles west of town on Highway 82 to the Aspen airport and hired a pilot to fly her someplace.”

“In a *snowstorm*?” I exclaimed at him. “In a wild blizzard at night, when every plane would have been grounded?” I was surly in my voice and in my mind, because I’d been hoping he had really thought up something sensible as to what happened to the mystery woman.

All I had gotten out of what he had said was a little information about the place where we were going to spend our vacation. There was taxi service to Glenwood Springs, air service if you went out four-and-a-half miles into the country on Highway 82, and some of the motels had heated outdoor swimming pools.

We got a chance to find out how wrong all Poetry’s ideas were when, right in the middle of our first week in the Rockies, we found a clue that sent showers of shivers up and down our spines and made our vacation one of the liveliest we’d ever had—and also one of the most important.