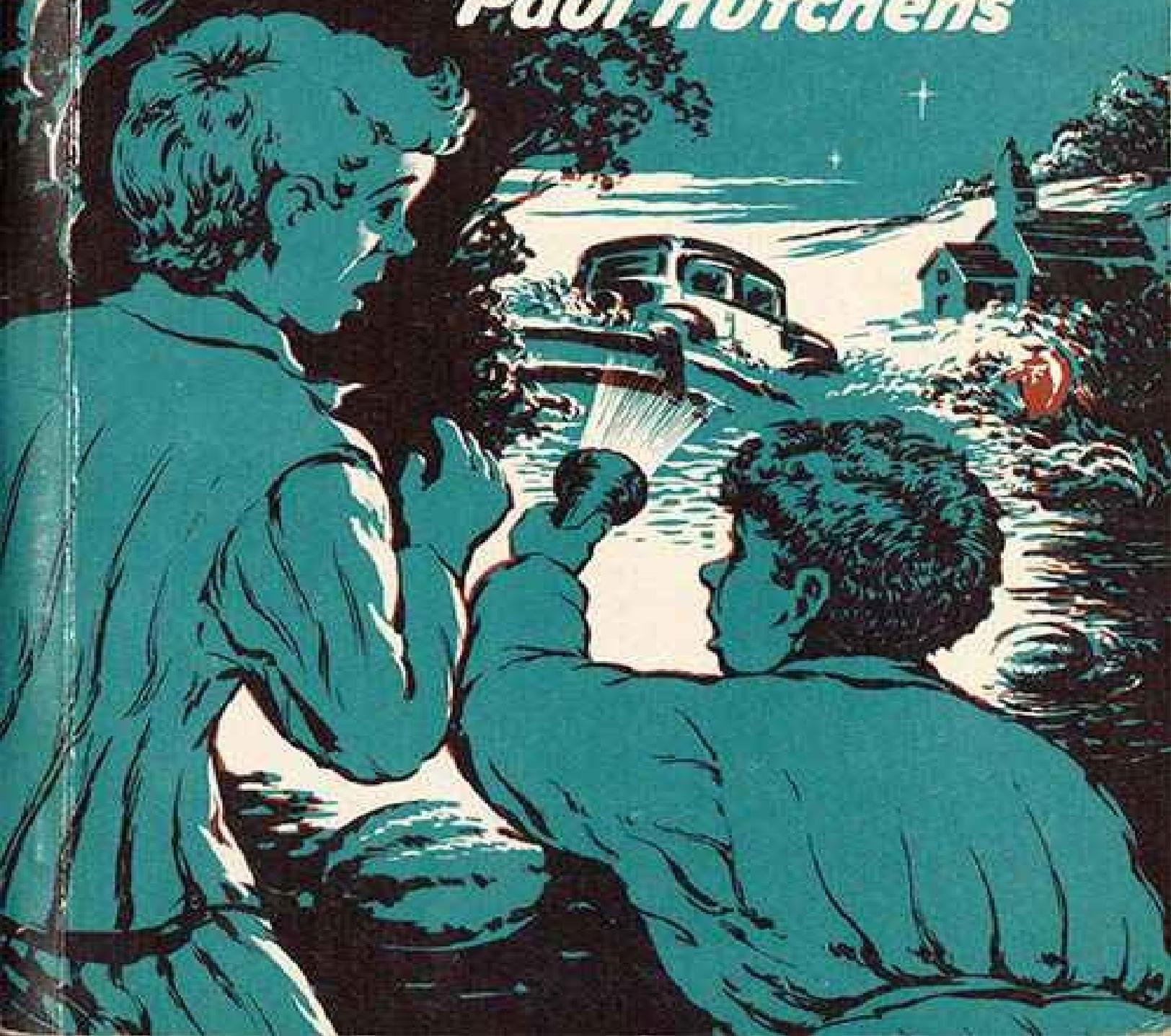


# WATERMELON MYSTERY AT SUGAR CREEK

*Paul Hutchens*



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Title: Watermelon Mystery at Sugar Creek

Author: Paul Hutchens

Release Date: January 6, 2019 [EBook #58628]

Language: English

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***THE WATERMELON MYSTERY  
AT SUGAR CREEK***

*WATERMELON MYSTERY  
AT SUGAR CREEK*

by  
PAUL HUTCHENS

*Published by*

Colophon

Scripture Press BOOK DIVISION  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Watermelon Mystery at Sugar Creek*

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*Third Printing*

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Printed in the United States of America

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# 1

IF I hadn't been so proud of the prize watermelon I had grown from the packet of special seed Pop had ordered from the State Experiment Station, maybe I wouldn't have been so fighting mad when somebody sneaked into our truck patch that summer night and stole it.

I was not only proud of that beautiful, oblong, dark green melon, but I was going to save the seed for planting next year. I was, in fact, planning to go into the watermelon-raising business.

Pop and I had had the soil of our truck patch tested, and it was just right for melons, which means it was well-drained, well-ventilated, with plenty of natural plant food. We would never have to worry about moisture in case there would ever be a dry summer, on account of we could carry water from the iron pitcher pump which was just inside the south fence. As you maybe know, our family had another pitcher pump not more than fifteen feet from the back door of our house—both pumps getting mixed up in the mystery of the stolen watermelon, which I'm going to tell you about right now.

Mom and I were down in the truck patch one hot day that summer, looking around a little, admiring my melon and guessing how many seeds she might have buried in her nice red inside. "Let's give her a name," I said to Mom—the Collins family, which is ours, giving names to nearly every living thing around our farm anyway—and Mom answered, "All right, let's call her *Ida*."

Mom caught hold of the iron pitcher pump handle and pumped it up and down quite a few fast, squeaking times to fill the pail I was holding under the spout.

"Why *Ida*?" I asked with a grunt, the pail getting heavier with every stroke of the pump handle.

Mom's answer sounded sensible: "Ida means *thirsty*. I noticed it yesterday when I was looking through a book of names for babies."

I had never seen such a thirsty melon in all my half-long life. Again and again, day after day, I had carried water to her, pouring it into the circular trough I had made in the ground around the roots of the vine she was growing on, and always the next morning the water would be gone. Knowing a watermelon is over ninety-two per cent water anyway, I knew if she kept on taking water like that,

she'd get to be one of the fattest melons in the whole Sugar Creek territory.

Mom and I threaded our way through the open spaces between the vines, dodging a lot of smaller other melons grown from ordinary seed, till we came to the little trough that circled Ida's vine, and while I was emptying my pail of water into it, I said, "Okay, Ida, my girl. That's your name: *Ida Watermelon Collins*. How do you like it?"

I stooped, snapped my third finger several times against her fat green side and called her by name again, saying, "By this time next year you'll be the mother of a hundred other melons. And year after next, you'll be the *grandmother* of more melons than you can shake a stick at."

I sighed a long noisy happy sigh, thinking about what a wonderful summer day it was and how good it felt to be alive, to be a boy and to live in a boy's world. I carried another pail of water, poured it into Ida's trough, then stopped to rest in the shade of the elderberry bushes near the fence. Pop and I had put up a brand new woven-wire fence there early in the spring, and at the top of it had stretched two strands of barbed wire, making it dangerous for anybody to climb over the fence in a hurry. In fact, the only place anybody would be able to get over *real* fast would be at the stile we were going to build near the iron pitcher pump half way between the pump and the elderberry bushes. We would *have* to get the stile built pretty soon, I thought, 'cause in another few weeks school would start, and I would want to do like I'd always done—go through or over the fence there to get to the lane, which was a short cut to school.

I didn't have the slightest idea then that somebody would try to steal my melon, nor that the stealing of it would plunge me into the exciting middle of one of the most dangerous mysteries there had ever been in the Sugar Creek territory. Most certainly I never dreamed that *Ida Watermelon Collins* would have a share in helping the gang capture a fugitive from justice, an actual runaway thief the police had been looking for for quite a while.

We found out about the thief one hot summer night about a week later when Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of our gang, stayed all night with me in his green sportsman's tent which my parents had let us pitch under the spreading branches of the plum tree in our yard.

The way it looks now it will take me almost a whole book to write it all for you. Boy oh boy, will it ever be fun remembering everything! Of course everything didn't happen that very first night but one of the most exciting and confusing things did. It *wouldn't* have happened though, if we hadn't gotten out

of our cots and started on a pajama-clad hike in the moonlight down through the woods to the spring—Poetry in his green striped pajamas and I in my red-striped ones, and Dragonfly in——!

But say! I hadn't planned to tell you just yet that Dragonfly was with us that night—which he wasn't at first. Dragonfly, as you probably know, is the spindle-legged, pop-eyed member of our gang, who is always showing up when we don't need him or want him and when we least expect him and is always getting us into trouble—or else we have to help get him *out* of trouble.

Now that I've mentioned Dragonfly and hinted that he was the cause of some of our trouble—mine especially—I'd better tell you that he and I had the same kind of red-striped pajamas—our different mothers having seen the same ad in the Sugar Creek Times and had gone shopping the same afternoon in the same Sugar Creek Dry Goods Store and had seen the same bargains in boys' night clothes—two pairs of red-striped pajamas being the only kind left when they got there.

Little Tom Till's mother—Tom being the newest member of our gang—had seen the ad about the sale too, and his mother and mine had each bought for their two red-haired, freckle-faced sons a pair of blue denim western-style jeans exactly alike, also two maroon-and-gray-striped T-shirts exactly alike. When Tom and I were together anywhere, you could hardly tell us apart. So I looked like Little Tom Till in the *daytime* and like Dragonfly *at night*.

Poor Dragonfly! All the gang felt very sorry for him on account of he not only is very spindle-legged and pop-eyed, but in ragweed season—which it was at that time of the year—his crooked nose which turns south at the end, is always sneezing, and he also gets asthma.

Before I get into the middle of the stolen watermelon story, I'd better explain that my wonderful grayish-brown-haired mother had been having what is called “insomnia” that summer, so Pop had arranged for her to sleep upstairs in our guest bedroom—that being the farthest away from the night noises of our farm, especially the ones that came from the direction of the barn. Mom simply had to have her rest or she wouldn't be able to keep on doing all the things a farm mother has to do every day all summer.

That guest room was also the farthest away from the tent under the plum tree—which Poetry and I decided maybe was another reason why Pop had put Mom upstairs.

Just one other thing I have to explain quick, is that the reason Poetry was staying at my house for a week was on account of his parents were on a vacation in Canada, and had left Poetry with us. He and I were going to have a vacation at

the same time by sleeping in his tent which we pitched in our yard—as I’ve already told you, under the spreading branches of the plum tree.

Well, here goes, headfirst into our adventure! It was a *very* hot late-summer night, the time of year when the cicadas were as much a part of a Sugar Creek night as sunshine is part of the day. Cicadas, as you probably know, are broad-headed, protruding-eyed insects which some people call locusts and others “harvest flies.” In the late summer evenings, they set the whole country half crazy with their whirring sounds from the trees where thousands of them are like an orchestra with that many members, each member playing nothing but a drum.

I was lying on my hot cot just across the tent from Poetry in his own hot cot, each of us having tried about seven times to go to sleep, which Pop had ordered us to do about seventy-times-seven times that very night, barking out his orders from the back door or from the living room window.

Poetry, being in a mischievous mood, was right in the middle of quoting one of his favorite poems, “The Village Blacksmith,” quoting aloud to an imaginary audience out in the barnyard, when Pop called to us again to keep still. His voice came bellowing out through the drumming of the cicadas, saying, “Bill Collins, if you boys don’t stop talking and laughing and go to *sleep*, I’m coming out there and *put* you to sleep!”

A few seconds later, Pop added in a still-thundering voice, “I’ve told you boys for the last time! You’re keeping Charlotte Anne awake—and you’re liable to wake up your mother, too!” When Pop says anything like that, like *that*, I know he really means it, especially when he has already said it *that* many times.

I knew it was no time of night for my two-year-old cute little brown-haired sister, Charlotte Ann, to be awake, and certainly my nice friendly-faced, grayish-brown-haired mother would need a lot of extra sleep, ’cause tomorrow was Saturday and there would be the house to clean, pies and cookies to bake for Sunday, and a million chores a farm woman has to do on Saturday, every Saturday there is.

“Wonderful!” Poetry whispered across to me. “He won’t tell us any more; he’s told us for the last time. We can laugh and talk now as much as we want to!”

“You don’t know Pop,” I said. “When he says he has said anything for the last time he means he won’t say it again with just words—he’ll use a switch or his old razor strap.”

You see, Poetry didn’t know as well as I did what an expert Pop was in the way he could handle a switch—beech, willow, cherry or any kind that happened to be handy—and he could handle a razor strap better than any father a boy ever felt.

Poetry ignored my warning and tried to be funny by saying, “Does your father still use an old-fashioned razor that has to be stropped?”

I tried to think of something funny myself which was, “He still has an old-fashioned boy that has to be—when that boy is too dull to understand.” But maybe what I said wasn’t very humorous, ’cause Poetry ignored it.

“I’m thirsty,” he said. “Let’s go get a drink,” his voice coming across the darkness like the voice of a duck with laryngitis.

Right away there was a squeaking of the springs of his cot as he rolled himself into a sitting position. He swung his feet out of bed, set them with a ker-plop on the canvas floor of the tent. I could see him sitting there like the shadow of a fat grizzly in the light of the moonlight that filtered in through the plastic-netted window just above my cot.

A split jiffy later, he was across the three feet of space between us, sitting on the edge of my cot, making it groan almost loud enough for Pop to hear.

“Let’s go!” he said, using a businesslike tone.

I certainly didn’t want to get up and go outside with him to get a drink. Besides, I knew the very minute we would start to pump the iron pitcher pump at the end of the board walk not more than fifteen feet from our kitchen door, Pop would hear the pump pumping and the water splashing into the big iron kettle under the spout and would come storming out, with or without words, and would start saying again something he had already said for the last time.

I yawned the laziest longest yawn I could, sighed the longest drawn-out sigh I could, saying to Poetry, “I’m too sleepy. You go and get a drink for *both* of us.”

Then I sighed once more, turned over, and began to breathe heavily like I was sound asleep.

But Poetry couldn’t be stopped by sighs and yawns. He shook me awake and hissed, “Come on, treat a guest with a little politeness, will you?”—meaning I had to wake up and get up and go out with him to pump a noisy pump and run the risk of stirring up Pop’s already stirred-up temper.

When I kept on breathing like a sleeping baby, Poetry said with a disgruntled grunt, “Give me one little reason why you won’t help me get a drink!”

“One little reason?” I yawned up at his shadow. “I’ll give you a *big* one—five feet, eleven inches tall, one-hundred-seventy-two pounds, bushy-eyebrowed, reddish-brown mustached, and with a razor strap in his powerful right hand!”

“You want me to die of thirst?” asked Poetry.

“Thirst, or something; whatever you want to do it of. But hurry up and do it, and get it over with, ’cause I’m going to sleep.”

I certainly wasn't going to get up and go out in the moonlight and run into Pop's razor strap for anybody.

That must have stirred up Poetry's temper a little, 'cause he said, "Okay, Chum, I'll go by myself!"

Quicker than a firefly's fleeting flash, he had zipped open the zipper of the plastic screened door of the tent, whipped the canvas curtain aside and stepped out into the moonlight.

I was up and out and after him in a nervous hurry. I grabbed him by the sleeve of his green-striped pajamas, but he wouldn't stay stopped. He whispered a half-growl at me, "If you try to stop me, I'll scream and you'll get a licking."

With that he started off on the run across the moonlit yard—not toward the pump but in a different direction toward the front gate, saying over his shoulder, "I'm going down to the *spring* to get a drink."

That idea was even crazier, I thought—crazier than pumping the iron pitcher pump and waking up Pop, who, in turn, would start pumping his right arm up and down with a razor strap on either Poetry or me, or both.

But you might as well try to start a balky mule as to stop Leslie Thompson from doing what he has made up his stubborn mind he is going to do, so a jiffy later the two of us were hurrying past "Theodore Collins" on our mailbox—*Theodore Collins* being Pop's name. A second later, we were across the gravel road and over the rail fence, following the path made by barefoot boys' bare feet through the woods to the spring, Poetry using his flashlight every few seconds to light the way.

And that is where we ran into our mystery!

Zippety-zip-zip, swishety-swish-swish, clomp-clomp-clomp, dodge, swerve, gallop ... It's nearly always one of the happiest times of my life when I am running down that little brown path to the spring, where the gang has nearly all its meetings and where so many interesting and exciting things have happened through the years. Generally, my barefoot gallop through the woods is in the daytime, and I feel like a frisky young colt turned out to pasture. But I had never run down that path in red-striped pajamas at night when I was sleepily disgruntled like I was right that minute for having to follow a dumpish barrel-shaped boy. So when we had passed the black widow stump and the linden tree and had dashed down the steep grade to the spring itself and found the dark green watermelon floating in the cement pool which Pop had built there as a reservoir for the water, it was as easy as anything for me to get fighting angry at most anything or anybody. A watermelon there could mean only one thing—especially when right beside it was a glass fruit jar with a pound of butter in it. It

meant there were campers somewhere nearby—and campers in the Sugar Creek woods was something the Sugar Creek Gang would rather have most anything else than. It meant our peace and quiet would be interrupted; that we would have to wear bathing suits when we went in swimming, and we couldn't yell and scream to each other like we liked to do.

Poetry, who was on his haunches beside the spring, surprised me by saying, "Look! It's plugged! Let's see how ripe it is!"

Before I could have stopped him even if I had thought of trying to do it, he was working the extra large rectangular plug out of the middle of the extra large melon's long fat side.

It was one of the prettiest watermelons I had ever seen—in fact, it was as pretty as Ida Watermelon Collins, herself.

Poetry had the plug out in a jiffy and was holding it up for me to see.

Somebody had bitten off what red there had been on the end of the plug, I noticed. Then Poetry said, "Well, what do you know! The melon's *green*. See, it's all *white* inside!"

