

# 1

It was one of the rainiest days I ever saw.

If it *hadn't* been a rainy day, I might not have been browsing around in our big *Merriam Webster International Dictionary*, which we keep upstairs in the alcove of our south bedroom.

And if I *hadn't* been browsing around in the dictionary just to give my mind something to do—and also to keep from losing it—I wouldn't have stumbled onto the very exciting idea that was to give the Gang a flying start into one of the strangest experiences we'd ever had.

Without that exciting idea, we wouldn't have built the tree house I'm going to tell you about right now. I'll also tell you about the mysterious stranger who moved into it one night—without our permission—and landed us into the middle of one of the saddest stories there ever was. Part of it actually happened to us but most of it to the old stranger himself.

Before there was any sadness, though, there was a lot of gladness, and the six members of the Sugar Creek Gang were right in the middle of everything—all the mystery and hot-tempered action, the disappointments, and the brand-new kind of danger. It would be the kind of danger that makes a boy feel fine to be in the middle of—the way a boy feels fine to be

racing along in the center of a whirlwind, dodging this way and that, running in zigzag fashion out across the pasture, not knowing where he is going or when he will stop.

Actually, it took *two* ideas to get things really started. The first one came flying into my mind from page 2,386 in the dictionary, and the other came in through my left ear when I answered the telephone about seven minutes later.

It had been thundering a lot and lightning all kinds of the prettiest lightning you ever saw. Some of it was what Dad calls just plain “sheet” lightning and some of it “chain” or “forked” lightning, tearing like mad across the Sugar Creek sky.

About fifteen minutes after the thundery part of the storm was over, the rain settled down into a lazy drizzle that anybody who knows his rain knows is the kind that sometimes lasts all day. It’s hard to keep from feeling grouchy in that kind of weather.

Well, as our family does with nearly everything around our place, we had given our dictionary a name, calling it “Aunt Miriam.” Its actual name, as you know if you have one like it, was *The Merriam-Webster New International Dictionary, Second Edition*.

Many times when Mom is wondering where Dad is and can’t find him anywhere else, she makes a beeline for our upstairs south bedroom and finds him in the alcove with Aunt Miriam, working a crossword puzzle or just

moseying from page to page, picking up new things to think about.

“My mind gets awfully hungry,” Dad often says to her and then adds jokingly, “and my wife is a bad cook!”

Mom herself spends quite a lot of time with Aunt Miriam every week when she is studying her Sunday school lesson. She is the teacher of the Gleaners’ class. Maybe a thousand times I’ve heard Mom say, “Miriam has the most interesting ideas to make the lesson come to life.”

I guess I was feeling especially grumpy that rainy afternoon, not being able to go outdoors or be with any of the gang as I wanted to. Mom was sitting sewing near the east window in our living room, getting as much light as she could from the murky sky. Charlotte Ann, my sometimes-cute baby sister, was pestering me to give her another piggyback ride, and I didn’t want to do it. I’d already walked and run and crawled all over the whole downstairs with her on my back—and also on my shoulders—maybe a half dozen times that afternoon.

Now I wanted a little peace and quiet for my mind, which was very hungry and trying to get something to eat out of a new book my parents had bought me for my birthday.

So when Charlotte Ann kept on fussing and tugging at me, I yelled at her, “Scat, will you! Leave me alone!” I swung around in my chair, turning my back on her and starting to let my mind sink down into one of the most interest-

ing books I had ever owned. It had in it more than a hundred colored pictures of American birds with interesting facts about the bird families they belonged to. A lot of the birds were the kind that lived and moved and made their nests around Sugar Creek.

There were quite a few long words in the book, and it was fun to learn the meaning of them. Two of the words were especially important to anybody who wants to learn about birds. One of the words was *altricial* and the other *precocial*, and Aunt Miriam knew exactly what they meant.

The *precocial* bird babies, such as ducklings or chickens or grouse or shorebirds, are born with down or fuzz on them and are able to run around to find their own food soon after hatching.

But most baby birds are those called *altricial*. They are hatched completely naked, and all their food has to be carried to them, they are so helpless.

I was thinking, as I sat straining my eyes in the dark room, that Charlotte Ann was like an *altricial* baby bird. She'd had to be waited on hand and foot ever since she was born. She still had to be, almost two-thirds of the time, or she wasn't happy. She just couldn't be baby-sat with but had to have something doing every second, and I had to do it. If what I did seemed funny to her or made her happy, I had to keep on doing it, over and over and over again.

