

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
1. Stranger on Madrona Hill	7
2. The Frog Pond	18
3. The Gravel Pit	28
4. The Squirrel Cage	39
5. A Big Decision	49
6. In Search of a Clue	59
7. Nobody Believes Us!	73
8. Carp Lake	83
9. Siren in the Night	94
10. The Treasure Hunt	103
11. MacDuff	117



1

Stranger on Madrona Hill

Tod Mitchell could hardly believe his eyes when he saw Barney turn in at the front gate. The short, fat boy walked slowly, his arm bent at the elbow, his upper arm held tightly against his chest. In his hand he was holding a strainer—just an ordinary sieve—the kind Tod’s mother used to drain spaghetti. Inside the strainer rolled a shiny red apple.

Tod took a running leap off the front steps and met Barney halfway up the drive. “What in the world are you doing, Barney?” he asked.

Barney looked up from the strainer and grinned. “I thought I might get hungry so I brought an apple.”

“I don’t mean the apple! The strainer!” Tod pointed.

“Oh, that! I thought it might come in handy for catching frog eggs.”

“You don’t catch them, Barn. You just take them out of the water. And besides, they don’t need to be strained,” he added. “They have to have water.”

“It might come in handy,” Barney repeated hopefully.

“I already have a coffee can we’re going to use.” Tod looked at the strainer again. “A strainer! What a dumb idea!” He brushed the sandy-colored hair out of his eyes

with the back of his hand and began to walk briskly down the drive.

Barney followed but was soon outdistanced. He still carried the apple in the strainer which he held in front of him in an awkward manner. They reached the base of the hill behind the Mitchell property and began the ascent to the brow of the hill. Barney was panting in a matter of moments.

"Hey, Tod," he puffed. "Whew! Wait up, will you?"

Tod stopped and turned to wait on the narrow trail.

"What's your hurry? We've got all day." Barney sat down abruptly in the middle of the path.

Tod crouched down beside him resting on his knees. "I keep forgetting that you can't keep up. You know, Barn," he added looking him over, "you are sort of fat."

Barney was breathing normally again. "Don't rub it in." He took the apple out of the strainer and bit into it.

"See! That's what I mean. Always thinking about your stomach! Come on!" Tod unfolded his slim five-foot-six-inches into a standing position. He had grown three inches in the past year. Barney, who was twelve and a year younger than Tod, as well as much shorter and chubbier, gave several grunts before he finally stood to his feet. He was still clutching the strainer in one hand as they continued up the hill.

From the top they followed a long-overgrown path for half a mile before they entered a brushy area. Minutes later they emerged abruptly at the edge of a marsh. Mud Lake was just one of many such ponds in the area around the small community of Wildwood. Cattails, tall grasses, and reeds grew in the brown, murky water.

The boys made their way along the edge of the marsh

looking for signs of frog eggs. They had been planning this excursion for almost a week. They had made up their minds that as soon as school was out for summer vacation they would locate some frog eggs and watch them hatch and develop into frogs.

At last Tod noted some greenish-white jellylike masses floating gently among the reeds. They were a little way out from the shore, and though the water was shallow Tod wondered how to reach them without wading into the mud and slime of the swamp. Barney had seated himself on the end of a log close by. He finished his apple and tossed the core into the marsh. It hit the water with a plunk and bobbed on the surface sending little ripples out from the point of impact.

“Hey, Barn. Put that strainer down and let’s get this log into the water.”

“What are you going to do with it?” Barney asked, as he rose from the log which was partially buried in the swamp mud.

“Let’s see if we can put it in the water so I can walk out on it and reach those frog eggs.” Tod pointed.

Puffing, tugging, and sweating, they finally managed to drag the log to the water’s edge. While Barney tried to hold one end in place, Tod guided the other out into the swamp with a stick. When he was satisfied that it was where he wanted it, the narrow end floated just above the bottom of the muddy lake. Tod rolled up his pant legs, hesitated for a moment, and then stepped cautiously onto the log. It settled deeper into the mud under his weight. He crouched to his knees and took a crawling position as he moved slowly out along the unsteady log.

“OK, now toss me the can.” Tod shook his head to get the

hair out of his eyes and turned toward Barney who was standing on the bank.

"How about the strainer?"

"No—the can!" Tod shifted his position slightly.

"Here it comes!" Barney threw it awkwardly, but Tod's long arm reached out and intercepted it before it hit the water. Momentarily, he lost his balance, and his foot slipped off the log.

"That water's cold!" he shrieked. Balancing himself again, he carefully dipped the can into the water until it was directly under the mass of frog eggs. As he lifted it, the log started to roll.

"Hold it steady, Barn. Do you want me to fall off?" Tod began to back along the log and was soon on solid footing.