That didn't make sense, 'cause this time of year even a watermelon that wasn't more than *half* ripe would be at least *pink* inside. My eyes flashed off the rectangular plug and into the hole in the melon, and Poetry was right—it *was* white inside! Then his mind came to life and he said, "Look, there is something in it! There's a ball of paper or something stuffed in it!"

I felt curiosity creeping up and down my spine and was all set for a mystery. Hardly realizing that I was trespassing on other people's property and most certainly didn't have a right to, even if the melon was in our spring, I quick stooped and with nervous fingers pulled out the folded piece of paper, which is what it was—the kind that comes off a loaf of bakery bread—and which at our house, when the loaf is all eaten, I nearly always toss into the woodbox or the wastebasket unless Mom sees me first and stops me. Sometimes Mom wants to save the paper and use it for wrapping sandwiches for Pop's or my lunches, mine especially during the school year.

The melon was ripe, though, I noticed. The inside was a deep dark red.

While my mind was still trying to think up a mystery, something started to happen. From up in the woods at the top of the incline there was the sound of running feet and laughing voices, and flashlights, and flickering shadows, and it sounded like a whole flock of people coming. *People*, mind you! Only there weren't any boys' or men's voices, but *girls'* voices. GIRLS'! They were giggling and laughing and coming toward the base of the linden tree just above us. In another brain-whirling second, they would be where they could see us, and

we'd be caught.

Say! when you are wearing a pair of red-striped pajamas and your barrel-shaped friend is wearing a pair of green-striped pajamas, and it is night, and you hear a flock of girls running in your direction and you are half scared of girls even in the daytime, you all of a sudden forget about a plugged watermelon floating in the nice fresh cool water of your spring, and you look for the quickest place you can find to hide yourself!

We couldn't make a dash up either side of the incline to the top, 'cause that's where the girls were, and we couldn't escape in the opposite direction 'cause there was a barbed wire fence there separating us and the creek, but we *had* to do *something!* If it had been a gang of *boys* coming, we could have stood our ground and fought if we had to—but not when it was a bevy of girls, which sounded like a flock of blackbirds getting ready to fly south for the winter, only they *weren't* getting ready to fly south, but *north*, which was in our direction.

“Quick!” Poetry's faster-thinking mind cried to me. “Let's beat it!” He showed me what he wanted us to do, by scrambling to his awkward feet and making a dive east toward the place where I knew we could get through a board fence, on the other side of which was a path that wound through a forest of giant ragweeds leading to Dragonfly's Pop's cornfield in the direction of the Sugar Creek Gang's swimming hole.

In another jiffy I would have been following Poetry through the fence and we would have escaped being seen, but my right bare foot which was standing on a thin layer of slime on the cement lip of the pool where the melon was, slipped out from under me, and I felt myself going down.

*Down*, mind you, and I couldn't stop myself! I struggled to regain my balance, and couldn't—couldn't even fall where my mixed-up mind told me would be a better place to fall than into the pool, which was in a mud puddle on the other side. Then thuddety-whammety, slip-slop-splashety—I was half sitting and half lying in the middle of the pool of ice cold spring water astride that long green watermelon, like a boy astride a bucking bronco at a Sugar Creek rodeo!

From above and all around and from every direction, it seemed, there were the voices of happy-go-lucky girls with flashlights, probably coming to get the watermelon, or the butter in the glass jar, or maybe a pail of drinking water for their camp.

## 2

THERE wasn't any sense to what I did then, because of the confusion in my mixed-up mind—if I had any mind at all—but the very minute the light of those three or four—or maybe there were seventeen—flashlights dropped over the edge of the hill and all of them at the same time splashed down upon me, hitting me in the face and all over my red-striped pajamas, I let loose with a wild, trembling-voiced cry like a loon's eery, half-scared-half-to-death ghostlike quaver, loud enough to be heard as far away as the Sugar Creek bridge. I began to wave my arms wildly, to splash around in the water, and to yell to my watermelon-bronco, "Giddap!... Giddap! You great big green good-for-nothing bronco!"

I let out a whole series of those wild loon calls, splashed myself off the watermelon and out of the cement pool and made a fast, wet dash down the path to the opening in the board fence, through which Poetry had already gone ahead of me. I quickly shoved myself through, and a jiffy later was making a wild moonlit run up the winding barefoot boy's trail through the forest of giant ragweeds toward the swimming hole, crying like a loon all the way until I knew I was out of sight of all those excited girls.

Even as I ran, flopping along in my wet pajamas, I had the memory of flashlights splashing in my eyes and some of the things I heard while I was going through the fence. Some of the excited words were, "Help! Help! There's a wild animal down there in the spring!" Others of the girls had simply screamed like girls do when they are scared, but one of them had shrieked an unearthly shriek, crying, "There's a *zebra* down there—a *wild zebra, taking a bath in our drinking water!*"

That, I thought, as I dodged my way along the path, was almost funny. In fact, sometimes a boy feels fine inside if something he has done makes a gang of girls let out an unearthly explosion of screams—most girls screaming not because they're really scared anyway, but because they like to make people think they are.

Where, I wondered as I zig-zagged along, was Poetry?

I didn't have to wonder long. By the time I was through the tall weeds and at

the edge of Dragonfly's Pop's cornfield I had caught up to where he was. His flashlight hit me in the face as he exclaimed in his duck-like voice, "Help! Help! A zebra! A wild zebra!"

I stopped stock-still with my wet pajama sleeve in front of my eyes to shield them from the blinding glare of his flashlight. "It's all your fault!" I half-screamed at him. "If you hadn't had the silly notion you had to have a drink!"

His voice in answer was saucy as he said back, "What a mess you made of things—falling into that water and yelling like a wild Indian! Now those girl scouts will tell your folks, and your father will *really* sharpen you up with his razor strap!"

"Girl scouts?" I exclaimed to him with chattering teeth from being so cold and still all wet with spring water. Also for some reason I didn't feel very brave—most certainly not very happy.

"Sure," he said, "didn't you know it? A bunch of girl scouts have got their tents pitched up there by the pawpaw bushes for a week. Old Man Paddler gave them permission; it's *his* woods, you know."

And then I *was* sad. Girl scouts were supposed to be some of the nicest people in the world—even if they were girls, I thought. What would they think of a red-haired freckle-faced creature of some kind that was part loon and part zebra, splashing around in their drinking water, riding like a cowboy on a watermelon and acting absolutely crazy? I would never dare show my face where any of them could see me, or some of them would remember me from having seen me in the light of their flashlights, and they would ask my mother whose boy I was. I knew that one of the very first things some of those girl scouts would do this week would be to come to the Collins' house to buy eggs and milk and such things as sweet corn and new potatoes. Some of them would be bound to recognize me.

"We had better get back to the tent and into bed quick, before somebody comes running up to use your telephone to call the police, or the marshal, or the sheriff, to tell them some wild boys have been causing a disturbance at the camp!" Poetry said.

It was a good idea even if it was a worried one, so away we went—not the way we had come, but lickety-sizzle straight up through Dragonfly's Pop's cornfield, swinging around the east end of the bayou and back down the south side of it until we came to the fence that goes south to Bumblebee Hill. Once we got to Bumblebee Hill we would swing southwest to the place where we always

went over the rail fence, which was across the road from our house. Then we would scoot across the road and past “Theodore Collins” on our mailbox, hoping we wouldn’t wake up Theodore Collins himself in the Collins’ west bedroom, and a jiffy after that would be safe in our tent once more!

The very thought of safety and the security of Poetry’s nice green tent under the spreading plum tree gave me a spurt of hope, and put wings on my feet, as I followed my lumbering barrel-shaped friend, not realizing there would be more trouble when I got home on account of my very wet red-striped night clothes.

We didn’t even bother to stop at Bumblebee Hill where the fiercest fastest fist-fight that ever was had taken place—and which you already know about if you’ve read the story called *We Killed a Bear*. At the *bottom* of the hill, you know, is the Little-Jim tree near which Little Jim, the littlest member of our Gang, killed the fierce old mad old mother bear; and at the top of the hill is the abandoned cemetery where the Gang has so many of its meetings. The wind I was making as I ran was blowing against my very wet 89-pounds of red-haired boy, making me feel chilly all over in spite of it being such a hot night.

It was a shame not to be able to enjoy such a pretty Sugar Creek summer night—the almost most-wonderful thing in the world. I guess there isn’t anything in the whole wide world that *sounds* better than a Sugar Creek night when you are down along the creek fishing and you hear the bullfrogs bellowing in the riffles, the katydids rasping voices calling to one another: “Katy-did, Katy-she-did; Katy-did, Katy-she-did!” the crickets singing away, vibrating their forewings together, making one of the friendliest lonesome sounds a boy ever hears. Every now and then, you can hear a screech owl crying “Shay-a-a-a-a!” like a baby loon learning to loon.

Oh, there are a lot of sounds that make a boy feel good all over, such as Old Topsy, our favorite horse, in her stall crunching corn, the queer sound the chickens make in their sleep, the wind sighing through the pine trees along the bayou, with every now and then somebody’s rooster turning loose with a “Cocka-doodle-do!” like he is so proud of himself he can’t wait until morning to let all the sleeping hens know about it—like it was a waste of good time to sleep when you could listen to such nice noisy music. From across the fields you sometimes hear the sound of a nervous dog barking, and somebody else’s dog answering from across the creek. You even like to listen to the corn blades whispering to each other as the wind blows through them.

Summer nights on our farm *smell* good, too—nearly always there being the smell of new-mown hay or fresh pine-tree fragrance which is always sweeter at night. If you are near the creek you can smell the fish that don’t want to bite, the

wild peppermint, the sweet clover and a thousand other half friendly, half lonely smells that make you feel sad and glad at the same time.

Things you think at night are wonderful, too. You can lie on the grass in the yard and, in the summertime, look up at the purplish blue sky that is like a big upside-down sieve with a million yellow holes in it and in your mind go sailing out across the Milky Way like a boy skating on the bayou pond, dodging this way and that so you won't run into any of the stars....

But this wasn't the right time to hear or see or smell how wonderful a night it was. It was, instead, a time for two worried boys, including a red-haired freckle-faced one to get inside the tent and into bed and to sleep.

Pretty soon Poetry and I were at the rail fence across from "Theodore Collins" on our mailbox. There we stopped stock-still and stood and studied the situation, keeping ourselves in the shadow of the elderberry bush that grew there. It seemed like the moonlight was never brighter and we couldn't afford to let ourselves be seen or heard by anybody who hadn't used a razor strap for a long time but who perhaps hadn't forgotten how—and not on his razor, either.

I was shivering with the cold, and just that second I sneezed. Just that second also, Poetry shushed me with a shush that was almost louder than my sneeze, as he whispered, "Hey, don't wake anybody up! Do you want your guest to get a licking? Your father has told us for the last time to—"

"Shush, yourself!" I ordered him.

We decided to go back up the fence, cross the road by the hickory nut trees, climb over into our cornfield and sneak down between the rows to arrive at the tent from the opposite side so nobody could see us from the house, which we did.

We had to pass Old Red Addie's apartment hog house on the way, which is the kind of place on a farm that *doesn't* have a nice, clean, sweet farm smell. Pretty soon, still shivering and wishing I had dry night clothes to sleep in, we were behind the tent waiting and listening to see if we could get in without being seen or heard.

Right then I sneezed again, and also again, and I knew I was either going to catch a cold or I already had one. I quick lifted the tent flap, swished through the plastic screen door, expecting Poetry to follow me, but he didn't and wouldn't. He stood for a second in the clear moonlight that came slanting through a branchless place in the plum tree overhead, then he said, "I'll be back in a minute." He started to start toward the house—in the moonlight, mind you, where he could be seen!

"Wait!" I called to him, in as quiet a whisper as I could. "Where are you

going?”

“I’m *thirsty*,” he whispered back. “I forgot to get a drink at the spring.”

“You’ll wake up my *father!*” I exclaimed to him. “Don’t you *dare* pump that pump handle!”

Poetry couldn’t be stopped. I knew that if Pop ever waked up and came to prove he had meant what he said when he had said what he said, there’d *really* be trouble. Pop would hear me sneeze, or see my wet night clothes and wonder what on earth, and why.

So in a jiffy, like the story in one of our school books about a man named Mr. McGregor chasing Peter Rabbit who was all wet from having jumped in a can of water to hide—and Peter Rabbit sneezing—I was acting out that story backwards: I myself was a very wet, very dumb bunny chasing Leslie Poetry Thompson to try to stop him from getting us into even more trouble than we were already in.

We arrived at the iron pitcher pump platform at the same time, where I hissed to him not to pump the pump, pushing in between him and the pump, blocking him from doing what his stubborn mind was driving him to do.

“I’m *thirsty*,” he squawked to me.

“The pump handle squeaks!” I hissed back to him and shoved him off the pump platform. My left wet pajama sleeve pressed against his face.

What happened after that happened so fast and with so much noise it would have wakened seventeen fathers, as Poetry, my almost best friend who had always stood by me when I was in trouble, who was always on my side, all of a sudden didn’t act like he was my friend at all.

We weren’t any more than three feet from the large iron kettle filled with innocent water, which up to that moment had been reflecting the moon as clearly as if it had been a mirror—clearly enough, in fact, for you to see the man in the moon in it.

The next second Poetry’s powerful arms were around me and he was dragging me toward that big kettle. The next second after that, he swooped my 89 pounds up and with me kicking and squirming and trying to wriggle out of his grasp and not being able to, he sat me down kerplop-splash, double-splashety-*slump* right in the center of that large kettle of water.

“What on *earth!*” I exclaimed, my voice trembling with temper, my teeth chattering with the cold and my mind whirling.

My words exploded out of my mouth at the very minute Pop came out the back door. “What on *earth!*” is right,” he exclaimed in his big father-sounding voice. “What on earth are you doing *in the water?*”

Poetry answered for me, saying politely like he was trying to save somebody from a razor strap, “It’s all my fault, Mr. Collins. We were getting a drink and I—I shouldn’t have done it—but I *pushed* him. I—.” Then Poetry’s voice took on a mischievous tone, as he said, “The water was so clear and the man in the moon reflected in it was so handsome, I wanted to see what a good-looking *boy* would look like in it. I couldn’t resist the temptation.”

*Such* an innocent voice! So polite! I was boiling inside as I splashed myself out of the kettle and stood dripping on the pump platform.

Then I did get a surprise. Pop’s voice, instead of being like black thunder, which it sometimes is at a time like that, was a sort of husky whisper: “Let’s keep quiet—all of us. We wouldn’t want to wake up your mother, Bill. You boys get back into the tent quick, while I slip into the house and get Bill a pair of dry pajamas. Hurry up! QUICK, into the tent!”

Pop turned, tiptoed to the back screen door, opened it quietly, while Poetry and I scooted to the tent. A second later, we were inside in the shadowy moonlight which oozed in through the plastic window above my cot.

Pop was back out of the house almost before I was out of my wet pajamas. He whispered to us at the tent door, “Here’s a towel. Dry yourself good. Put these fresh pajamas on—but, BE QUIET!” He whispered the last two words almost savagely.

“Here, let me have your old wet ones. I’ll hang them on the line behind the house to dry—and remember, not a word of this to your mother, Bill. Do you hear me?”

“Don’t worry,” I said. It was easy to hear anything as easy to listen to as that.

And Pop was gone.

In only a few jiffies I was dry and had on my nice fresh clean-smelling, Mom-washed stripeless yellow pajamas, and there wasn’t even a sniffle in my nose to hint that maybe I would catch cold.

Boy oh boy, was it ever quiet in the tent—the only sounds being those in my mind. Everything had happened so fast, it seemed as if it had taken only a minute. It also seemed like a year had passed—so many exciting things had happened—crazy things, too, such as a boy galloping around in a pool of cold water on a green watermelon, and a gang of girls screaming like wild hyenas that there was a zebra taking a bath in the spring.

“Wait,” Poetry ordered, as I sat down on the edge of my cot and started to crawl in. “We can’t get in between your mother’s nice clean sheets with feet that have waded through mud and dusty cornfields. I’ll go get the wash pan from the grape arbor, fill it with water, and bring it back.”

“You stay *here!*” I ordered. “I don’t trust you outside this tent one minute! I’ll get the water myself.”

Say, do you know what that dumb bunny of a fat boy answered me? He said in his very polite voice, “But I’m *thirsty*—I haven’t had a chance to get a drink—I —”

“Stay *here!*” I ordered. “I’ll *bring* you a drink.”

“After all I’ve done for you, you won’t even let me go with you?” he begged.

“What have you done for *me*, I’d like to know? You—with your plunking me into the middle of that kettle of water?”

Poetry’s strong fat hands grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. “Listen, Chum,” he said fiercely; “I saved you from getting a licking, didn’t I? I heard your father opening the back door, and I knew he’d be there in a jiffy. If he found you all wet with that *spring* water, he’d have asked you how come, and you’d really have been in a pretty kettle. So I pushed you in with my bare hands, don’t you see? Besides—look at this!” Poetry turned on his flashlight, reached over to the foot of his cot and picked up a long black something-or-other with a handle on it, and extended it to me. *AND IT WAS POP’S RAZOR STRAP!*

“He had it in his hand when he came out the door,” Poetry told me. “He accidentally left it on the pump platform when he went in for the fresh pajamas. Now, am I your friend, or not?”

Looking at the eighteen-inch-long blackish-brown leather razor strap in Poetry’s hand, and remembering the last time Pop had given me a few interesting strokes with it, I decided maybe Poetry really had been my friend. Besides, if I let him go to get a pan of water for washing our feet, and if Pop saw and heard him, Pop would probably not say a word—he not wanting to wake Mom up.

“All right,” I said to Poetry, “but hurry back.” Which he did.