*If only she would quit pestering me, I could do a little thinking*, I thought. That's when I whirled

around in my chair, and that's when I had to stop reading.

As I whirled, my left foot struck against her chubby little legs, bowled her over, and sent her sprawling onto the floor. She let out a shriek and started to cry, her voice sounding like a loon choking on a half-swallowed fish. It sounded only a little bit like a human baby crying.

Well, that unearthly cry coming from Charlotte Ann shattered Mom's peace and quiet and brought her voice to excited life. "Bill Collins! What on earth is the matter with you today! You certainly don't act very *sociable!*" she exclaimed, probably meaning she thought I ought to stop reading my interesting book about American birds and become a baby-sister-sitter by giving Charlotte Ann another piggyback ride around the house.

The word *sociable* was new to me, so I decided that as soon as the chance came, I'd go upstairs to the alcove to see what Miriam had to say about it—to see what kind of boy I *wasn't* and Mom wished I were.

Well, I baby-sister-sat for another half hour, and Charlotte Ann still wasn't satisfied but got fussier and fussier. Being on my hands and knees at the time, I tumbled her off my shoulders onto the floor—sort of accidentally, maybe—and exclaimed to her, "You are the most altruistic bird I ever saw. What on earth's the matter with you, anyway? Why don't you grow up?"

But, of course, a toddler only three years old couldn't get any older all of a sudden.

Mom decided she was “fussy-sleepy” and needed her nap, so we put her into her pink Scottie-dog bed in the downstairs bedroom and shut the door. And I was free to do what I wanted to do for a while.

“Where are you going?” Mom asked when I started toward the kitchen to go through it to the stairway.

“Up to see Aunt Miriam,” I answered, which is the same thing Dad always says when he is going up to look up something. “My mind is half starved, and my mother is a bad cook.”

“Can’t you stay down here to keep me company?” Mom asked with an accusation in her voice. “It’s a very gloomy day.”

“I’m sorry,” I said back to her, “but I don’t feel very *sociable* this afternoon,” thinking maybe I already knew what the word meant. I kept on going toward the stairs, expecting that Mom’s voice would lasso me any second and make me come back to mother-sit awhile. But when I climbed all the way up to Aunt Miriam’s alcove without being stopped, I decided she wasn’t going to be a helpless mother who had to have attention on a rainy day.

I stood looking down at Miriam on her little roll-away table and thought how nice it was that she was always ready to let a boy know almost anything he wanted to know.

Miriam was always open, even when nobody was using her, because that was part of the instructions that had come with her when Dad bought her. We were always to leave her

open with about the same number of pages on either side. It was better for such a large book to be kept like that.

First, I lifted the purple scarf Mom had made for her so that her staying open like that wouldn't make her a dust catcher, because dust is not good for an open book.

In a minute now, I would know what kind of boy I was supposed to be and wasn't. I'd find out what Mom had meant when she said, "You certainly don't act very *sociable*."

Before looking up the word, I rolled Miriam's table over to the rain-spattered south window, where there was more light, and stood for a long minute looking down and out through the curtain of falling rain at the puddles in the barnyard. Then I looked up at the excited clouds, still scudding across the sky as if they were disgusted with life and didn't care who knew it—as if they would rather be sailing around high and dry, far up in a beautiful sunshiny blue sky. Even the clouds looked grumpy and felt so bad that they were crying about it, I thought.

Grumpy clouds and a grumpy boy with grumpy memories! That was the way I felt that very minute. Through the window that was catching all the rain's tears it could and draining them off onto the ivy leaves below, I noticed the pignut trees up at the end of the garden. They were tossing around in the half-mad wind, and I remembered something very exciting that had happened in the clover field up there.

That topsy-turvy experience had been caused by a new boy who had moved into our neighborhood, a boy named Shorty Long, whose blue cow had upset the calm of the whole territory. I had fought several times with Shorty. In at least one of the battles—in which he had bashed my nose—I had given him a licking. I had also been licked myself at the end of that same fight.

“Ho hum,” I sighed through the window at the rain. “At least I won’t have to worry about the short, fat Long boy *this* summer!” His family had moved away. Shorty’s blue cow, Babe, was also gone, and as far as we knew there wasn’t a single boy enemy left to cause us any trouble.

*But, I thought right that second, what boy wants that? What he really wants is to be in the middle of some kind of excitement.*

Still not ready to look up the word I had come to look up, I lazed to the unpainted cedar attic door and opened it just to listen to the rain on the shingled roof. That was one of my favorite sounds—rain on our attic roof or on our barn roof when I’m up in the haymow. Rain on a shingled roof makes a boy feel sad and glad and lonesome all at the same time, like seeing and feeling a baby rabbit trembling in the palm of his hand.