"Will they hatch?" asked Barney, looking into the can.

"I don't know why not."

The boys dabbled along the marsh edge, poking sticks into the mud, and watching the polliwogs scatter.

"How come there are already polliwogs in the lake when there are still frog eggs that haven't hatched?" asked Barney.

"The eggs were probably laid sooner than the ones we got, that's all."

"Just in case the eggs don't hatch, why don't we catch some polliwogs, too?"

"That's the best idea you've had all day," Tod replied.

Barney grinned at the compliment. They moved along the lakeshore looking for a place where they could reach the tadpoles without getting into the water. In a shallow cove, green and brown grasses and slime moved gently as black polliwogs darted here and there. Near the edge, the water was black with shiny, wriggling bodies.

Barney quickly dipped his strainer into the black mass.

He lifted it from the marsh, and as the water poured off through the wire mesh the polliwogs flopped about. Tod gently lifted the frog eggs from the can so that Barney could dump in the polliwogs. Then he put the eggs back in on top of the water.

“Who said my strainer wouldn’t come in handy?” beamed Barney, his dark eyes sparkling.

“Well, after all, Barney. You couldn’t very well carry them home in a strainer!” Tod laughed.

“Let’s start on our frog pond this afternoon,” suggested Barney a little later, as they made their way back along the lake.

“Can’t. I have to deliver my papers when I get home.”

As they walked through the woods they decided to cut across by the deserted Martin place. Tod had heard his dad talk about old man Martin who used to live there all alone. That was before Tod could remember. The meadow grass had grown tall around the house which sagged slightly to one side. The paint, which had once been white, was chipped and weathered. In the yard, an old apple tree, dead and gnarled, held its bare gray branches out oddly. It reminded Tod of some weird monster.

They bypassed the rickety front porch and walked around to the back to peer through a broken windowpane. A faded curtain hung limply from the kitchen window. A rusted coffee pot was still on the old wood heater which stood in the corner. An enamel wash basin, chipped and dirty, lay upside down on the floor. Scraps of paper littered the broken linoleum.

Tod had moved away and was looking in through another window when he felt the pressure of Barney’s hand on his arm. He looked in the direction Barney was pointing.

Walking across the meadow with long, quick strides moved a man—taller than anyone Tod had ever seen. He wore a black coat with long tails. Atop his head was a tall black stovepipe hat and in his left hand he was swinging a cane. A moment later he had disappeared into the shadow of the woods.

Before either boy could speak, the stillness of the woods was shattered by a low wail. It grew gradually higher and louder until it reached a screaming crescendo. Tod felt a cold, prickly sensation move along his arms and up his back. His hair seemed to stand straight up on end. The siren held the high pitch for several seconds and gradually died away. Tod rubbed the goose bumps on his arms. Everything was silent for a moment, and then the siren gave three short blasts.

For a moment the boys seemed rooted to the spot. Tod looked at Barney. "You don't think—let's get out of here!"

Tod dashed back across the clearing the direction they had come. Barney, following as fast as he could, stumbled along behind. When Tod finally dropped down to rest, Barney plopped down beside him gasping for breath. For a few moments neither one spoke. Tod felt a throbbing in his head, and his heart beat so loudly he was sure that it could be heard miles away.

"You know something, Barney?" He sat up abruptly.

Barney lifted himself on one short chubby arm and put his hand beneath his chin. "All I know is I'm tired of running."

"We forgot the polliwogs."

"We'll have to go back, won't we? I put the can and strainer down while I was looking in that house."

"I should have carried the can," Tod stated as they retraced their steps back toward the Martin place.

"What do you think he's doing out in the woods dressed like that?" questioned Barney, glancing into the shadow of the woods.

"You know what he reminded me of?" asked Tod. "Those pictures you see of Abraham Lincoln. I guess he was just about the tallest man there ever was." They walked in silence for a moment. "The really creepy part is that siren."

"My dad says the only time they sound the siren is when one of the mental patients is missing from the hospital."

"They blow it every day at noon, Barn."

"It's way past noon though."

"It's sort of weird that it blew right after that man disappeared into the woods—almost like a signal of some sort."

The boys reached the meadow, looked cautiously in all directions, and then raced across the clearing to the deserted house. The can was right where Barney had put it down. The strainer was on the ground beside it. Tod picked up the can, and Barney clutched his strainer as they started for home.

"I suppose he could be someone from the mental hospital." Tod picked up the conversation again.

"Do you think he's dangerous?"

"I doubt it. My dad says most of the patients aren't dangerous at all—only sick and sort of mixed up sometimes. He says if you met one of them you probably wouldn't know anything was wrong with him. Like maybe somebody with a sickness that doesn't show. Cancer, or something."