Pretty soon we had our feet washed and dried on the towel, which I noticed when we got through might also have to be washed in the morning. In only a little while we were in our bunks again and sound asleep, and right away I began dreaming a crazy mixed-up dream in which I was running in red-striped pajamas through the woods, leaving the path made by barefoot boys’ bare feet and working my way around to the left along the crest of the hill where the pawpaw bushes were, just to see how many girl campers there were. Then it seemed like I was in the spring again, galloping around on a green no-legged bronco which somebody had stolen and plugged and maybe sold to the girls—or even *given* to them—or maybe some of the girls had invaded our melon patch that very night and stolen it themselves.

I hated to think that, though, ’cause any girl who is a girl scout is supposed to

be like a boy who is a boy scout, which is absolutely honest. Besides as much as I didn't like girls—not most of them anyway—and was scared of them a little—it seemed like there was a small voice inside of me which all my life had been whispering that girls are kind of special—and anybody couldn't help it if she happened to be born one. Mom had been a girl for quite a few years herself, and it hadn't hurt her a bit. She had grown up to become one of the most wonderful people in the world.

But who had stole my watermelon? And how had it gotten down there in the spring? It *was* my melon, of course!

The idea woke me up. Or else my own voice did, when I heard myself hissing to Poetry:

“Hey, you! *Poetry!* Come on, wake up!”

He groaned, turned over in his cot, and groaned again. “Let me sleep, will you?”

“No,” I whispered, “wake up! Come on and go with me. I've got to go down into our watermelon patch to see—”

“I don't want any more water,” he mumbled, “and I wouldn't think you would either.”

“That melon in the spring,” I said. “I just dreamed it was my prize melon! I think somebody stole it. I want to go down to our truck patch to see if it's gone.”

Poetry showed he hadn't been asleep at all then, 'cause he rolled over, sat up, swung his feet out over the edge of his cot and onto the canvas floor, and I knew we were *both* going outside once more—*just once more*.

What we were going to do was one of the most important things we had ever done—even if it might not seem so to a boy's father if he should happen to wake up and see us in the melon patch and think we were two strange boys out there actually stealing watermelons.

Poetry and I were pretty soon outside the tent again in the wonderful moonlight where now most of the cicadas had stopped their wild whirrings and the crickets had begun to take over for the rest of the night. Fireflies were everywhere, too. It seemed like there were thousands of fireflies flashing their green lights on and off in every tree in our orchard and in all the open spaces everywhere. The lights of those that were flying were like short yellowish green chalk marks being made on a schoolhouse blackboard.

Poetry, with his flashlight, was leading the way as he and I moved out across our barnyard. When we were passing Old Red Addie's apartment hog house, I was reminded again that all the smells around a farm are not the kind to write about in a story, so I won't even mention it but will let you imagine what it was

like.

At the wooden gate near the barn, Poetry said, “Listen, will you?”

I listened, but all I could hear was the sound of pigeons cooing in the haymow, which is one of the friendliest sounds a boy ever hears—the low lonesome cooing of pigeons.

There are certainly a lot of different sounds around our farm, nearly all of which I have learned to imitate so well I actually sound like a farmyard full of animals sometimes, Pop says. Mom also says that sometimes I actually *look* like a red-haired freckle-faced pig—which I probably don’t.

Say, did you ever stop to think about all the different kinds of sounds a country boy gets to enjoy?

While you are imagining Poetry and me cutting across the south pasture to the east side of our melon patch, I’ll mention just a few that we get to hear a hundred times a year, such as the wind roaring in a winter blizzard, Dragonfly’s Pop’s bulls bellowing, Circus’s Pop’s hounds baying or bawling or snarling or growling; Mixy, our black and white cat, meowing or purring; mice squeaking in the corncrib; Old Topsy neighing; Poetry’s Pop’s sheep bleating; all the old setting-hens clucking; the laying hens singing or cackling; Big Jim’s folks’ ducks quacking; honey and bumblebees droning and buzzing; crows cawing; and our old red rooster crowing at midnight or just at daybreak; screech owls screeching; hoot-owls hooting; the cicadas drumming, and the crickets chirping. Yes, and Dragonfly sneezing, especially in ragweed season, which it already was in the Sugar Creek territory.

There are a lot of interesting sounds, too, down along the creek and the bayou, such as water singing in the riffles, the big night herons going “Quoke-quoke,” cardinals whistling, bob-whites calling, squirrels barking—and when the gang is together, the happiest sounds of all with everybody talking at once and nobody listening to anybody.

There are also a few sounds that hurt your ears, such as Pop filing a saw, Old Red Addie’s family of red-haired pigs squealing, the death squawk of a chicken just before it gets its head chopped off for the Collins’ family dinner, and the wild screams of a bevy of girls calling an innocent boy in red-striped pajamas, a *zebra!*

In only a few jiffies we were out in the middle of our truck patch looking to see if any of the melons were missing. I was just sure that when I came to Ida’s vine, I’d find a long oval indentation where she had been—the dream I had had about her being stolen was so real in my mind.

“All this walk for nothing,” Poetry exclaimed all of a sudden, when his

flashlight landed ker-flash right on the green fat side of Ida Watermelon Collins, as peaceful and quiet as an old setting hen on her nest.

I stood looking down at her proudly, then I said in a grumpy voice, “What do you mean, making me get up out of a comfortable bed and drag myself all the way out here for nothing! You see to it that you don’t make me dream such a crazy dream again—do you *hear* me!”

I felt better after saying that, then Poetry beside me grunted grouchily, and said, “And don’t ever rob *me* of *my* good night’s rest again either!”

With that, we started to wend our barefoot pajama-clad way back across the field of vines and other melons in the direction of the barn again. We hadn’t gone more than fifteen yards when what to my wondering ears should come but the strange sound of something running—that is, that’s what I thought it sounded like at first. I stopped stock-still and looked around in a fast moonlit circle of directions, and saw away over by the new woven-wire fence not more than twenty feet from the iron pitcher pump, something dark about the size of a long, low-bodied extra-large raccoon, moving toward the shadows of the elderberry bushes.

I could feel the red hair on the back of my neck and on the top of my head beginning to crawl like the bristles on a dog’s or a cat’s or a hog’s back do when it’s angry—only I wasn’t angry—not yet, anyway.

A little later, I was not only angry but my mind was going in excited circles. If you had been me and seen what I saw, and found out what I found out, you’d have felt the way I felt, which was all mixed up in my thoughts, worried and excited and stormy-minded, and ready for a headfirst dive into the middle of one of the most thrilling mysteries that ever started in the middle of a dog day’s night.

### 3

**Y**OU don't have to wait long to decide what to do at a time like that, when you have mischievous-minded, quick-thinking Poetry along with you, even when you are in the middle of a muddle in the middle of a melon patch, watching something the size of a long, very fat raccoon hurrying in jerky movements toward the shadows of the elderberry bushes.

If things hadn't been so exciting, it would have been a good time to let my imagination put on its wings and fly me around in my boy's world awhile—what with a million stars all over the sky and fireflies writing on the blackboard of the night and rubbing out all their greenish-yellow marks as fast as they made them, and with the crickets singing and the smell of sweet clover enough to make you dizzy with just feeling fine.

But it was no time for dreaming. Instead, it was a time for acting—and *QUICK!*

"Come on!" Poetry hissed to me. "Let's give chase!" and he started running and yelling, "Stop, thief! Stop!"

And away we both went, out across that truck patch, dodging melons as we went, leaping over them or swerving aside like we do when we are on a coon chase at night with Circus's Pop's long-eared, long-nosed, long-voiced hounds leading the way, trying to catch up with the dark-brown, long, low, very-fat animal—something I had never seen around Sugar Creek before in all my life.

Then, all of a disappointing sudden, the brown whatever-it-was disappeared into the shadow of the elderberry bushes, and I heard an exciting whirring noise in the lane on the other side of the fence. A fast jiffy later, an automobile came to noisy-motored life, a pair of head-lamps went on, and an oldish-sounding car went rattling down the lane, headed in the direction of the Sugar Creek school, which is at the end of the lane where it meets the county line road.

Poetry's long 3-battered flashlight shot a straight white beam through the firefly-spattered night. It landed ker-flash right on that oldish-looking car as it swished past the iron pitcher pump and disappeared down the hill. A few seconds later, we heard the car go rattlety-crash across the board floor of the

branch bridge, the head-lamps lighting up the lane as it sped up the hill on the other side in the direction of the schoolhouse.

*What on earth!*

My mind was still on the car and who might be in it, when I heard Poetry say, “Look! There is our wild animal! He stopped right at the fence! Let’s get him!”

My mind came back to the long brown low very-fat something-or-other we had been chasing a minute before. My eyes got to it at about the same time Poetry’s flashlight socked it ker-wham-flash right in the middle of its fat side.

My feet got there almost as quick as my eyes did.

“What is it?” I exclaimed, looking about for a stick or a club to protect myself, in case I had to.

My imagination had been yelling to me, “It’s some kind of animal, different from anything you’ve ever seen!” so I was terribly disappointed when Poetry let out a disgusted grunt with a surprise in it, saying, “Aw, it’s only an old gunny sack.”

And it was. An old brownish—or rather, *new*, light-brown—gunny sack, with something large inside of it. Fastened to one end was a plastic rope which stretched from the gunny sack back into the elderberry bushes.

We kept on standing stock-still and staring at the thing. Whatever was in the sack wasn’t moving at all, not even breathing, I thought, as we stood studying it and wondering, “What on earth!”

It was large and long and round and very fat and—!

Then like a light turning on in my mind, I knew what was in that brown burlap bag. I knew it as well as I knew my name was Bill Collins, Theodore Collins’ only son. “There’s a watermelon in that bag!” I exclaimed.

Whoever was in that car had probably crawled out into our melon patch, picked the melon, slipped it into this burlap bag, tied the rope to it, and had been hiding here in the bushes, pulling the rope and dragging the melon to him! Doing it that way so nobody would see him walking, carrying it!

Was I ever stirred up in my mind! Yet, there wasn’t any sense in getting too stirred up. A boy couldn’t let himself waste his perfectly good temper in one big explosion, ’cause, as my Pop has told me many a time, you can’t think straight when you are angry. Pop was trying to teach me to *use* my temper, instead of *losing* it.

“A temper is a fine thing, if you control it, but not if it controls you,” he has told me maybe five hundred times in my half-long life. As you maybe already know if you’ve read some of the other Sugar Creek Gang stories, my hot temper had gotten me into trouble many a time by shoving me headfirst into an

unnecessary fight with somebody who didn't know how to control his own temper.

In a flash I was down on my haunches beside the burlap bag. "Here," I said to Poetry, "lend me your knife a minute. Let's get this old burlap bag off and see if it's a watermelon!"

"Goose!" Poetry answered me. "I'm wearing my night clothes!" Both of us were, as you already know. His were green-striped, and mine yellow, as I've already told you. We both looked ridiculous there in the moonlight.

"Look!" Poetry exclaimed. "Here's how they were going to get it through the fence!"

My eyes fastened onto the circle of light his flashlight made on a spot back under the elderberry bushes and I noticed there was a hole cut in Pop's new woven-wire fence, large enough to let a boy through. Boy oh boy, would Pop ever have a hard time using *his* temper when he saw that tomorrow morning!

But we *had* to do something *with* the melon. "Let's leave it for the gang to see tomorrow," Poetry suggested. "Let Big Jim decide what to do about it."

"What to do with Bob Till, you mean," I said grimly. Already my temper was telling me it was Bob Till himself, the Sugar Creek Gang's worst enemy, who had been trying to steal one of our melons.

Just thinking that started my blood to running faster in my veins. How many times during the past two years we had had trouble with John Till's oldest boy, Bob, and how many times Big Jim, the Sugar Creek Gang's fierce-fighting leader, had had to give Bob a licking—and always Bob was just as bad a boy afterward, and maybe even worse.

I was remembering that only last week at our very latest Gang meeting, Big Jim had told us: "I'm *through* fighting Bob Till. I'm going to try kindness. We're *all* going to try it. Let's show him that a Christian boy doesn't have to fight every time somebody knocks a chip off his shoulder—and let's not put the chip on our shoulder in the first place."

At that meeting, which had been at the spring, Dragonfly had piped up and asked, "What's a 'chip on your shoulder' mean?"

Poetry had answered for Big Jim by saying, "It's a doubled-up fist, shaking itself under somebody else's nose—daring him to hit you first!"

Big Jim ignored Poetry's supposed-to-be-funny answer and said, "Bob is on probation, you know, and he has to behave, or the sentence that is hanging over him will go into effect and he'll have to spend a year in the reformatory. We wouldn't want that. We have got to help him prove that he can behave himself. If he thinks we are mad at him, he will be tempted to do things to get even with us.

As long as this sentence is hang—”

Dragonfly cut in, then, with one of his dumbish questions, at the same time trying to show how smart he was in school, asking, “What kind of a sentence—*declarative*, or *interrogative*, or *imperative*, or *exclamatory*?”

Big Jim’s jaw set, and he gave Dragonfly an exclamatory look. Then he went on, shocking us almost out of our wits when he told us something not a one of us knew yet: “One of the conditions of his being on probation instead of in the reformatory is that he go to church at least once a week for a year. That means he’ll probably come to *our* church, and *that* means he’ll be in our Sunday school class, and—”

I got one of the queerest feelings I ever had in my life. Whirlwindlike thoughts were spiraling in my mind. I just couldn’t imagine Bob Till in church and Sunday school. It would certainly seem funny to have him there with nice clothes on and his hair combed, listening to our preacher preach from the Bible. What if I had to sit beside him myself—I, who could hardly think his name without feeling my muscles tighten and my fists start to double up?

Another thing Big Jim said at that meeting was, “You guys want to promise that you will stick with me and all of us try to help him?”

And we had promised.

And now here was Bob already doing something that would make the sentence drop on his head. Whoever was in that car just *had* to be Bob Till on account of he had a car just like that—the car being what people call a “hot rod.”

“Listen!” Poetry exclaimed. I listened in every direction there is, then I heard and saw at the same time a car coming back up the lane, its head-lamps hitting us full in the face.

“Quick!” Poetry cried. “Down!”

We stooped low behind the elderberry bushes and waited for the car to pass.

“Hey!” I said to us. “It’s slowing down. It’s going to stop,” which it did. The same rattling old jalopy. In a split jiffy we were scooting along the fence row to a spot about twenty-five feet farther up the lane. And there we crouched behind some giant ragweeds and goldenrod and orange-rayed, black-eyed Susans—Pop having ordered me a week ago to cut down the ragweeds with our scythe, and I hadn’t done it yet. I nearly always cut the goldenrod too, on account of Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of our Gang, is allergic to them as well as to the ragweeds and he nearly always uses this lane going to and from school.

My heart was pounding in my ears as I crouched there with Poetry, he in his

green-striped pajamas and I in my plain yellow ones.

“Get down!” I hissed to him.

“I *am* down,” he whispered.

“Flatter!” I ordered him, “so you won’t be seen! Can’t you lie *flat*?”

“I can only lie round,” he answered saucily, which, under any other circumstances, would have sounded funny, he being so extra large around.

“Somebody is getting out,” Poetry whispered.

“How many are there?”

“Only one, I think.”

Then I felt Poetry’s body grow tense. “There goes one of your watermelons,” he hissed to me.

I saw it at the same time he did—the brown burlap bag being pulled deeper into the elderberry bushes—and I knew somebody was actually stealing one of our melons. In a jiffy it would be gone!

“Let’s jump him,” I exclaimed to Poetry. My blood was tingling for battle. I started to my feet, but he stopped me, saying, “*Sh!*” in a subdued but savage whisper. “Detectives don’t stop a man from stealing; they let him do it first, then they capture him.”

It wasn’t an easy thing to do—to do nothing, watching that watermelon being hoisted into the back seat of that car. My muscles were aching to get into some new kind of action that was different from hoeing potatoes, milking cows, gathering eggs, and other things any ordinary boy’s muscles could do. I was straining to go tearing up the fence row to the elderberry bushes, dive through the hole in the fence, make a football-style tackle on that thief’s hind legs and bring him down. I was pretty sure, if all the Gang had been there, one or the other of us wouldn’t have been able to stay stopped stock-still. He would have rushed in, and the rest of us would be like Jack, in the poem about “Jack and Jill”—we would go tumbling after, even if some of us got knocked down and got our crowns cracked.

But the rest of the Gang wasn’t there. Besides it was already too late to do anything. In less time than it has taken me to write it, the melon in the gunny sack was in the car. The thief was in the driver’s seat, and the hot rod was shooting like an arrow with two blazing heads down the moonlit lane.

Poetry shot a long powerful beam from his flashlight straight toward the car, socking it on the license plate, and I knew his mind—which is so good it’s almost like what is called a “photographic mind”—would remember the number if he had been able to see it.

It's like having a big blown-up balloon suddenly burst in your face to have your excited adventure come to an end like that; kinda like a fish must feel when it's nibbling on a fat fishing worm down in Sugar Creek and, all of a disappointing sudden, having its nice juicy dinner jerked away from it by the fisherman who is on the other end of the line.

There wasn't anything left to do except go back to the tent and to bed and to sleep.

Just thinking that reminded me of the fact that I probably would need another pair of pajamas to sleep in, the yellow pair I had on having gotten soiled while I was lying in the grass behind the goldenrod and ragweed and black-eyed Susans. "We'll have to wash our feet again before we can crawl into Mom's nice clean sheets," I said, as we started to start back to the tent.

"Maybe it would be easier and cause less worry for your mother if we just climbed into our cots and went to sleep, and tomorrow if your mother gets angry at us we can explain about the watermelon and that will get her angry at the thief instead of at us. We could offer to help her *wash* the sheets, anyway."

It was a pair of very sad, very mad boys that threaded their way through the watermelon patch to the pasture and across it to the gate at the barn and on toward the tent. There were still a few cicadas busy with their drums, I noticed, in spite of the fact that I was all stirred up in my mind about the watermelon. Thinking about the seeds in their long, straight rows, buried in the dark red flesh of the watermelon, like seeds always are, just like somebody had planted them, reminded me of the stars in the sky overhead, and I was wishing I could actually look up and see the Dog Star, which is the brightest star in all the Sugar Creek sky but which, during dog days—which are the hot and sultry days of July and August—you have to get up in the morning to see—on account of the Dog Star always comes up with the sun in July and August and, in a very little while, fades out of sight.