Pretty soon I was back in front of Miriam, turning her big pages to the word *sociable*.

“So *that’s* what I’m not,” I said aloud when I saw what Miriam said Mom had said I wasn’t very. “I’m not very ‘friendly,’ I am not ‘inclined



to seek or enjoy companionship with others of the same species.’”

“Mom is wrong,” I said to me. “I’m one of the most sociable people in the world—when I’m with the Gang.”

My mind reached out its arms and gave a great big sociable hug to every other member: Big Jim with his almost-mustache and powerful biceps; Little Jim, the littlest member; Dragonfly, the spindle-legged member, who is allergic to ragweed in hay fever season and sneezes at almost every strange smell; Poetry, the barrel-shaped member and my almost-best friend, who likes poetry almost better than most boys like blackberry pie; and Circus, who has a beautiful singing voice and, when he grins, looks more like a monkey than any of the rest of us.

Right then my eyes stumbled onto something especially interesting. It was the picture of a bird perched on a branch of what looked like a large toadstool, except that it wasn’t a toadstool. It was, Miriam explained, a huge bird’s nest. The bird was what is called an African sociable weaverbird, “which breeds in colonies, nesting in one great umbrella-shaped structure of grass placed in a tree.”

I looked in Dad’s encyclopedia, then, and learned that sometimes as many as a hundred or even two hundred pairs of sociable weaverbird parents work together to build a giant-sized grass house with hundreds of small nests in it. And the birds all live together without fighting.

For some reason, right that second it seemed I ought to be willing to give my own sister a few extra piggyback rides without complaining. Maybe I could even help the whole Collins family build a more friendly home.

Just as I was wheeling Miriam back to her place in the alcove, I heard the phone downstairs ring, and my mind leaped into hope that whoever was calling would be one of the gang, one of my very own “species.”

I hadn’t any sooner reached the end of the banister at the head of the stairs, getting ready to plunge down, than Mom’s cheerful voice came singing up to me. “Bill! Telephone!”

I was out of breath when I reached the phone, after a stormy dash down the steps, through the kitchen, into the living room, and across its many-colored rag rug to the east window, where the phone was fastened to the wall.

“Who is it?” I whispered to Mom.

And she whispered back with her hand over the phone’s mouthpiece, “He sounded very businesslike.” Her eyes had a twinkle in them that said the person on the other end of the line was one of the Gang. Mom liked all the members almost as well as I did.

I used a very businesslike tone of voice myself as I spoke. “The Theodore Collins residence. William Jasper Collins speaking.”

A second later I knew who had called me. It was good old squawky-voiced, mischief-minded Poetry himself, my almost-best friend. He was

in a cheerful mood. “Is this the Sugar Creek Tent and Awning Company?” he asked.

“It’s the Sugar Creek *Everything* Company,” I answered, using an even more dignified voice than he had and feeling proud of myself for thinking what I thought was a bright remark.

“This is Leslie Thompson’s father’s boy. I’m speaking for his son. Do you repair old lawn umbrellas? The storm has ripped ours to shreds, and we have only the metal ribs left.”

And that is when the *second* idea hit me—the one that was to get this story really started. With my mind’s eyes I saw the whole thing: the Thompsons’ large lawn umbrella converted into the roof of a grass tree house for the gang to meet in. We would cut the top out of a young sapling down along the creek or the bayou, lash the umbrella’s center pole to its trunk, then interweave bluegrass and timothy and some of the tall marsh sedge near the swamp, tying everything together with binder twine and maybe covering the metal ribs of the umbrella with chicken-yard wire first. When we were finished, the roof of our house would look like an African sociable weaverbird’s monstrous nest.

To keep out the rain and wind, we’d have to have sidewalls, which we could make out of pieces of old canvas from some of our dads’ harvesters.

“We certainly *do* repair old lawn umbrellas!” I almost screamed into the phone. “We certainly do. Bring it right over as quick as you can!”

And that was the beginning of the Sugar Creek Gang's new grass-roofed hideout, which we actually built, using the skeleton of Poetry's folks' old lawn umbrella for the framework of the roof. When we finished it, it didn't look any more like an African sociable weaverbird's hundred-family tree house than the man in the moon looks like a man. It was a pretty nice house, though, and was a good hideout for us to hide in from our imaginary enemies. Its roof was actually rainproof, and whenever there was a rain coming up and we knew it, we would run helter-skelter for its shelter and stay as dry as a feather in the sunshine. We even outfitted it with some old furniture.