"Why would anybody wear such funny clothes if there wasn't something wrong with him?" asked Barney.

"That's what I'd like to know. Especially out here in the woods."

The boys reached the brow of the hill and rejoined the path by which they had come earlier. They walked single file with Tod in the lead. The trail led through Oregon grape, salal bushes, wild currant, and other low-growing vegetation. Here and there the red bark of the madrona trees showed through shiny, dark green leaves. At the foot of the hill, while passing through a section of tall fir trees, they looked anxiously for signs of the man in the stovepipe hat.

"What was that!" Barney grabbed Tod's shirt. There was a rustle in the leaves and a moment later the call of a bird.

"You're really spooked, Barney. Haven't you ever heard a quail call before?"

It was with a great deal of relief that they finally reached the cleared area at the back of the Mitchell property. Leaving the trail, they crossed the foot of the hill and emerged by the chicken house.

"Let's keep what we saw a secret, Barney. At least until we find out more about it. People would think we were making it up."

"You know something?" Barney asked seriously. "I think you're right. I'm beginning to think maybe we were seeing things."

It was time for Tod to go on his paper route when he reached home. Barney followed Tod about like a puppy as he placed the can of frog eggs and tadpoles on the windowsill of the woodshed and went to get his bicycle. He stopped by the kitchen long enough to call to his mother.

"I'm leaving for my papers now, Mom!"

Mrs. Mitchell acknowledged the call, and Tod pedaled

slowly out of the driveway with Barney puffing alongside. They covered the short distance from Mitchell's to Sebastian's, and while Tod waited, Barney clumped onto the porch. As he turned the doorknob, Mrs. Sebastian, dark, curly-headed, and as round and well-padded as her son, opened the door.

"Can I go with Tod on his route? Please, Mom?" Without waiting for an answer Barney was back down the porch steps getting his bicycle.

"When will you be back, Barney?" she called, as the boys started down the road.

"Couple of hours," Tod assured her.

The big blue and white bus was just pulling into the bus area by Lambert's store as the boys reached the highway. There was a *whoosh* of air as the driver applied the brakes; the bus doors opened, and a bundle of papers was tossed out onto the gravel shoulder of the road. Tod and Barney left their bicycles as the bus pulled away with a popping roar.

"What do you do with the money from your paper route?" asked Barney as they settled down to the task of folding and stuffing papers into the bag for delivery.

"First, I take out my tithe. That's ten percent of all I earn. It goes into the offering at Sunday school. I put some in the bank and spend whatever I have left."

"How come you have to take part of it to Sunday school?"

"I don't *have* to, Barney. I *want* to. Ever since I met Jesus Christ last summer at Bible camp, I try to do what I should." He looked up from the paper he was folding and brushed his hair from his eyes. "One of the things God wants Christians to do is to give part of what they earn back to Him."

"I don't get it, Tod. You'd have a lot more to spend if

you didn't have to give ten cents out of every dollar to your church."

"I know that. But when I think about Jesus dying on the cross and giving His life for me, I just want to do all I can to please Him."

"If I had a paper route I'd spend all the money I made on things like hamburgers, ice cream cones, and—"

"I guess it's all in what you think is important," interrupted Tod. He sat back against his heels and looked at Barney. "I sure wish you'd go with me to Sunday school so you could find out what I'm talking about."

"My dad says Sunday's the only day he gets to sleep late, so why should he waste it going to church."

Tod got to his feet and hoisted the canvas bag into place on his bicycle. "You're not your dad, Barney. You could get up and go with me if you wanted to."

"You didn't used to bug me about going with you. How come you keep after me now?"

"Because, ever since I asked Jesus Christ to be my Saviour I know what you are missing. Before I was saved I was like you." Tod swung his leg over the bar of his bicycle. "I went to church because that was what our family did every Sunday, but since last summer I want to go."

Barney followed on his bicycle as Tod led the way on the paper route. Sometimes Tod would hand a paper to Barney, and he would toss it onto a porch or put it into a mailbox. Most often Tod did it himself, for he had learned to hit the selected spot with unswerving accuracy. An hour later they stopped their bicycles in front of the Mitchells house.

"You could come with me to our kids' club, Barney. That way you could still sleep in on Sunday morning," Tod urged,

as he sat astride his bicycle balancing himself with his long legs.

“No, thanks. I’m doing OK.”

Tod frowned as he turned to go. “If I don’t see you before, come over Monday and we’ll start the frog pond.”

“I’ll be there,” Barney assured him.

“And keep quiet about the other,” Tod cautioned.

“Don’t worry. I don’t want anybody thinking I’m some kind of nut!”

Tod grinned and pedaled into the driveway.