In the winter, in February, the Dog Star is almost straight overhead at night and is like a shining star at the top of a Christmas tree—but who wants to go out in the middle of a zero-cold night just to look at a star, even if it is the brightest one that ever shines?

"Are you sleepy?" Poetry asked me, when we reached the plum tree.

"Not very," I said, "but I'm still so mad I can't see straight."

"You want to go back down to the spring with me?" he asked, his hand on the tent awning, about to lift it for us to go in.

"Are you crazy?" I asked.

"I'm a detective. I want to go down there and see if we can find the oiled

paper you threw away when we heard those girls at the top of the hill.”

“My mother has dozens of old bread wrappers,” I told him. “I’ll ask her for one for you in the morning.”

“Listen, Chum,” Poetry whispered, as he let the tent awning drop into place and grabbed me by the arm, “I said I’m a detective, and I’m looking for a clue! I’ve a hunch there was something in that paper—something whoever put it in that melon, didn’t want to get wet!”

I knew, from having studied about watermelons that summer, that the edible part of a watermelon is made up of such things as protein, and fat, and ash, and calcium, and sugar and water and just fibre. Six per cent of the melon is sugar and over ninety-two per cent is water. You could eat a piece of watermelon the size of Charlotte Ann’s head and it would be like drinking more than a pint of sweetened water. I could understand that anything anybody put on the inside of the melon would get wet, almost as wet as if you had dunked it in a pail of water. “Look,” I said to Poetry, “I don’t want to show my face or risk my neck anywhere near a campful of excitable girls who can’t tell a boy in a pair of red-striped pajamas from a zebra and who might start screaming bloody murder if they happened to see us again.”

“I’ll have to go alone, then,” Poetry announced firmly, and in a jiffy, his fat green-striped back was all I could see of him as he waddled off across the moonlit lawn toward the walnut tree and the gate.

It was either let him go alone on a wild goose chase, or go with him and run the risk of stumbling into a whirlwind of honest-to-goodness trouble.

I caught up to him by the time he had reached “Theodore Collins” on our mailbox, and whispered to him, “What do you think might have been wrapped up in it?”

Poetry’s voice sounded mysterious, and also very serious, as he answered, “Didn’t you read the paper this morning?”

I nearly always read the daily paper, part of it anyway, almost as soon as it landed in the mailbox, sometimes racing to get to the box before Pop did. Pop himself always read the editorials and Mom, the fashions and the new recipes and the accidents, and also *worried* about the accidents outloud to Pop a little. Mom always felt especially sad whenever anything had happened to a little baby.

“Sure,” I puffed to Poetry as I loped along after him in the shadowy moonlight. “What’s that got to do with a wad of oiled paper in a plugged watermelon?”

His answer as it came panting back over his fat shoulder, started the shivers vibrating in my spine again—and if I had been a cicada with a sound-producing organ inside me somewhere, my shaking thoughts would have filled the whole woods with noise.

Here are Poetry's gasping words, "Whoever broke into the Super Market last week might be hiding out in this part of the county—maybe even along the creek here somewhere!"

"The paper didn't say that," I said.

"It didn't have to," Poetry shouted back. "It didn't say where he *was* hiding, did it? I've got a hunch he's right here in our territory. Maybe in the swamp or \_\_\_\_\_"

I'd had a lot of experiences with Poetry's hunches, and he'd been right so many times, that whenever he said he had one, I felt myself getting all of a sudden in a mood for a big surprise of some kind.

But this time his idea didn't seem to make sense—not quite, anyway, so I said, "Who on earth would want to stuff a lot of money inside a watermelon?"

Poetry's answer was a grouchy grunt, followed by a scolding: "I said I had a *hunch!* I *know* we'll find something important going on around here ... Now, stop asking dumb questions and hurry up!" With that, that barrel-shaped, detective-minded boy set a still faster pace for me as we dashed down the hill to the place where I had just had the humiliating experience of riding a wild green, legless bronco in a reservoir full of cold water.

The red-striped pajamas I had been wearing must have made me look ridiculous to those girl scouts, I thought. I hoped they wouldn't come back to the spring again while Poetry and I were looking for what he called a "clue."

SEVERAL times, before that night was finally over, I thought how much more sensible we had been if we had curled ourselves up in our cots in the tent and gone sound asleep.

It's better to be in bed when you have your night clothes on than scouting a watermelon patch or splashing in a pool of spring water or crouching shivering behind ragweeds and goldenrod and black-eyed Susans in a fence row, or searching with a flashlight for a wad of oiled paper which somebody has stuffed into a watermelon.

Especially is it better to be in bed, like any decent boy should be, than to be lying on your stomach under an evergreen tree with pine needles pricking you and you don't dare move or you'll be heard by somebody you are straining your eyes to see, while he does the most ridiculous thing you ever heard of at the very spring where you yourself were just an hour ago.

Boy oh boy, let me tell you about what happened, the second time Poetry and I went to the spring that night.

When we came to the beech tree, on whose close-grained gray bark the Gang and maybe thirty other people had carved their initials through the years, we stopped to look the situation over. There was a stretch of moonlit open space about twenty yards wide between us and the leaning linden tree which is at the top of the incline leading down to the spring.

The shadowy hulk of the old black widow stump in the middle of the moonlit space looked like a black ghost. I kept straining my ears in the direction of the linden tree wondering if there might be anybody down at the spring; also I kept my ears and my eyes focused in the direction of the pawpaw bushes away off to the left where the girls' camp was. I could smell the odor of wet ashes and I knew that the girls had had a campfire near the black widow stump—there being an outdoor fireplace there for picnickers to use for wiener roasts, steak fries, and for making coffee—and also for giving a picnic a friendly atmosphere. I was only half glad to notice that the girls had put out the very last spark of their fire, 'cause I hated to have to admit that a flock of girls knew one of the most important safety rules of a good camper, which is: "Never leave a campfire

burning, but put it out before you go.”

From the beech tree we moved east maybe a hundred feet, then made a moonlit dash for the row of evergreens which border the rail fence that skirts the top of the hill above the bayou.

“Okay,” Poetry panted when we got there. “We’ll work our way down from here. As soon as we get to the bottom, we’ll turn on the light and start looking for our clue.”

And then I heard something—a noise out in the creek somewhere, as plain as a Dog Star sunrise. It was the sound of an oar in a rowlock.

Poetry and I shushed each other at the same time, straining our ears in the shadowy direction the sound had come from.

At the same instant, we dropped down onto the pine needles under the tree.

“It’s somebody in a boat,” Poetry whispered. “He’s pulling in at the spring.”

I could see the boat now, emerging from the shadow of the trees down the shore. It had come up the creek from the direction of the Sugar Creek bridge.

Now the boat was being steered toward the shore. I knew if it was anybody who knew the shoreline, he wouldn’t stop directly in front of the spring, ’cause the overflow drained into the creek there and it would be a muddy landing. Below it, or just above it, was a good place.

“There’s only one man in it,” Poetry said. Even in the shadowy moonlight, I could tell it was a red boat and one we’d never seen before.

Then I did get a startled surprise, and my whole mind began whirling with wondering what on earth in a gunny sack! No sooner had the prow of the boat touched the gravelled shore than whoever was in it was up and out and beaching the boat, wrapping the guy rope, which is called a “painter,” around the small maple that grew there. Then he stepped back into the boat, stooped, picked up something in both hands—something dark and long and——!

“Hey!” my mind’s voice was screaming, while my *actual* voice was keeping still. “It’s a gunny sack! It’s the old brown burlap bag we saw in the watermelon patch a half hour ago!”

In a minute the man was out of the boat and disappearing in the path in the shadow of the trees we knew about. A second later, he emerged at the opening in the board fence, worked his way through, and moved straight toward the spring, lugging the burlap bag with the melon in it.

“Let’s jump him!” I whispered to Poetry.

Poetry put his lips to my ear and whispered back, “Nothing doing. Detectives don’t capture a criminal *before* he commits a crime. They let him do it first, *then*

they capture him!”

“He’s already done it,” I said, “at the melon patch!”

“If you’ll be patient,” Poetry whispered back, “we’ll find out what we want to know.”

We kept on watching from behind the evergreen while the man at the spring hoisted his burlap bag over the cement lip of the pool and let it down inside. He stayed in a stooping, stock-still position for several jiffies, then began doing something with his hands.

“He’s about the size of Big Jim,” I whispered to Poetry.

“Or Circus,” he answered.

“Big Jim,” I insisted—only I knew that neither of them would steal a watermelon and bring it here by night in a boat.

Just then I shifted my position a little on account of I had been sitting on my foot and it was beginning to hurt. It was a crazy time to lose my balance and have to struggle awkwardly to keep from sliding down the incline, but that is what I did, and for a few anxious seconds I was looking after myself instead of watching the mysterious movements at the spring.

When, a jiffy later, I was focusing my vision in his direction, the man or extra large boy—whichever he was—had left the spring and was on his way back to the boat. For a split second we lost sight of him in the shadows, then we saw him again with his back to us at the boat, heard the painter being unwrapped from the tree.

In only a few more seconds the boat was gliding out into the creek—but only a few feet, for right away the oarsman steered it toward the shore and it became only a dim outline in the shadow of the trees that grew along the steep incline.

Poetry, beside me, sighed an exasperated sigh and said, “Well, it wasn’t any of *our* Gang, anyway. Look!”

I had already seen—first the flash of a match or a cigarette lighter, then a reddish glow in the dark, and I knew somebody was smoking a cigarette or a cigar. That’s how I knew for sure it wasn’t any of the Gang.

“I’d like to get my hands on him, for just one minute,” I said to Poetry. “Both hands—twenty times—in fast succession.”

“You wouldn’t strike a woman or a girl, would you?” he answered.

“What? Who said it was a woman or a girl? He had on a pair of trousers, didn’t he?”

“Girls wear slacks, don’t they? And lots of girls smoke, too.”

“And shouldn’t,” I answered.

We crept from our hiding place, scrambled down to where the boat had been beached and looked to be sure the oarsman—or oarswoman or oarsgirl—was out of sight. Then we slipped through the fence to look into the cement pool to see the melon and also to look around for the wad of paper I had tossed away when I had been here before.

I tell you it was an interesting minute—or three minutes, I should say—'cause that's all the time it took us to discover some thing very important—very, *very* important!

Say, did you ever have a flashlight strike you full in the face and blind you for a few seconds? Well, the white light from the match or cigarette lighter and the reddish glow from the cigarette or cigar fifty yards down the shore, sort of blinded me—not my eyes, but my mind. I couldn't think straight for a minute. It was Poetry's suggestion, though—that the thief might be a woman or a girl—that really confused me.

I guess all the time I had had it in the back of my mind that the thief was Bob Till—but what if the person in the boat was a *girl!* No wonder I couldn't think, I thought.

It was the perfume that sent my mind whirling. We noticed it the very second we had crawled through the fence. It was so strong it made the whole place smell as if somebody had upset the perfume counter in the Sugar Creek Dime Store and half the bottles of cologne and fancy perfumes had been broken.

If Dragonfly had been with us, I thought, he'd have sneezed and sneezed and sneezed, on account of he is allergic to almost every perfume there is.

Well, that was our chance to make a quick search for the wad of oiled paper which is what we had come there for in the first place. I remembered just about where I had tossed it and in only a few seconds Poetry hissed, "Here it is! Here's our clue!"

His excitement about the thing and his being so sure, had built up my mind to expect to see something wonderful inside that oiled paper. Anybody who would go to the trouble to steal and deliver a watermelon secretly in a boat at night, would probably leave something *in* the melon worth a hundred times more than the melon itself.

There in the shadow of the linden tree, to the music of the bubbling water in the spring, and the singing of the crickets, Poetry held the flashlight while my trembling fingers unfolded that crumpled piece of oiled paper, and spread it out.

"There's *printing* on it!" Poetry exclaimed under his breath.

And there was—*actually* was!

"What does it say?" I exclaimed.

“It says—it says, ‘*Eat more Eatmore Bread. It’s better for you. The more Eatmore you eat, the more you like it.*’”

It was disgusting; very disappointing also.

“Smell it,” Poetry exclaimed, which I did, and say!

Boy oh boy, there was *really* a perfume odor around the place now! If Dragonfly had been there, I thought again—or rather, started to think and didn’t get to finish, ’cause all of a sudden from the crest of the hill I heard a rustling of last year’s dry leaves, saw a flashlight leading the way and a spindle-legged barefoot boy in red-striped pajamas coming down the incline to the spring. Imagine *that!* Dragonfly in his night clothes! What on earth!

Poetry and I slipped behind an undergrowth of small elms where we couldn’t be seen, and listened and watched as Dragonfly came all the way down, went straight to the cement pool, shined his flashlight inside, then his hands began to work fast like he was in a big hurry and also like he was scared, and wanted to do what he was doing and get it over quick. He certainly was nervous and he seemed to be having trouble getting what he wanted to do, done.

Poetry’s fat face was close to mine. I decided I could whisper into his ear and only he would hear me, so I said, “Look! He’s got a knife! He’s going to plug the melon. He—”

Poetry jammed his fat elbow into my ribs so hard it made me grunt outloud.

Dragonfly jumped like he was shot, dropped his knife into the spring, started to straighten up, lost his balance, staggered in several moonlit directions, then ker-whammety-swish-splash—into the water he went just like I myself had done an hour or so ago.

And there he was, like I myself had been—a very wet boy in some very wet, very cold water, struggling to get onto his feet and out of the pool, and sneezing and spluttering because he had probably gotten some of the water into his mouth, or nose, and maybe even into his lungs.

And *now* what should we do?

We didn’t have time to decide, ’cause right that second there was a sound of running steps at the top of the incline and two shadowy figures with flashlights came flying down that leaf-strewn path, and somebody’s voice that was as plain as day a girl’s voice cried, “We’ve got you, you little rascal!”

Those two girls swooped down upon Dragonfly, seized him by the collar and started dunking him in the pool of very cold water, dunking and splashing water over him, and saying, “Take that—and that—and *that!* We knew if we waited here, you’d be back!”

Then all of a sudden, there was a hullabaloo of other girls’ voices at the top of

the incline and a shower of flashlights and excited words came tumbling down with them. It seemed like there must have been a dozen girls, only there probably weren't. Like a herd of stampeding calves, all of them swarmed around our little half-scared-half-to-death Dragonfly who was shivering and probably wondering what on earth. They were pulling him this way and that, as if they would tear him to pieces.

Things like those I was seeing and hearing that minute just don't happen. Yet they *were* happening, and to one of the grandest little guys that ever sneezed in hayfever season—our very own Dragonfly himself.

I didn't know what he had done, nor why, but it seemed like anybody with that many people swarming all over him like a colony of angry bumblebees, ought to have somebody to stand up for him. If it had been a gang of *boys* beating up on that innocent little spindle-legged guy, I probably would have made a headfirst dive, football style, into the thick of them and bowled half a dozen of them over into the cement pool. Then I'd have turned loose my two double-up experienced fists on them, windmill fashion, and Poetry would have come tumbling after.

But what do you do when your pal is being torn to pieces by a pack of helpless girls? As I have maybe told you before, my parents had taught me to respect all girls, kind of like they were angels—which most of them aren't—and only one I ever saw in the whole Sugar Creek territory is anywhere near like one, and she is one of Circus's many sisters, whose name is Lucille. Also I wouldn't have the heart to fight a weak-muscled helpless creature which men and boys are supposed to defend from all harm and danger. Right that minute, though, while they were dunking Dragonfly in the spring and shoving him around and calling him names, it didn't seem like girls *were* such helpless creatures. Certainly it was Dragonfly who needed the protection from harm and danger!

I decided to use my mind and my voice, instead of my muscles. I remembered that when I myself had been the striped cowboy riding a watermelon, I had scattered the girls in every direction there is, by letting loose a series of wild loon calls which sounded like a woman screaming or a wildcat with a trembling voice trying to scare the wits out of its prey. So, while I was still crouched in the shadows beside and behind Poetry, I lifted my face to the sky and let loose six or seven blood-curdling long-toned, high-voiced, trembling cries, making the loon call, the screech-owl's screech, and a wolf's howl, over and over again, and at about the same time.

Poetry, catching on to my idea, joined in with a series of sounds like a young rooster learning to crow, and a guinea hen's scrawny-necked squawking, screaming song, which made me decide to bark like a dog and also to let out a

half-dozen long-toned, high-pitched wailing bawls like Circus's Pop's hound, Old Bawler, makes when she's on a red-hot coon trail.

We probably sounded like the midway of a county fair gone crazy, especially when all of a sudden Poetry, who could imitate almost every farm noise there is, started in bawling like a calf, and I went back to the loon call and the screech-owl's screech. Then we began shaking the elm saplings we were under, making them sway like a windstorm was blowing and a cyclone would be there any minute.

Things happened pretty fast after that, and the noise got even worse 'cause, all mixed up with Dragonfly's sneezing and Poetry's and my eardrum-splitting noises, were the different-pitched screams of the girls. All of a sudden there was a flurry of skirts and slacks and running feet, and in a flash of several jiffies the girls were tumbling over each other on their way up the incline, past the base of the leaning linden tree, and were gone! In my mind's eye I was watching them making a helter-skelter dash for the pawpaw bushes and their tents.

And that is how we practically saved Dragonfly's life that very first night of this story, which is only the beginning—and which made the mystery we were trying to solve seem more mysterious than ever.

POOR Dragonfly! I guess he never had been so frightened before in his sneezing life. Dog days are ragweed days—and nights, too—and he was not only sneezing but wheezing a little, which meant he might get an asthma attack any minute.

“The w-w-w-water ...” he stammered and gestured behind him toward the spring.