We used our tree house for our headquarters for all kinds of explorations into what we pretended was wild Indian country. Also we acted out the Robinson Crusoe story we all knew so well.

But it was only make-believe, and a boy can't be satisfied *all* the time with a lot of let's-pretend stuff. Once in a while something has to come to some kind of life, which nothing did except that a lot of birds—some *altricial* and some *precocial*—thought our nest was full of wonderful material for making their own smaller nests. They kept stealing the straw and sedge and stuff, which we had to replace or our roof would leak.

But still nothing happened, day after day after day. Nothing *real* until—

By “until” I mean not until the day we

found a mysterious stranger living in our house. If we had known who he was and what kind of adventure he was going to lead us into, we probably wouldn't have decided to let him keep on living there. We might have been scared to.

## 2

We had built our tree house on a knoll between the bayou and the slope leading down to the creek, where there was a good place to fish. We'd had a hard time deciding just where, at first, because Old Man Paddler, who owns the woods and most of the territory around our playground, was away on a trip to California to see his nephew, and we kind of hated to cut the top out of a sapling on his property without his permission, even though we were pretty sure he'd let us.

So when we found a very strong, just-the-right-size young tree on a grassy knoll that was on Dragonfly's folks' bottomland, we built it there.

The house wasn't much to look at after the roof turned brown. When Mom saw it, which she did one day when she was down along the creek with her camera, she said, "It looks like an old brown setting hen on a nest," and she snapped a picture of it.

The first we knew anybody had moved into it was one very hot afternoon while Old Man Paddler was still on his vacation and we were sort of lonesome for him. His cabin up in the hills looked sad and lonely, too.

"Let's go take a look at our old setting hen

to see if she has any chickens under her,” Little Jim said with his cute mouselike voice.

And away we all went, from the spring where we were at the time, *zip-zip-zip* through the giant ragweeds in the path toward the swimming hole, which led past our tree house.

All of a sudden, Dragonfly, who was ahead of the rest of us at the time, called, “Hey, you guys, somebody’s had a *fire* here.”

But the big surprise came a few minutes later, when he yelled to us again, this time from inside our thatch-roofed house, “Come here! Somebody has moved *into* our house and is living here!”

In a few seconds, a scramble of flying bare feet carried the rest of us to where Dragonfly was, where we quickly funneled our way inside, looking around to see what Dragonfly had seen. There wasn’t much—only an old brown suitcase, and a few cans of different kinds of food on the little folding table we had put there to eat on, and the camp cot on the far side.

Then Dragonfly’s crooked nose sniffed suspiciously. He exclaimed, “I smell turpentine,” and he sneezed to prove he had.

I’d been smelling it myself, although I’d thought it was paint of some kind. The odor was hardly strong enough for anybody except Dragonfly to notice it. It was not any more than you could smell if you walked up to the trunk of the big ponderosa pine that grows beside the path on the way to the sycamore tree and

smelled the yellowish, sticky fluid that oozes from it.

Dragonfly sneezed again and squeezed his way past me to the exit, sneezing twice before he could get outside into the fresh, pure air. But he hadn't been outside longer than it would take him to sneeze twice more, when he hollered again, this time saying, "Gang! Somebody's coming!"

Then I heard it myself. Somebody or something *was* coming.

Would we be caught snooping around, looking over somebody's private property? It seemed we ought not to be there, even if it was our very own tree house that somebody had moved into.

"I'm getting out of here!" Circus exclaimed and was the first to duck out, with the rest of us following like bumblebees storming out of their nest after a boy has poked a stick into it.

We fanned out in six different directions, but mostly in the direction of the spring, which was opposite the direction of the sounds. As soon as I felt we were out of sight, I stopped and listened.

At first there was only the sound of the worried water in the Sugar Creek riffle and a half-dozen robins scolding in the trees overhead and all around, accusing us of trespassing on robin property, saying, "*Quick! Quick! Get out of here! Quick!*"

I was used to hearing Robin Redbreast and his family scolding like that, because nearly



every summer for years a pair of them had built their nest in a crotch in the upper branches of the plum tree in our yard.

Even though birds didn't belong to our species, still we ought to love them and not destroy their nests. It seemed, though, that if we sort of accidentally trespassed on what they thought was their own property, they ought to be a little more sociable about it.