Poetry and I were quick out of our hiding on our way to where Dragonfly was. What, I wondered, was he trying to tell us about the watermelon?

“M-m-m-m-my knife!” he spluttered. “I-i-i-it’s in there—in the bottom of the pool!”

When I heard that, I *knew* he had been planning to plug the melon, which I was sure somebody had left there a few jiffies ago. It didn’t feel very good to have to believe one of our own gang had been mixed up with the stealing of melons from the Collins’ truck patch.

“Hurry!” Dragonfly wheezed. “G-g-g-get it for me! I’ve got to get home quick or I’ll get a licking! My parents don’t know where I am!”

Because all of us were in a hurry to get away from such a dangerous place for boys to be—which it was, with a colony of bumblebee-like girls on a temper spree—I exclaimed to Poetry: “Hold the flashlight for me. I’ll get it!”—which Poetry did, and which I started to do, but got an exclamation point in my mind for sum when I noticed there wasn’t even one watermelon in the pool—neither the one I was sure somebody had just hoisted over the lip of the pool and lowered inside, nor the long beautiful one I had seen there myself, and which had had the oiled paper wadding in it, and on which I had had a fierce, fast ride in the moonlight.

What on earth!

“Come on! Hurry up!” Dragonfly cried. “I’ve got to get home before my father gets back from town. It’s *his* knife, and I wasn’t supposed to have it!”

I quickly shoved my stripeless pajama sleeve up to my shoulder, and while Poetry held the flashlight for me and Dragonfly shivered and wheezed and watched, I plunged my arm into that icy water, where in a few seconds my

fingers clasped the knife and only a few seconds after that all of us were on our way up the incline. At the top, we looked quick to see if the enemy had retreated, and they had—anyway we didn't see or hear them—then we skirted the rail fence and the evergreens, and started on the run on the way up the bayou, taking the way that most certainly wouldn't lead anywhere near the pawpaw bushes.

We would have looked very strange to most anybody—Poetry in his green-striped pajamas, I in my yellowish, stripeless ones, and Dragonfly in his red-striped ones—that was the funny thing about it, that crooked-nosed, spindle-legged, short-of-breath little guy being in his night clothes, too. When we asked him, “How come?” he panted back, “I didn't have time to dress. I had to get here, and get back again before my father got home.”

It wasn't a very satisfactory answer. His running around in the woods in his night clothes didn't make half as much sense as Poetry and I running around in ours did. It must have seemed absolutely nonsensical to those girl campers who must have thought he and I were the same idiotic boy—which we most certainly weren't—at least I wasn't.

Dragonfly was going to explain further when he got stopped as quick as a chicken's squawking stops when you cut its head off to have it dressed for dinner. His wheezy voice was interrupted by somebody in the direction of Bumblebee Hill calling my name, saying, “*Bill! ... Bill Collins! ... WHERE IN THE WORLD ARE YOU!*”

“It's your father!” Poetry stopped stock-still and said.

And it was.

That big, half-worried, half-mad, thundery voice trumpeting down to us from the top of Bumblebee Hill was the well-known voice of Theodore Collins, my reddish-brown-mustached, bushy-eyebrowed father. What on earth was Pop doing out there waving his lantern and calling, “Bill Collins, where in the world are you?”

All of a sudden it seemed like wherever I was, it would be a good place not to be. It would be safer if I could take a fast shortcut through the woods and be fast asleep in the tent—or pretending to be—by the time Pop would give up looking for me and come back to the house. I could tell by the tone of his ear-deafening voice that whatever he was saying, he had already said it for the last time.

“Come on,” I whispered to Poetry and Dragonfly, “let's get home quick—QUICK!” I repeated the last word with a hiss, and lit out for home—the shortcut that would miss Pop, who was still dodging along with his swinging lantern toward the bayou, still calling my name and stopping every few yards to listen. If only Dragonfly could run faster, it would be easy, I thought.

Right then, to my surprise, Pop swung west and started on the run toward the spring. We quick dodged behind some choke-cherry shrubs so as not to be seen, then we scrambled up the hill and into the path made by barefoot boys' bare feet, and in a fast jiffy reached the rail fence just across the road from the Collins' gate and the walnut tree.

In less than almost no time, we were inside the tent, Dragonfly puffing and wheezing on account of his asthma, Poetry puffing on account of his weight, and I, just puffing.

But it wasn't to any peaceful quiet tent that we had come back. Dragonfly was as wet as a drowned rat from having been dunked in the spring water and was shivering with the cold—on such a *hot* midsummer night!

We certainly had a problem on our hands. In fact, the whole night was all messed up with problems. *Who* had crawled out into our truck patch, picked one of our melons, slipped it into a burlap bag, dragged it on the end of a long plastic clothesline to a hole in the fence under the elderberry bushes, hoisted it into his car, and driven away with it? *Who*, quite a while later, had come rowing up the creek in a boat and left the melon in the spring? And how come there wasn't even one melon there a little later? What on earth was Dragonfly himself doing there? Was he actually looking for his knife, or had he had it with him all the time? How come he had dropped it in the spring?

I felt like I do sometimes on examination day in school when the teacher gives me a little slip of onion-skin paper with seven or eight questions on it, quite a few of which I know I can't answer. Generally the slip of paper has a printed note at the top which says, "*Answer any five.*" But tonight's questions were worse. I'd certainly need to do a lot of studying, to answer even *one* of them!

"I have got to get home and into bed, before my father gets home from town and finds I'm not there, or I'll get a licking!" Dragonfly whined.

"Doesn't he know you are gone?" Poetry asked, and Dragonfly answered, "I climbed out of my bedroom window. I had to get to the spring to get my knife."

Then Dragonfly got what he thought was a good idea. "You let me have *your* red-striped pajamas until tomorrow, Bill." He was looking at me and noticing I had on my yellow ones.

"I can't," I said, "—they are all wet."

He was standing shivering in the light of Poetry's flashlight and I was shivering too, from all the excitement. Also I was still wondering how soon Pop would give up looking for us in the woods and come back to the tent. Dragonfly and I both had our fathers after us, I thought.

"Your red-striped pajamas are all wet?" Dragonfly exclaimed, and I answered,

“Yes, they just got dunked in the spring!” which, of course, didn’t make sense to him.

We were all standing in the middle of the tent between the two cots, trying to decide what to do, when Poetry said, “Listen! I hear a telephone ringing somewhere!”

I had already heard it. The sound was coming from our house through the open east window near which our phone hangs on the wall. Who, I wondered, would be calling the Collins’ at this time of night? I knew that if Mom woke up and came downstairs to answer the phone, she’d be within a foot of the open window and she could hear anything we would say or do in the tent.

But nobody answered the phone. A jiffy later it rang again, and when nobody answered it, Poetry said, “Maybe your mother’s out in the woods somewhere with your father; you’d better go answer it yourself.”

I lifted the tent awning, sped out across the lawn to the board walk that leads from the back door to the pump, slipped into the house, worked my way through the dark kitchen to the livingroom, hurried to the phone, my heart pounding from having hurried so fast.

“Hello,” I said into the mouthpiece, making my voice sound as much like my mother’s as I could, and there came screeching into my ear an excited woman’s voice saying worriedly, “Hello, Mrs. Collins? I’ve been trying to get you. Is our boy, Roy, there?”

“Roy?” I asked. “Roy *who*?”—not remembering for a second that Dragonfly’s real name is Roy Gilbert, the Gang never calling him that. He was just plain Dragonfly to us.

“Roy—my *boy*. He’s not in his room and I can’t find him anywhere.”

I didn’t have time to tell her anything ’cause right that minute there was a voice hissing to me from outside the window, saying, “Who *is* it?”

I turned my face away from the telephone mouthpiece and said to Poetry whose hissing voice it was, “It’s Dragonfly’s mother. She’s afraid he’s been kidnapped.”

From behind me I heard footsteps in our dark house, and before I could wonder who it was, I heard Mom’s voice calling from the bottom of the stairs, “What’s going on down here?”

Mom certainly looked strange, standing there in the kitchen doorway in her night gown, her hair done up in curlers, the curlers shining in the light of the lamp she was carrying.

Right then Poetry’s mischievous mind made him say something which he must have thought was funny, but it wasn’t ’cause it made Mom gasp. His

squawky duck-like voice was almost like a ghost's voice coming loudly from just outside the window: "Everything's all right, Mrs. Collins. The phone rang and Bill answered it, 'cause your husband wasn't here—but was out in the woods in his night clothes racing around with a lantern and yelling wildly. The last we saw of him he was running like an excited deer with hounds on his trail!"

To make matters worse, Dragonfly's mother was still on the phone and heard everything Poetry said, and thought he had said it about her boy—that *Dragonfly* was running around in the woods with a lantern and yelling wildly with hounds on his trail. She gasped into the telephone the same kind of gasp Mom had just made.

"You want to talk to my mother?" I asked Mrs. Gilbert, glad for a chance to get out of the house which the second Mom took the receiver I started to do, and would have, if right that minute, Charlotte Ann, in her baby bed in the downstairs bedroom hadn't come to life with a frightened baby-style cry.

Mom shushed me and told me to go in and see if Charlotte Ann had fallen out of her bed.

In another second, I would've been in the room where Charlotte Ann was, but my eyes took a fleeting glance out the front screen door and across the road in the direction of the spring, and I saw a lighted lantern making crazy jiggling movements which told me that Pop, who was carrying it, was running like a deer in the direction of our house. I knew that in another jiffy Theodore Collins would be over the rail fence, swishing past "Theodore Collins" on our mailbox and sooner than anything would be there in the middle of all our excitement, and want to know what was what, and how come?

Boy oh boy, you should have seen the way Pop flew into action the very minute he landed in his night shirt and trousers in the middle of our brain-whirling trouble and excitement. But, for a father, he certainly didn't calm things down very fast—not like a father is supposed to when he yells to everybody to "Calm down!" which Pop sometimes does at our house, when he thinks I, especially, am raising what he calls a "ruckus."

Of course, Pop didn't know I was inside the house trying to quiet Charlotte Ann nor that Mom had gotten up upstairs and come downstairs and was talking to Dragonfly's mother on the phone trying to calm *her* down.

The first thing Pop noticed was Poetry who, by that time, was in the middle of the yard not far from Dragonfly who was not far from the tent. I could hear Pop's strong voice not far from the plum tree as he demanded of the whole

Collins' farm, "William Jasper Collins"—meaning me—"where on *earth* have you boys been? And *what* are you doing with those wet pajamas on again?"—yelling that exclamatory question at poor little red-striped, pajama-clad Dragonfly himself, who, of course, Pop must have thought was his own innocent son.

Seeing and hearing him from the open window near the telephone, I yelled out to Pop, "I haven't got my red-striped pajamas on! They are still out on the line behind the grape arbor where you hung them yourself!"

You'd have thought Pop's ears could have told him that his son's voice had come from the house behind him and not from the tent in front of him, but I guess it was like a ventriloquist's voice fooling his audience, 'cause Pop was looking at the boy in the shadow of the plum tree, and in the sputtering light of his lantern. He barked back at Dragonfly, "Don't try to be funny!" and demanded an explanation.

All this time Mom was using a soothing voice on Roy Gilbert's mother while also all the time I was trying to quiet Charlotte Ann's half-scared-half-to-death voice.

And *that* was the way Pop's understanding of things began—and the way the next thirty minutes started.

*What* a night!

## 6

AN excitement like the one we were splashing around in—squawky-voiced, barrel-shaped Poetry; red-striped pajama-clad Dragonfly; night-gown-dressed Mom; crying Charlotte Ann; my confused father, and his actual son—couldn't last forever, and this one didn't!

In not too long a while, Pop began to get things clear in his usually bright mind, as Poetry and I managed to squeeze in a few words of explanation, keeping some of the mystery to ourselves to talk over with the Gang tomorrow, when we would have our meeting at the Little-Jim tree at the bottom of Bumblebee Hill. The Little-Jim tree, as you know, is the name we had given the tree under which Little Jim had killed the fierce old mad old mother bear, which you know about if you've read the book, "We Killed a Bear."

It seemed we ought to tell Pop and Mom *why* Poetry and I had been running around in a beautiful moonlit dog days night in our night clothes, so as soon as we could, we explained about the watermelon in the burlap bag and the noisy old car racing down the lane and coming back a little later.

Pop really fired up when I mentioned how the thief had managed to get the watermelon through the fence. "You mean somebody cut a hole in my new woven-wire fence!" he half shouted. "We'll go down there right now and have a look at it!" He was more angry, it seemed, that his fence had been cut than that one of our watermelons had been stolen.

Dragonfly broke in then saying, "I've got to get home," and the way he said it made me wonder if he knew all about the whole thing and wanted to get away from us.

Mom decided what we were going to do first, by saying, "I promised Roy's mother we'd drive him home right away."

That did seem like the best thing to do and so in a little while all of us including Mom and Charlotte Ann, were in our car driving up the road to Dragonfly's house. It took quite a few minutes for Mom and Pop and me to calm Dragonfly's mother down—she was so upset. I helped as much as I could, taking as much blame as I thought would be safe—not wanting Pop to start wondering where his razor strap was. But I *didn't* want that little spindle-legged, crooked-

nosed little guy to have to have a licking for doing practically nothing, which it looked like maybe his mother was excited enough and nervous enough to give him.

“You know how boys are,” Mom said. “They get ideas of things they want to do, and they think afterwards.”

Pop helped a little by saying, “Even our own son does unpredictable things once in awhile. Isn’t that right, Bill?”

It was too dark there in the shadow of the big cedar tree that grows close to Dragonfly’s side door, for Pop to see me frown, but I decided to look up the word “unpredictable” in our dictionary as soon as I got a chance, just to see what kind of things I did once in awhile, hoping they weren’t as bad as such a long word made them sound.

“It’s my fault, he got his pajamas all wet,” I thought it was safe to say to Dragonfly’s worried mother. Then I told her a little about the girls at the spring and how they probably thought Dragonfly was me. I *didn’t* tell her I thought maybe her innocent son was mixed up in our watermelon mystery, or she might have had insomnia that night even worse than another pajama-dressed boy’s mother.

From Dragonfly’s house we drove back toward ours, turned into the lane that goes down the south side of our farm and stopped at the place in the fence where the elderberry bushes were, the very same place where not more than two hours ago the noisy oldish car had been parked.

Say, when Pop’s flashlight showed him the hole in the fence under the elderberry bushes, he was as angry as I have ever seen him get. He just stood there at the side of our car, with the moonlight shining on his stern face, his jaw muscles working, and I knew every other muscle in his body was tense.

“It’s hard to believe anybody would be *that* mean,” he said.

“Bob Till is mean enough to do anything,” I answered, but Mom stopped me before I could say another word. “You’re *not* to say that!” she ordered me. “We’re going to give that boy a chance. We’re NOT going to believe he did this, until we have proof.”

“How much more proof do you want?” I asked. “We saw his car parked here; we saw the watermelon being dragged in the gunny sack along the fence right over there on the other side, and actually saw it being dragged through this hole and hoisted into the car and we saw him drive away—Poetry and I both did.”

“Did you count your melons?” Mom asked. “Were there any missing?”

“Were there any—?” I stopped. I didn’t even know how *many* melons we had. I’d never bothered to count them. Those smaller melons hadn’t seemed as

important to me as Ida had, on account of they had grown from ordinary watermelon seed, and not from the packet of special seed from the State Experiment Station.

The only way I could know for sure if any were taken would be to look all over the patch to see if there were any oblong indentations in the ground where a melon *had* been. “All right,” I said, “I’ll find out right now. I *know* there was a watermelon in that gunny sack. I felt it with my own hands, and it was long and round and hard.”

Pop let me have his flashlight, and I crawled through the fence and started looking around all over the truck patch to see if there were any melons missing, making a beeline first straight for Ida’s vine to be sure she was there and all right.

Poetry wanted to go with me but he couldn’t get through the small hole in the fence. “At least that proves *he* didn’t do it,” Pop said grimly, and Poetry answered, “If I’d been cutting a hole in a nice new fence, I’d have made it large enough for a man my size to get through”—trying to be funny even at a time like that!

In only a few barefoot jiffies, I was standing beside the circular trough in which Ida’s vine was growing, and my flashlight was making a circular arc all around the place while my eyes were looking for Ida herself.

And then, all of a sudden, I felt myself get hot inside, as I heard at the same time my excited, angry voice almost *screaming* back across the moonlit truck patch to Mom and Pop and Charlotte Ann and Poetry, “She’s *gone!* *Somebody’s sneaked in while we were away and stolen her!*”

There in front of my tear-blurred eyes was a long, smooth indentation in the ground where for the last eighty-five days—which is how long it takes to mature a melon—Ida Watermelon Collins had made her home. I was all mixed up with temper and sobs and doubled-up fists, and ready to explode.

Ida was gone! Ida had been stolen! *My prize watermelon!* The mother of my next year’s watermelon children, and the *grandmother* of my year-after-next’s watermelon *grandchildren*—and my college education!

I tell you there were a lot of what Pop called “stormy emotions” whirling around in our minds when, a little later, the five of us got back into the car and drove on down the lane in the direction of the Sugar Creek schoolhouse, to find a place in the road large enough to turn around in.

We talked a lot, and tried to make plans, Poetry and I especially in the back seat. I simply couldn’t understand my parents’ attitude. There was Pop’s fence with an ugly hole in it, and Ida was missing, and yet he was very calm and very

set in his mind about what NOT to do. “Like your mother says, Bill, we don’t know that Bob did it. It won’t cost much to repair the fence—and next year, we’ll raise another melon that’ll be even bigger and better.”

I stormed awhile there in the back seat until I got strict orders from both my parents to calm down—Mom making it easier for me to by adding as we pulled up to Theodore Collins on our mailbox, “We’re Christians. We don’t take revenge on people. We’re going to commit this thing to the Lord and see what good He will bring out of it?”

It was quite awhile before things were quiet around the Collins’ farm, that night, with Pop and Mom and Charlotte Ann in the house, and Poetry and I in our hot cots in the tent under the plum tree.

Tomorrow, when the Gang got together at the Little-Jim tree, we’d decide what to do—only it seemed like Mom’s attitude was going to be like a lasso on a rodeo steer to keep me from doing what I really wanted to do, which was to hunt up Bob Till himself and face him with the question of what he had done with my watermelon.

“Listen,” all of a sudden I hissed to Poetry in his cot, and before he could answer, I went on, “If we can find out what happened to the melon, maybe we can still get the seed from it. Anybody he sold it to wouldn’t eat the *seeds*.”

At breakfast table next morning, Pop’s prayer was a little longer than usual, and seemed sort of meant for me to hear. Right in the middle of it, while Charlotte Ann, in the crook of Mom’s arm, was wriggling and squirming and reaching both hands and half-fussing to get started eating, Pop said, “... and bless with a very special blessing those who have sinned against themselves and against Thee by breaking the commandment ‘Thou shalt not steal.’ Help us to love them and to show them by our lives that the Christian life is the only truly satisfying life. Keep us under Thy control ...”

That last request bothered me a little on account of it seemed like I wanted to be under my own control all day, and that if I was going to be under Anybody Else’s control I might not get to help teach Bob Till or whoever-it-was had cut the hole in Pop’s new fence and stolen that watermelon, a good-old-fashioned lesson by giving him a licking.

Mom’s buckwheat pancakes were the best Poetry had ever tasted, he told her—which was probably his excuse for tasting so many of them. He certainly knew how to make Mom’s eyes twinkle, Mom liking boys so well. In fact all the boys of the Sugar Creek Gang liked Mom so well they stopped at our house every chance they got just to make her eyes twinkle while they ate some of her cookies or a piece of one of her pies.

Mom surprised us all, right then, by saying, “Last night while I couldn’t sleep for a while, I got to thinking about whoever took your melon and cut the hole in the fence, and it seemed the Lord wanted me to pray for him or them. I feel so sorry for boys who do things like that.” Mom sighed heavily and I noticed her eyes had a faraway expression in them. Just looking at her, made me think it would be pretty hard for me to be a bad boy as long as I had such a wonderful mother.

After breakfast and before we left the table we passed around what we call the “Bread Box,” which is a small box of cards, each one about two inches long with a Bible verse printed on it and, say! Do you know what? Just like it had been when Pop had prayed, I felt like a frisky young steer that has just been lassoed, on account of the card I picked out of the box when it was passed to me, had on it, “Love your enemies; do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you.”

When I got through reading my verse aloud like we all do every time, I looked across the table toward Pop, and his grey-green eyes were looking straight into mine. He had a half grin on his face when he said, just as if there wasn’t anybody else in the room, “*Your* watermelon, and *my* fence!” I could tell by the expression in his voice that he had been lassoed too!

Poetry and I managed to get through the morning all right, but it was hard to wait until two o’clock in the afternoon. We did quite a little work around the place, though, such as helping Mom with the dishes, helping Pop with the chores and running a few errands for each of them. Once we stopped in the middle of the barnyard, while I pointed out to Poetry the boss hen of our whole flock—the one Pop has named Cleopatra. Cleopatra is a very proud, high-combed, very pretty White Leghorn who, like all boss hens in a hen flock, could peck all the other hens any time she wanted to but not a one of them ever dared to peck her back. She had already proved to them who was boss by giving every one of them a licking one at a time.

“We’ve got a boss hen, too,” Poetry told me as we stood watching Cleopatra proudly lifting her yellow feet and strutting around to show how important she was.

“We have a *second* boss, too; she pecks every other hen except the boss hen, and Cleopatra is the only one that can peck her,” I said to Poetry, which anybody who knows anything about what Pop calls the “social life of a flock of hens” knows is the way they live and get along with each other. At the very bottom of the social ladder in the Collins’ chicken yard is a bedraggled-looking hen Mom has named Marybelle Elizabeth. She gets pecked by every other hen in the

barnyard and can never peck *any* of them back.

We liked Marybelle Elizabeth, though. She was one of the best laying hens we had, even though in a fight she wasn't any good at defending herself, and always ate her lunch alone when all the others were through.

I was standing beside Poetry near our garden fence watching Marybelle as she foraged around by herself like she didn't have a friend in the world. I was feeling very sorry for her and thinking how lonely a life she had to live—how she had to take all the unfair things the other hens did to her and couldn't ever fight back.

Poetry moseyed on toward the house then and I kept on standing not more than fifteen feet from Marybelle. "Here, Marybelle," I comforted her, "don't you feel too bad. I live a kind of henpecked life myself." Taking a handful of corn from my pocket, I tossed it to her. She lifted her head high, twisted her neck in every direction like she wondered how come anybody wanted to be kind to her, then started in gobbling up the grains of corn as fast as she could.

"Atta girl," I said to her. "Go to it!"

Pretty soon, Mom called us that dinner was ready and pretty soon after dinner—and after Poetry and I had offered to help Mom with the dishes and she had surprised us by letting us—it was time for the Gang to meet under the Little-Jim tree.

It was one of the nicest dog days days I ever saw, with the heat waves dancing above the fields, short-horned grasshoppers springing up along the sunny path as Poetry and I moseyed along, not wanting to run and get hot on such a hot day. I felt kind of sad because of the watermelon and also on account of our boys' world had been invaded by a flock of girl campers. Girls in our woods would be a lasso on a boy's fun. He couldn't go racing wildly among the trees playing leapfrog and yelling and whooping it up like a wild Indian on account of he would be afraid they would think he was a wild Indian.

As I was saying, the short-horned grasshoppers were springing up all along the path, making their funny little rattling sounds during the short time they were in the air, the rattling stopping the very second they landed which they generally did only a few yards from where they took off. Butterflies of a half-dozen families were tossing themselves about in the air above the wild rose bushes and here and there and everywhere in the yellow afternoon.

"Hey, look!" Poetry exclaimed. "There goes a milkweed butterfly! I've got to have him for my collection!"—and he started to start on a fast run after him, but I stopped him with "*Quiet! The girls will hear you!*"

He stopped stock-still and scowled and the beautiful Monarch butterfly swung proudly away in the air, starting to stop every now and then and not doing it, but

lifting itself on the breeze and floating away to another place.

It wouldn't be long until fall now, I thought, when all the Monarchs in the Sugar Creek territory would gather themselves into flocks like blackbirds and crows do, and before winter they would migrate to the South, flying all the way down to the bottom of the United States and even into Mexico or South America. Then next spring they would be back at Sugar Creek to lay their eggs on the milkweeds which grow in the fence rows or wherever a farmer doesn't cut them down.

The larva that hatches from the milkweed or Monarch butterflies is one of the prettiest a boy ever sees, being a long greenish-yellow caterpillar with crow-black rings around it all along its body from its head to its tail—only it is hard to tell which end is its head on account of it has two short black horns on each end of itself.

You can see a greenish-yellow-and-black Monarch larva hanging from a milkweed leaf most any time in the late summer, if you stop and look close enough.

Dragonfly was the only one of the Gang who didn't come to our meeting that day, and Poetry and I thought we knew why.

We all plumped ourselves down on the grass under the Little-Jim tree and relaxed awhile, each of us lying in a different direction like we nearly always do. Big Jim looked around at the rest of us, letting his stern eyes stop on each of our faces for a flash of a second—Poetry's fat mischievous face, Little Jim's mouselike innocent face, Circus's monkey-shaped face, and my freckle-faced face.

Big Jim's own face was more sober than it is sometimes and I noticed his almost mustache on his upper lip was *really* almost now. If it should keep on growing as fast as it had the last two or three years, pretty soon, he would actually have to start shaving. For a second my mind wandered a little and I was thinking if Big Jim should ever need a razor strap I would very gladly offer him Pop's discarded one which Pop hardly ever used anymore except for some unnecessary reason. There really wasn't any sense in having a piece of leather like that lying around our house cluttering up the place and giving a boy's father the kind of ideas it's not good for a son for his father to have.

"Anybody know where Dragonfly is?" Big Jim asked.

And Poetry answered, saying, "He had asthma last night; maybe his mother wouldn't let him come today."

Big Jim's stern face probably meant he was remembering his resolution not to fight Bob Till any more, unless he was forced to in self-defense. Of course, if

Bob himself started a fight we'd have to defend ourselves.

I got an idea then, and it was, "Bob Till has already started a fight by stealing our watermelons last night. That's the same as whamming me in the stomach—on account of that's where the watermelons would have been if I had eaten them. And since he's already *started* the fight, I've got a right to defend myself, haven't I?"

"It's not the same," Big Jim said grimly, his jaw muscles still working. His fists were doubled up though, I noticed, and I could see he didn't like the lasso with which he had lassoed himself.

Little Jim spoke up then and said, "How'd we feel in Sunday school tomorrow if Bob came in with a black eye and a smashed nose?"

Right then as I looked into that cute little guy's cute little mouse-shaped face and saw how innocent he was, and realized he was so tender-hearted he'd even hate to swat a fly and wouldn't if he didn't think the fly needed to be swatted—I say, right then was when I noticed for the first time the rectangular manila envelope Little Jim had brought with him. It looked about five inches wide and nine inches long, and had something in it. I couldn't tell what it was and didn't get to find out until later in the afternoon.

Little Jim's question, "How'd we feel in Sunday school tomorrow morning if Bob came in with a black eye and a smashed nose?" took some of the fight out of me, 'cause I knew Bob *had* to be in church tomorrow—that being one of the things the judge who had put him on probation had said he had to do—he had to go to Sunday school and church at least once every Sunday for a whole year.

I spoke up then with a half-mischievous voice saying, "The judge told him he had to go every Sunday unless he is sick and unable to. He might *not* be able to if—"

"Stop!" Big Jim cut in. "The thing is not funny!"

Not a one of us said a word for a second. Then Big Jim told us in a serious voice, "We can't let Bob break his parole. If he does he'll have to go to Reform School for from one to ten years, and we wouldn't want that."

"Hasn't he already broken it, by stealing my watermelons?" I asked.

Again Big Jim cut in on me almost savagely, "You don't know that. It could have been somebody else."

"It was *his* car," I countered. "I'd know it anywhere."

Just thinking about that burlap bag with the stolen watermelon in it and Ida herself being gone, stirred me all up inside again, and I was in a whirlwind of a mood to do something about it. I thought about poor old Marybelle Elizabeth out by our garden fence all alone at the very bottom of our chicken yard's social

ladder, and how she had to take all the pecks of all the other hens and didn't dare fight back. I felt sorry for her having to live such a henpecked life, 'cause right that minute if I had been her, I'd have felt in a mood to start in licking the feathers off every other hen in the whole Sugar Creek territory.

But we couldn't just lie around and talk all afternoon, and *do* nothing. *Nothing* is something a boy can do for only a few minutes at a time, anyway.

"Let's go swimming," Little Jim suggested.

"Can't," I said crossly. "We don't have our bathing suits."

"*Bathing suits!*" Circus exclaimed. "Who ever heard of the Sugar Creek Gang using bathing suits in our own swimming hole!"

Nobody ever had, on account of our swimming hole was quite a ways up the creek and was well protected on both sides by bushes and shrubbery, and nobody lived anywhere near the place.

"There are guests in our woods," Big Jim said. And my sad heart told me he was right. *We couldn't* go swimming.

"Girls!" Poetry grunted grouchily and got shushed by Big Jim who asked, "They're human beings, aren't they?"

"Are they?" Poetry asked with an innocent voice.

Big Jim sighed, looked around at all of us again and said, "Little Jim here has something he has to do this afternoon and it might be pretty dangerous. He might need our help. You guys want to go along with him and me?"

"I," I said, "am going to do something dangerous myself before the afternoon is over—but I don't suppose any of you would care to go with me. You don't care whether my prize watermelon was stolen or not. But *I* do, and I'm going to do something about it!" My own words sounded hot in my ears and made me a little braver than I had been—reminded me of Marybelle Elizabeth at the bottom of our chickenyard's social ladder, living a henpecked life and not daring to fight back at all at any time.

"What you goin' to do?" Circus asked. "I'm willing to go along and help save your life if you need any help."

"Yeah, what *are* you going to do?" Poetry asked me, and I answered: "First, I'm going down to the spring to see if Ida is there. If she's not, I'm going down to the bridge, and across it, and straight to Bob Till's house and ask him straight out if he knows anything about a watermelon thief."

I caught Big Jim's and Little Jim's eyes meeting and thought I saw some kind of message pass between them.

"You guys don't have to go along if you don't want to," I said, beginning to

feel a little less brave, now that it seemed like I was doing more than just talking, but was actually going to do what I said I was going to do.

“We can’t let you be killed,” Circus said. “Maybe we *all* ought to go along!”

Pretty soon we were on our way—to the spring first, of course. As we moved grimly along, I noticed my teeth were clenched, my lips were pressed together in a straight line, my eyebrows were down. I was remembering last night’s ridiculous ride on the melon in the spring reservoir, the screaming girls, and especially what had happened in our truck patch near the elderberry bushes. But right in the front of my mind’s eye was the oblong indentation in the sandy loam where Ida Watermelon Collins had spent all the eighty-five days of her life from a tiny quarter of an inch long green baby to the huge, dark green watermelon she now was if she was. Where, I asked myself, was Ida now?

Maybe she was in the spring reservoir. Maybe whoever stole her had sold her to the girl scouts. When we got there, would we run into a flock of perfumed guests, and would they recognize a zebra who had changed his color and shape since last night?

Well, we didn’t find any girls there, and we didn’t find any watermelon either. All there was in the big cement pool was a glass fruit jar filled with butter, a half dozen cartons of milk and there were girls’ shoe tracks all around the place.

There weren’t any boys’ tracks—not even barefoot ones.

Big Jim wanted to look around where the boat had been moored, so we all gathered in a huddle by the maple tree, keeping as quiet as we could so if anyone did come to the spring we wouldn’t be seen or heard.

For a jiffy, Little Jim slipped out of our huddle and began nosing around over by the board fence where last night Poetry and I had crawled through in such a fast hurry.

“Hey, everybody!” all of a sudden Little Jim’s excited, mouse-like voice squeaked to us. “Look what I found! A note of some kind!”

I looked quick in his direction and he was holding up a piece of paper. I remembered then that that was the exact place where Poetry and I had been when we had unfolded the oiled paper which said on it:

“Eat more Eatmore.”

Poetry’s and my eyes met and we grunted to each other. “That’s only an old bread wrapper. We threw it away last night,” I said to Little Jim.

“You shouldn’t have,” Little Jim answered, and came loping over to where we were, with the happiest grin on his face you ever saw. He held the oiled paper

out to us. “Look! There’s a note in it. See!” he cried.

You could have knocked me over with a watermelon seed, I was so astonished. The oiled paper said, “Eat more Eatmore,” all right, but as plain as day there was something sealed in between two layers of the wrapping paper. The thought hit my mind with a thud—there was something *very* important in that paper!

“Let’s get out of here quick,” Big Jim said. Taking the paper and ordering: “Follow me!” he started on a fast run up the path which led through the forest of giant ragweed toward the old swimming hole.

Zippety-zip-zip, plop-plop-plop, my bare feet went in the cool damp winding path through the ragweed following along with the rest of the Gang.

The minute we reached the place where we had had so many happy times each summer, we heard voices from up the creek.

“Girls!” Circus exclaimed disgustedly. “Let’s get out of here!”

I looked in the direction the sounds came from and saw a boat with three or four girls in it. In less than a firefly’s fleeting flash, we were up and gone, scooting through the rows of tall corn headed for the east end of the bayou.

“We’ll have our meeting in the graveyard,” Big Jim said. “They’ll be afraid to come there.”

IN almost less time than it has taken me to write these few paragraphs, we were in the cemetery at the top of Bumblebee Hill, and sprawled out on the grass near Sarah Paddler's tombstone—the one that has the carved hand on it with the forefinger pointing toward the sky and the words that say, “There is rest in heaven.”

Every time we had a meeting there, I would read those words, and look at the other tombstone exactly the same size, which had on it Old Man Paddler's name and the date the old man was born, with a blank place after it, meaning he was still alive—and nobody would put on the date of his death until after his funeral. Also I would always remember that that kind old long-whiskered old man was an honest-to-goodness Christian who loved the heavenly Father and His only begotten Son. He trusted in the Saviour for the forgiveness of his sins, so I was sure that when he *did* die his soul would go sailing out across the Sugar Creek sky to heaven itself where his wife Sarah and his two boys already were—and the whole family would be together again.

That old cemetery was certainly an interesting place and was very pretty. I hoped that nobody would ever try to make it look like the well-kept other cemeteries around the country. It'd be nice if people would let the wild rosebushes and the chokecherries and the sumac and the elderberries and the wild grapevines keep on growing there. Of course, it would be all right to keep the weeds away from the different markers and to keep the grass cut, but I liked the little brown paths that wound around from one to the other—and it always seemed like God was there in a special way.

You get a kind of saddish happy feeling in your heart when you think about Him, when all your sins are forgiven and you and your parents like each other. It seems as if maybe He likes boys especially well, on account of He made such a pretty boys' world for them to live in.

There was purple vervain all over the place and tall mullein stalks—and already the sumac was turning red. I hadn't any more than thought all these things than from behind the sumac on the other side of Sarah Paddler's tall tombstone I heard a long-tailed sneeze and knew Dragonfly was there. A jiffy later he came pouting into the little circular open place we were in, saying, “How

come you didn't wait for me?"

He looked a little guilty, I thought, as, panting and wheezing a little, he plumped himself down on the ground between Poetry and me.

Everything was so quiet for a minute that he must have guessed we had been talking about him. "Are the—are the girls still camping up in the woods?" he asked—and I knew he was remembering last night's dunking in the spring and also probably never would forget it.

There was an interrogatory sentence in my mind, right that minute. So I exploded at Dragonfly, "What were you doing in the middle of the night down there at the spring?"