How we had all gotten together so soon after our helter-skelter scramble from our birdhouse, I don't know, but there we all were, crouching in the grass on another small knoll behind some shrubbery, panting and serious-faced and excited and wondering what on earth and who.

Just then Dragonfly, who was hunkering beside Little Jim and peeking through the foliage of a sweetbrier bush, sneezed again, maybe on account of the extrasweet smell of its leaves and flowers. Then he whispered, "Look! I see him! He's a—he's *black!*"

I was so surprised at Dragonfly's tone of voice that I looked at his face.

My parents had taught me that people of other races were as good as white people, the same as robins were as good as meadowlarks, which just happen to be a different color. The One who had made the robins and all other birds had also made different-colored human beings. The color of a person's skin wasn't important—it was the kind of heart a person had that counted. Mom had said that many a time.

So when Dragonfly said what he had just said in the tone of voice he had used, I felt my temper getting ready to catch fire.

Maybe I ought to explain that there were very few black families in Sugar Creek territory. The one we knew best was named Ballard. The father's name was Samson, but everybody called him Sam. He was one of the kindest men anybody ever saw. He was also a hard worker, with muscles as strong as the village blacksmith's in a poem we studied in school, and he made a good living for his family.

My eyes galloped after Dragonfly's, and I saw what he saw. Sure enough, the person was black. He was walking with a limp, using a cane, and heading straight for our tree house door. He was coming from the direction of the spring.

"Look!" Dragonfly whispered again. "He's got a bottle of something!"

I was seeing the same thing. The man did have a bottle. It was shaped like a whiskey flask.

I saw something else too. I saw the man—he was an old man—raise his hand to his head as if he wasn't feeling well. He swayed a little and sort of sank down on the grass. Then he fumbled in a shirt pocket for something, took it out, poured something into his hand, and put it into his mouth. Then he lifted the bottle to his lips and took a drink.

I knew it was an actual whiskey flask, because I'd seen quite a few lying along the roadside and sometimes even down at the spring on Monday morning when there had been Sunday

picnickers in the woods. Whiskey bottles make good targets for a boy's slingshot, if you set them up on a fencepost.

"He's trespassing on our territory," Dragonfly said. "Let's go order him off."

When we'd been inside our tree house a little while before, we'd seen enough to know that the man had really moved in. How long he had been there, we didn't know, but he'd stayed at least one night.

We couldn't keep on crouching there in the grass doing nothing, so pretty soon Little Jim suggested, "Why don't we all start whistling and talking and moseying along toward where he is and see *who* he is and if we can help him some way."

Big Jim made that an order, and a few seconds later, with all my nerves tingling and my heart pounding for wondering what on earth, I was following along with the rest of the gang. All of us were trying to act like ordinary boys doing ordinary things, just rambling along the creek with nothing on our minds except being happy on a sunshiny afternoon.

That is what we started to do.

But Dragonfly stopped us with a bossy "Wait! You guys stand back of me! I'm going to order him off our property!"

"Why?" Big Jim wanted to know. "What's he doing wrong?"

"Trespassing," Dragonfly answered with a set face, then added with a loud whisper, "he's a black!"

I just couldn't believe it! A member of the Sugar Creek Gang feeling the way Dragonfly's tone of voice said he felt right that minute!

My thoughts were interrupted then, because something started to happen behind me. It was Circus and Dragonfly having a scuffle. Circus was shaking Dragonfly by his shoulders and saying, "That old man is *not* trespassing. Nobody is trespassing on anybody else's property unless there's a sign that says No Trespassing. And besides, he's a human being, the same as you are—only maybe more so!"

Big Jim stopped the scuffle with his voice and his powerful muscles. He pulled the boys apart and said, "There doesn't actually *have* to be a No Trespassing sign. But if we all say he's *not* trespassing, then he isn't."

I was glad there wasn't going to be any rough-and-tumble battle between two members of our gang, though I knew their thoughts were still fighting even if their muscles weren't. I was also proud of Circus for feeling the way he did.

Circus was one of the best thinkers in the whole gang. He always made good grades in school, too. He was especially good in arithmetic, which I sometimes wasn't, and he had one of the best boy-soprano singing voices in the whole territory. Sometimes he sang solos in church.

A boy as fine as Circus couldn't help it that he had six sisters and hardly ever got a chance

to help his mother with the dishes, the way a certain other boy I know gets to do.

But this wasn't any time to let myself feel sorry for myself for being maybe the best boy dishwasher in the county. As the robins—which had been scolding that we were trespassing on *their* territory—calmed down a little, I asked myself what would happen during the next few minutes.