My question probably sounded pretty saucy to him.

"I went to get my knife," he said. "I was there getting a drink yesterday afternoon when a whole flock of girls came storming down and scared me so bad I dropped my knife. I was so scared I ran home. It was my Dad's knife, and he was coming home before midnight, and I didn't want him to know I had it, so I sneaked back to get it, and—"

Another of my mystery balloons had burst. Poetry and I looked at each other and shrugged. That let Dragonfly out. He hadn't had anything to do with stealing watermelons. He was as innocent as a lamb. I sighed a big sigh of relief though, 'cause it felt good to get all that suspicion out of my mind, and to have him with us again.

We all crowded around Big Jim to see what was between the layers of the bread wrapper. "It's a map!" Little Jim exclaimed in his squeaky voice, and it was—a crude drawing made with indelible pencil. That was the first thing I noticed, that it had been made with indelible pencil. The drawing looked like a map of the Sugar Creek territory itself. In fact, it was a *very good* map of the Gang's playground with the names of important places on it—names that only anybody living in our neighborhood would know about; a few that only the Gang itself might know—such as "Bumblebee Hill," "the Black Widow Stump," and the "Little-Jim tree."

My mind cringed when I realized that maybe whoever had drawn the map was one of our own Gang—maybe one of us who, right that minute, were in a football-style huddle in the cemetery.

Then Poetry noticed something I hadn't—"Look at that red X, would you? Wonder what *that* means?"

I squeezed in between Poetry and Dragonfly and looked, and there it was, a

very small red X with a red circle around it, in the upper left-hand corner of the page. I could tell that the red X and the red circle were marking a spot on the other side of the creek, just below the big Sugar Creek bridge.

Boy oh boy, it was like a story book! That was the second map of the territory we had found—the first one, as you already know, had been hidden in the old hollow sycamore tree, and that map had been the very center of the very first mystery we had ever had—but I told you all about that in the very first story there ever was about the Sugar Creek Gang, and it's in a book by that name.

Big Jim must have been thinking the same thoughts I was, 'cause right that second he said, "Who outside our Gang knows the name of the tree where Little Jim killed the bear?"

Poetry rolled himself into a sitting position and grunted himself to his feet. Trying to make his voice sound like a detective's, he said, "All right, everybody; don't a one of you leave this room—this cemetery, I mean. One of you in this circle is a watermelon thief; one of you drew this map!"

Before anybody could have stopped him he was firing at us one interrogatory sentence after another. The first one was, "Who among us has an indelible pencil? You, Bill?"

"No sir," I said.

I was surprised that Big Jim let Poetry keep on with his questions, but he did, and pretty soon Poetry had asked us a half-dozen others, such as, which of us ate Eatmore Bread at home, what kind of clotheslines did our mothers use—rope or plastic—and did any of us smoke? Of course the last question was a foolish one, as far as the Gang was concerned, but I knew why he had asked it. He was remembering the man in the boat who, last night, had lit a cigar or cigarette with a match or a lighter.

Poetry was looking as dignified as any fat boy with mussed-up hair and mischievous eyes can look. He was all set to keep on talking and asking questions when Big Jim interrupted, saying, "Look, all of you! There's only one other person—or rather two—who might know the names we've given to the important places around here. One is Little Tom Till, and the other is his big brother, Bob."

I don't know why I hadn't thought of Tom before. The very second Big Jim mentioned his name, I remembered that Tom was very good in art at school; in fact, he got better grades in it than any of the rest of us. For some reason, though, I didn't like the idea of thinking that Tom was guilty. He wasn't exactly a member of our Gang but we all felt he belonged to us anyway. He hadn't been meeting with the Gang lately, though, because his brother didn't want him to,

and Tom was very much afraid of his big brother's big fists.

"The thing for us to do," Big Jim interrupted my thoughts to say, "is to do what Bill suggests—go straight to their house and ask them point-blank what they know about this map and whether they've been stealing watermelons."

And *that* is what we decided to do, only Big Jim cautioned us to watch our words so as not to stir up Bob's temper.

"Remember, he will be in church tomorrow—and in our class."

I remembered it all the way. Our faces were set as we left the cemetery, moved down the slope of Bumblebee Hill, walking right through the place where the famous battle of Bumblebee Hill had been fought and where Little Tom Till had fired the fist heard round the world. That fist had landed ker-smash right on my nose. I stopped for a minute, right in the middle of the battleground and looked around, trying to remember the exact spot where two red-haired, freckle-faced, fiery-tempered boys, who looked very much alike, most of the time, had had such an exciting time getting acquainted.

I was glad that Tom was my friend now—or was he? If he had drawn the map and stuffed it into the watermelon, then *he* must be mixed up in our mystery in some way.

We passed the Little-Jim tree and went on to the spring again, then moved cautiously through the woods toward the rail fence that bordered the north road, having to pass not more than forty yards from the pawpaw bushes on the way. Dragonfly managed to sneeze several times just as we were parallel with the girl scout camp, which proved that his mind as well as his nose was allergic to perfume, 'cause he certainly wasn't close enough to their camp to smell them.

"Girls aren't anything to be sneezed at," Poetry was smart enough to think of to say to Dragonfly; and Dragonfly sneezed again.

At the rail fence, we went through—or under or over—the different rails—whichever different ones of us decided to do, and in a fast jiffy were on our way across the bridge, in the direction of the Tills' house.

The minute we reached the other side of the bridge Little Jim cried suddenly, "Look! There's the boat I bet they used last night!"

I looked downstream in the direction Little Jim was pointing and saw the red stern of a rowboat half hidden under the low-hanging branches of a willow.

A thousand shivers started racing up and down my spine when I realized that our mystery was coming to even more life than it had come to last night when we had seen the boat stopping at the spring.

At that very same instant I saw, back on the shore, half-hidden among the trees, the forest-green roof of a wall-type tent. What on earth? I thought. Not

only were there a flock of girls camping near the pawpaw bushes in the woods above the bridge, but here on the other side of the creek and *below* the bridge was somebody else camping! I was remembering last night and the mysterious something-or-other I had seen somebody carry to the spring from the boat. This very same boat, maybe!

Poetry beside me remarked, “There’s where the woman lives—the one that was smoking the cigarette last night.”

“There’s where the *man* lives, you mean,” I disagreed.

Beside the tent was a gun-metal gray pickup truck that looked like it was maybe ten or fifteen years old. At almost the same instant, there was the sound of a motor coming to roaring life, and right away the truck was moving. It went backwards first, then swung left and began bumping along in the little lane toward the highway.

“Quick, everybody!” Big Jim ordered. “Down the embankment and under the bridge!”

We obeyed Big Jim like soldiers taking orders from a captain in a battle. In only a few lightning-fast jiffies, we were all down the embankment and crouching on a narrow strip of shore underneath the north end of the bridge, getting there just in time on account of in a few fast minutes we heard the truck’s wheels on the board floor above us. And *that was that!*

As soon as the car was across the bridge, we decided it would be a good idea to look around a little, just to see if we could find any “clues,” as Poetry was always saying.

We followed a narrow footpath which skirts the shore and is bordered on either side with willows and ragweeds just like the path on our own side of the creek.

Pretty soon we came to within twenty-five feet of the boat and the green tent. “Hello, there!” Big Jim called. “Anybody home?”

There wasn’t any answer from anybody.

“Hello! I say, *Hello!*” Big Jim called again several times, and still there wasn’t any reply.

While it wouldn’t be right to trespass on somebody’s campground, we knew we wouldn’t be doing anything wrong if we just walked in the path which belonged to everybody anyway, past the place where the boat was moored.

A second later we were there, and what to my wondering eyes should appear but out in the middle of the boat a gunny sack—an actual, honest-to-goodness gunny sack—and it had in it something fat and long and—

“Hey,” I said to Poetry and to all of us, “look! There’s another watermelon! In

a gunny sack!”

“You’re crazy,” Poetry answered. “That’s not a watermelon; that’s a water jug!” And to my very sad disappointment, Poetry was right.

There was a great big water jug like the kind we used in the Sugar Creek threshing ring, wrapped round and round with a gunny sack, and tied on with binder twine.

I remembered then that many a time I had carried drinking water to Pop from our iron pitcher pump out across the barnyard to whatever field he was in at the time. First I would soak the burlap bag in cold water. If you do that to a burlap bag, it will keep the water in the jug cool for quite a long time.

“That,” Poetry said, “is what the woman in the boat last night was getting at the spring. She carried an empty jug to the spring, let it down into the water until it was filled and then carried it back again.”

“I still want to know who drew a map and put it inside that watermelon,” I said crossly. “And *where* is Ida!”

After Big Jim had called “Hello,” a few more times and nobody had answered, we decided to see if we could find any honest-to-goodness clues, only we wouldn’t go inside the tent.

“Look at that, would you?” Poetry exclaimed, the minute we were on the other side of the tent. “See that clothesline hanging between those two trees.”

Most of us had already seen it. It was a brand new plastic line stretching from a small maple near the tent to the trunk of an ash that grew about thirty feet away, not more than five feet from a field of very tall corn. Hanging on the line were two or three pairs of slacks like women and girls wear; also there were several different kinds of different-colored other women’s clothes. We didn’t even have time to try to make up our minds what to do next, on account of all of a sudden there was a clattering of the boards of the Sugar Creek bridge—and it was the pickup truck coming back.

“Quick, everybody!” Big Jim exclaimed. “Let’s get out of here!”

And “out of here” we got, scurrying like six scared cottontails into the tall corn. We didn’t stop running until we knew we were far enough away so we couldn’t be seen by anybody even if she dropped down on her hands and knees and looked beneath the drooping cornblades in our direction.

“I guess this lets Bob and Tom out,” Circus said. It had also knocked the daylights out of my mystery.

“But what about the burlap bag with the watermelon in it—the one that was being dragged through our watermelon patch, last night?” I asked.

“It was *dark* out there, wasn’t it?” Circus asked. “You couldn’t tell whether it

was a watermelon or a water *jug*.”

“But I felt it with my two hands, and it was long and round and——”

“A water jug is long and round,” Little Jim’s mouselike voice squeaked.

“But this one in our watermelon patch didn’t have any spout on it,” I protested, feeling my mystery-house falling and crashing all around me.

“How do you know it didn’t have? You didn’t feel both *ends*, did you? You just felt it in the middle!” Poetry argued back. “And besides,” he went on in a talkative hurry, “your other iron pitcher pump wasn’t more than twenty feet away when we first saw it. Somebody was helping himself to some drinking water.”

I felt my jaw muscles tightening with anger. I knew—*knew* what had been in that burlap bag last night was a watermelon. Besides, why would anybody want to get drinking water secretly like that? I quickly asked the question out loud, and got a quick answer from Poetry, whose detective-like mind was certainly alert that day: “Sugar Creek water isn’t safe to drink for anything except a fish in dog days. Look at all that green scum floating out there.”

Poetry was probably right, but his answer didn’t tell me *why* whoever wanted the water, didn’t go right straight to any member of the Sugar Creek Gang’s parents and ask for a jug of water in the *daytime*.

“But somebody *did* take my prize watermelon!” I protested. “Ida couldn’t just get up and walk away. Somebody had to carry or drag her.” And a second later, Poetry was juggling a little jingle we’d heard him use quite a few times, and was:

“I proposed to Ida,  
Ida refused;  
I’da won my Ida if I’da used ...”

“STOP!” I ordered Poetry and started to start to say something else but got stopped by Big Jim shushing me, making me swallow my words and my temper. But I still knew I was right. The whole thing was as plain as a dog-day day to anybody with half a mind, which it looked like maybe I was the only one of us that did have.

That was as far as any of us got to talk or think right then, on account of from the direction of the tent I heard a car door slam and I knew it was the truck, and my mind was busy trying to imagine who had probably just climbed out of it.

“Do you suppose it’s anybody we know?” Dragonfly asked, and sneezed and

grabbed his nose with his right hand to stop another sneeze that was already getting ready to explode.

For a few anxious seconds we all lay there in the nice clean dust of the cornfield, listening and thinking and trying to decide what to do, if anything. For a few minutes, even though I was worrying on account of the mystery, I was hearing and actually enjoying the sound of the husky rusty rustle of the corn blades in the very light breeze that was blowing. Overhead I could see the big white cumulus clouds hanging in the lazy afternoon sky, also the shimmering green leaves in the top of the cottonwood tree farther down the shore. I even noticed a lazy crow loafing along in the sky like he didn't have a worry in the world. It wouldn't be long before fall would be here, I thought, and that lonely old crow would join about five hundred of his black-feathered friends and spend half the day everyday, for a while, cawing and cawing in his hoarse voice, keeping it up and keeping it up, hour after hour in the bare trees. One of the dreariest things a farm boy ever sees in the autumn, is a forlorn-looking crow flapping his sad wings above the frosty cornfields.

Nearly every summer there is a crow's nest in the top of the old pine tree on the other side of the creek near the mouth of the branch. About all a pair of crow parents ever do to make a nest for their crow children to be hatched in, is to build a rough platform of sticks—some large and some small—and line it with strips of bark from the cedar trees. Then the mother crow, who is just as black as her husband only her feathers don't shine as brightly, lays from four to seven eggs that are the color of green dust with little brown spots on them. Crows are always scattering themselves over the new cornfields in the spring, digging down into the rows where the grains have been planted, and gobbling up the grains before they have a chance to grow.

Of course, any farm boy knows a crow eats May beetles and grasshoppers and cutworms and caterpillars and even mice, and he is also a thief—*but he doesn't use a plastic clothesline to help him get what he wants.*

Just thinking that brought my mind back to the cornfield we were lying in right that minute.

My thoughts got there just in time to hear Big Jim say to me, "Bill, you and Poetry tell us once more all you know about everything from the beginning up to now—" which Poetry and I did, rehearsing to the Gang what we had seen at the spring on our first trip—the plugged watermelon with the folded oiled paper in it; the long dark thing we had seen being dragged through the melon patch which at first I had thought was some kind of wild animal running; the car that had gone clattering down the lane and back again; the hole in the fence and the

watermelon being pulled through—or the water *jug*, whichever it was—and hoisted into the car; and then Poetry’s and my trip back to the spring again, the mystery man or woman in the boat; and Dragonfly’s coming for his knife and getting dunked by the girls.

“Don’t forget the perfume,” Dragonfly said, “and the pine-scented paper and the map and—” And then he quickly grabbed his nose just in time to stop another sneeze.

“And the red letter X,” Little Jim put in.

Big Jim unfolded the map again and we crowded around him to study it. There was only one person I knew who could draw a map as neat as that. “We’d better see Tom about this,” I said. “Here—let me have it. I’m the one who took it out of the melon in the first place.”

I was surprised when Big Jim handed it to me saying, “All right, you keep it until we find the real owner. It probably belongs to the girl scouts.”

I folded it and tucked it into my left hip pocket.

“Don’t forget about the plastic clothesline—the brand new one we just saw,” Circus said, which I remembered right that very minute was stretched between two trees behind the tent and had a lot of different kinds of different colored women’s clothes on it.

Things certainly were mixed up. The more we talked, the more tangled up everything seemed. All this time, Little Jim had been hanging onto his brown manila envelope like it was very important. I noticed he had a far-away expression in his eyes right then like he was thinking about something a lot farther away than the cornfield we were in. Also he didn’t have any worries on his face, which I was pretty sure I had.

“Let’s do a little more scouting around,” Poetry suggested. “Let’s send out a couple of spies to sneak up close to the tent to see what we can see or hear.”

Big Jim shook his head a very savage “No,” saying, “You don’t go sneaking around a tent where women or girls are camping! There’s even a law against it. Remember what happened to that Peeping Tom they caught looking into a window in town, last winter?”

“What’s a Peeping Tom?” Dragonfly wanted to know. And Big Jim, being the oldest one of the Gang, explained it to all of us. When he got through, we made it a rule of the Gang that not a one of us would ever be one.

That knocked out Poetry’s scouting suggestion. We couldn’t go spying around any tent or any place where there were women or girls.

Just that second, Dragonfly hissed like he does when he has seen or heard something important. “Listen! Somebody’s coming!”

We all looked and listened in every direction, and sure enough, somebody was coming. Was it a man, or a woman, or a girl? Or who, or what?

I stooped low, looked down the corn row I was in, and when I saw what I saw, I hissed to everybody, "It's a *woman*; she's wearing blue slacks!"

That meant that six boys ought to scramble themselves out of there, which, on Big Jim's hissed orders, we did, hurrying like a covey of quail, only instead of fanning out in a lot of different directions like flushed quail do, we all followed Big Jim down his corn row, not stopping until we reached the bridge again.

"We'll go on over to the Tills' house right now," he said, and I noticed that Little Jim's hands were clasping tightly his manila envelope as he said, "Yeah, let's."

And away we went.

## 8

AS much as I hated to leave the red boat and the green tent and the brown burlap bags with the waterjugs in them, and the blue-dressed woman, I was perfectly willing to go on to Big Bob Till's house—and of course Dragonfly was, for some reason, extraordinarily willing to get as far as possible from anybody who was a woman or a girl. I was all set in my mind for whatever would happen when Big Bob and Big Jim saw each other. What *would* happen? I wondered.

I certainly was surprised when, just before we reached the Tills' wooden gate which led to their barnyard, I looked down at my hands and saw that somewhere on the way—I had picked up a three-foot-long stick and was carrying it, claspng it so tight my knuckles were white. My eyebrows were down, my lips were pressed tightly together, and my jaw muscles were tense.

We looked around the barn first and called "Hello," a few times, with nobody answering. Then we went inside and out again, and through their orchard to the back door of their house. Big Jim and Circus went on to the small roofless porch and knocked—and again nobody answered. "Hello," Big Jim called, and there wasn't any answer or any sound from inside the house.

"Hello there," Big Jim called again, and knocked again. Still nobody answered.

While Big Jim was doing that, I noticed Little Jim had his pencil out and was writing something on the manila envelope. My parents had taught me that it isn't polite to read over anybody's shoulder unless he invites you to, so I had a hard time seeing what he was writing, having to stand in front of him and crane my neck to read upside-down. And—would you believe it?—that little guy had written:

Dear Bob,

Here's the Sunday School lesson quarterly Mother promised your mother. Be sure to study all the questions so in case our teacher

asks you any of them you will know the answers. We will stop for you at nine o'clock in the morning.

Your friend,  
Little Jim Foote.

I couldn't have read another line without getting a crick in my neck, but I remembered all of a sudden that it was to Little Jim's father, the township trustee, that Bob had been paroled.

I saw Little Jim slip the envelope between the screen door and the unpainted white-knobbed wooden door, just as we were leaving.

They had probably gone to town or somewhere, I thought.

In a little while we were back at the bridge again and across it and, because it was Saturday and we were all supposed to get the chores done early so our parents could go to town, which most of them did on Saturday night, we separated, each one going to his own house. Even though Poetry was going to spend the night with me in the tent, he said he had to go home for a while so I was all by myself when I got to the north road and turned left toward the Collins' farm.

I moseyed lazily along, thinking and worrying and trying to figure out things. It just didn't seem possible that the gunny sack under the elder bushes last night had had a water *jug* in it instead of a *watermelon*. Even if it was possible, I didn't want to believe it. Of course, the woman or several women or girls who lived in the forest-green tent would have to have drinking and cooking water—even if they could have used the water from the creek to do their washing. Sugar Creek water wasn't supposed to be good for drinking, even when it wasn't dog days.

A lot of ideas were piled up in my mind, but it seemed like one of them was on top, and it was: "If whoever had filled his or her water jugs at the spring, or at the Collins' *other* iron pitcher pump, had done it *at night*, then whoever lived in the tent must be afraid to go to anybody's house in the daytime and ask for water. And if they were afraid to, *why* were they afraid?"

One other thing made me set my feet down a little harder as they went plop-plop in the dusty road I was walking in, and that was: "Was the oldish car I had seen and heard in the lane last night the same as the gun-metal gray pickup truck which right this minute was parked beside the green tent?"

My mind was so busy with my thoughts that I was frightened when I heard a car coming behind me, the driver giving what Pop would call "a courteous honk," like you are supposed to give when you want somebody to know you are

behind them and don't want to scare the living daylights out of them.

A jiffy later the car had pulled up alongside and stopped, and I saw, sitting behind the steering wheel and wearing a watermelon-colored dress and sparkling glasses, a smiling-faced, dark-haired lady about twenty years old. "Hello there!" she called in a friendly, musical voice. "I've been looking all over for you. Where have you been?"

Before I could answer she had gone on to say, "You forgot to leave the map in the watermelon. The girls told me there was nothing in it."

"Map?" I asked, with an exclamatory voice.

Interrogative sentences were galloping round and round in my mind. Then my thoughts made a dive for my left hip pocket. My face must have had a question-mark on it, 'cause she said, "Don't you remember? You were going to make us a copy of the one you showed me. We wanted each of our girls to make her own map, using yours as a model, so that if any of them should get lost while they were here, they could easily find their way back to camp."

Before I could answer—not knowing what to say anyway—she said with a laugh that was like the water in the Sugar Creek riffle above the spring, "I hardly recognized you, at first, with your hair cut, and I see you've washed your face since yesterday, too. You certainly remind me of my little brother. His first name was Tom, too."

Say, you could have knocked me over with a haircut, I was so surprised. All of a brain-whirling sudden, I knew who the watermelon thief was, and my mystery was practically solved. *Little Tom Till and I had red hair and freckles, and each of us wore a striped shirt and blue denim western-style jeans! The lady thought I was Little Tom Till!*

Just then I heard somebody calling from the direction of our farm and it was Pop's thundery voice saying loud enough to be heard a quarter of a mile away, "Bill! Hurry up! It's time to start the chores!"

What little presence of mind I had, told me not to answer because it seemed like I ought to let the smiling-faced lady think I was Little Tom Till—for just a little while anyway—so I said to her, "That's Theodore Collins. He's probably calling his son to come and help him with the chores."

"You know the Collins family?" the voice that was still like the Sugar Creek riffle, asked.

When I swallowed again and answered "Yes," she surprised me by saying, "I met your mother in town this afternoon. She seemed like a very nice person. You must be very proud of her."

"Uh—my mother? Which one?... I mean—you *did*?"

“She and Mrs. Collins were together shopping. They invited our troupe to church tomorrow. You go to Sunday school, I suppose?”

I swallowed a “Yes, Ma’am,” which she managed to hear, and before Theodore Collins called his son again about the undone chores, I said, “If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll run over and see if I can stop him from having to call again. I think I know where his boy is.”

My hip pocket seemed to have a fire in it which ought to be put out, so just before I started to start toward Pop to help put out a temper-fire which probably was ready to burn a hole in his hat, I handed to the lady the map Poetry and I had found last night in the watermelon in the spring, saying, “Is this what you wanted?”

She unfolded the “Eat more Eatmore” wrapper, spread out the map and studied it. Her face lit up as she said, “Why this is *good*—*very good*! It’s even better than the one you showed me yesterday.”

I liked her friendly voice and her smile so well, that for a second I wished I was actually Little Tom Till, himself. Then she tossed another question at me, and it was “This red X in the circle—does that represent any special location?”

“The red X?” I asked innocently. “Why, that’s—that’s—that’s where the green tent is pitched. I—it’s straight across the creek from the mouth of the branch, and just—uh—about fifty yards above where the current divides, and one part goes down the north side of the island and the other the other.”

She smiled a spoken thank you and added, “You do have a fine sense of humor, don’t you?”

I wasn’t sure *what* I had, but there was one thing I wanted to know, and very much. I felt I *had* to know it. What *did* the red letter X stand for? Of course I knew the tent was there, but who lived in it and why? And why, if Tom had drawn this map for the girl scouts, *why* had he put the red X there?

I must have been frowning my worry and she saw it, ’cause right away she added, “The girls’ll be intrigued by your story that an old witch is camping there, but I’m afraid instead of their wanting to stay away, they’ll be more curious than ever.”

Then my whole mind gasped. The lady in the watermelon colored dress not only thought I was Little Tom Till, but that little rascal of a red-haired boy had told her there was an old witch living in the tent, and that the girls ought not to go anywhere near it. *What on earth!*

Just then Theodore Collins’ thundery voice called again for his son, so I said, “I’d better go now,” which I did. Away I went in a galloping hurry to let a reddish-brown-mustached, bushy-eyebrowed father know where his son really

was—if he *was* his son.

I found Mr. Collins in a better humor than I expected. Panting and running fast like a boy who is late for school, I arrived at the barn door just as Pop came out with a pail of Purina Chow for our old brindle cow who was standing at the pasture bars looking at us with question marks on her ears as if wondering why her supper had to come so early—but that it was all right with her.

“Why didn’t you answer me when I called?” Pop asked, and I remembered an old joke our family had read in a magazine and which we had laughed over, so I said, “I didn’t hear you the first *two* times.”

“Bright boy,” Pop answered, and I answered with another old joke, saying, “I’m so bright my parents call me ‘son.’”

Pop grinned and when I asked him how come we had to get the chores done so early, he explained, “There’s a special prayer meeting for the men of the church. That’s why your mother’s in town now—she went in to get the shopping done this afternoon—she and Mrs. Till.”

It was a good thing we *did* get the chores done early—a *very* good thing—because there were a lot of important other things that had to happen that day to make this story even more mysterious, and to clear up some of the cloudy questions in my mind. Nearly everything had to happen before sundown, only of course I didn’t know it at the time, or I’d have hurried even faster with my part of the chores.

I was up in our haymow alone throwing down alfalfa hay when I looked out the east window and saw our car coming down the road, with Mom at the steering wheel and Little Tom Till’s Mom with Charlotte Ann in her lap in the front seat with her. Only a few minutes before I had been thinking about Mrs. Till in a very special way, so when I saw her in the car with Mom, I got the queerest feeling.

Throwing down hay was something I always liked to do because it is like a man’s job; also there was something nice about being alone in a big wide alfalfa-smelling haymow where a boy could think a boy’s thoughts, talk to himself, and whistle, and even sing, and nobody could hear him.

Sometimes when I’m in the haymow, I climb up on the long, axe-hewn beam that stretches across the whole width of the barn from one side to the other, and imagine myself to be Abraham Lincoln who had split so many logs with an ax. I raise my voice and quote all of his Gettysburg address, feeling fine while I am doing it, and important, and glad to be alive. Maybe I would be President of the United States, some time, myself.

I always hated to stop when the last word was said, and I would have to be

Theodore Collins' son again, with years and years of growing yet to do before I would be a man.

Well, I had just said in my deepest, most dignified voice, "... that this nation under God may have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth," and was still standing listening to my imaginary audience clap their hands, and thinking about the part of my speech which said, "all men are created equal," and was also thinking of the Till family—old hook-nosed John Till himself; his oldest boy Bob, and Little Tom, his other son, who wanted to be a good boy and was, part of the time. I was remembering the manila envelope which Little Jim had left at the Tills' back door and was thinking about Mrs. Till who had such a hard time just to keep from being too discouraged to want to live...

Then is when I heard our car coming and saw Mom with Mrs. Till beside her. I quickly threw down another forkful of hay, hurried to the ladder and climbed down, leaving Abraham Lincoln to look after himself—and to get off the log the best way he could.

It seemed like Mom, by being a friend to Bob and Tom Till's mother, was helping to prove that "all men are created equal."

"All men are created equal," was still in my mind when I reached the bottom of the ladder. For some reason, though, it didn't seem right that Little red-haired, fiery-tempered, freckle-faced Tim Till was as equal as I was. We might look a lot alike to anybody who saw us dressed in the same kind of clothes, but I was *not* a watermelon thief—and he was, I thought—and the first chance I got I was going to prove to him that even though all men, boys especially, might be created equal, when one boy sneaked out into another boy's melon patch, stole a melon, and sold it to a girl scout troupe, the other boy was equal to giving him a sound thrashing.

I was wondering whether I ought to tell Pop about what the girl scout leader had told *me*, when I heard Mom's voice calling from up near the walnut tree, "Is Bill out there somewhere?"

I almost jumped out of my bare feet when I heard Pop answer her from just outside the barn door, "He's helping me with the chores!"

Mom called back to say that she wanted me to take care of Charlotte Ann while she drove Mrs. Till on home.

It wasn't easy, taking care of that wriggling, impatient little rascal of a sister. Whatever makes a two-year-old baby sister so hard to take care of anyway? And why do they always want to run away from you and get into dangerous situations the very second your back is turned? I hadn't any sooner sat down in the big

rope swing under the walnut tree, and started to pump myself a little, than I heard Pop yelling from some direction or other—in fact from away up at the pignut tree—and how in the world did *he* get that far away so quick?—yelling for me to “Run quick and get Charlotte Ann away from Old Red Addie’s fence.”

I swung out of the swing in a scared hurry, ’cause my eyes told me that that cute little reddish-brown-haired baby sister of mine was not only near the hog-lot fence but was actually trying to crawl through it to get inside—Charlotte Ann not being afraid of a single animal on our farm—not even one.

I scattered our seventy-eight hens in even more directions than that as I flew to Charlotte Ann’s rescue. Mom would have a conniption fit if I let that little sister of mine get her clean dress soiled and her best shoes muddy in Red Addie’s apartment-house yard—especially if she decided the mud puddle was a good place to walk in, which she probably would.

I got there just in time. *Honestly!* That *child!* You can hardly do anything else when you are looking after her. Mom calls it “baby-sitting” when she asks me to take care of her, but it isn’t! It’s *baby-running*, and keeping your eyes peeled every second or you won’t even have a baby sister. She’ll be gone in a flash, and you have to look all over for her—like the time she got lost in the woods and a terrible cyclone roared into our territory and trees were uprooted and fell in every direction and—But you know all about that if you’ve read the story, “The Green Tent Mystery at Sugar Creek.”

Well, after what seemed like too long a time, Mom got back from driving Mrs. Till home, and I went to the car to help her carry in the groceries and other things, and that’s when we found the brown paper bag with oranges in it, which Mrs. Till had accidentally left on the floor in the back, and Mom hadn’t seen it.

“Yes, that’s hers,” Mom said. “I’d better drive right back with it. Her doctor wants her to have fresh orange juice three times a day.”

“I—it’s almost time to start supper,” Pop said, looking at his watch. He explained to Mom about the special prayer meeting for men at the church, then gave me a quick order which was, “Bill, you take your bike and ride over to the Tills’ with these oranges while your mother starts supper.”

And that’s how come I ran into a situation that gave me a chance to prove in several, very fast hair-raising adventures that Little Tom Till and I were actually created equal.

I got to find out, also, who the old witch who lived in the green tent really was—and also why she lived there.

WHEN I knocked at Mrs. Till's back screen door, she was in the kitchen ironing something with an old fashioned *iron* iron with an all-iron handle. I could see it was a pair of Little Tom Till's old, many times-patched jeans.

As soon as I'd given her the oranges and she had thanked me, she said, "You have such a nice mother, Bill. *Such* a nice mother."

I shifted from one bare foot to the other, swallowed something in my throat which hadn't been there a second before, and wished I could think of something polite to say, and couldn't at first, then managed to think of:

"Tom has a nice mother, too." I noticed Little Jim's brown envelope with his awkward handwriting on it, lying on the other end of the ironing board. She'd probably read it, I thought, and then I got a little mixed up in my mind as I said, and was sorry for it afterward:

"*Bob's* got a nice mother, too,"—and I knew she knew *I* was thinking how come such a nice mother could have two boys, one of which was a good boy and the other was a juvenile delinquent?

There were tears in her eyes when she looked at me with a sad smile and answered: "But I love them both—and some day God will answer my prayers for them."

I forgot for a minute that I had actually been thinking Tom was just as bad as his very bad big brother, Bob, because he had stolen my watermelon.

"Where's Tom now?" I asked, and she said, "I think he's down along the creek, somewhere. If you see him or Bob on your way home, tell them it's chore time."

She thanked me again for the oranges, and I swung onto my bike, pedalled through their barnyard and out their open gate and on toward the creek.

At the bridge I stopped, looked downstream again at the green tent, and without even straining my eyes, I caught a fleeting glimpse of a boy just my size, wearing blue western-style jeans and a gray and maroon striped T-shirt. He was at the edge of the cornfield behind the green tent not more than ten feet from the clothesline which had on it different colored different kinds of women's clothes.

"Right now, Bill Collins," I heard my harsh voice saying to me through my

grit teeth, “right *now*, you’re going to find out what is what, and why ... RIGHT NOW!”

I was down the embankment and under the bridge in a jiffy, and out in the cornfield scooting along in a hurry, like one of Circus’s Pop’s hounds trailing a cottontail—only my voice was quiet.

Closer and closer I came to the place where I had last seen Tom, shading my eyes to see what I could see.

Right then I heard a whirlwind of flying feet coming in my direction straight down the corn row I was stooped over in. In only a few fast-flying jiffies whoever was coming would be storming right into the middle of where I was, and if they didn’t happen to see me and I didn’t get out of the way, they’d bowl me over like a quarterback getting tackled in a football game.

There were other sounds than flying feet and the husky rusty rustle of the cornblades. There was an angry mannish-sounding voice, shouting exclamatory sentences and saying, “Stop you little rascal! Come back here with that! Do you hear me! I’ll whip the daylights out of you if I ever catch you!”

There was also a smallish, half-scared-half-to-death voice yelling “Help! Help! HELP!”

My muddled mind told me the small frightened voice was Little Tom Till’s and the angry voice was his big brother Bob’s—’cause it sounded just like his—and that Bob was chasing his brother and if he caught up to him he would give him a licking within an inch of his life.

Even as I glimpsed Little Tom flying ahead of whoever was behind him, I noticed again that he was dressed the same way I was. Being dressed like that made us look like twins, although, of course, he looked more like *me* than I did *him*, which means he was a better-looking boy than *I* would have been if I had looked like *him*.

For some reason when I realized that Tom was crying and running to get away from having to take a licking, in spite of the fact that I thought he was a watermelon thief, it seemed like I ought to do something to save him.

Closer and closer, and faster and faster, those flying feet came storming toward me. Then without warning Tom swerved to the left and dashed down a corn row and at the same time part of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address came to life in my mind and I knew I was really going to do something quick to help save Tom.

The thought was lightning fast in my mind: I was dressed exactly like Tom;

my hair was red like his, and we were the same height, and would look so much alike from behind that whoever was chasing him wouldn't know the difference. So I waited only a second until I felt sure Bob had seen me, then like a young deer I started on a fast gallop down the same corn row. I was sure I could run faster than Tom 'cause I had beaten him in a few races, and it would be quite a while before Bob could catch up with me. When he did catch up, he'd stop stock-still and stare, and Tom would be safe—for awhile anyway.

A second later the chase was on, and I was scooting down the row like a cottontail, running and panting and grinning to myself to think what a clever trick I was playing.

But say, that big lummoX of a boy whom I hadn't seen yet but had only heard, seemed to be gaining on me. Within a few minutes he would have me, if I didn't run faster.

"*Faster!*" my excited mind ordered me. But I quickly realized I couldn't save myself by just being fast. I'd have to be smart too, like a cottontail outsmarting a hound.

Remembering how cottontails disappear in a thicket if they can, then circle and go right back to where they were before, I turned left like Little Tom had done and raced madly back toward the tent and the creek and the plastic clothesline.

But it wasn't a good idea. The big bully of a boy heard, or saw me, or something. I hadn't any sooner shot out into the open and dashed between a pair of brown slacks and a pink lady's dress of something hanging on the line than I heard panting and flying feet behind me and knew I would have to be even smarter than a cottontail.

"You dumb bunny!" a savage voice yelled at me. "I'll make short work of you. Stop, you little thief! STOP!"

Right then was when my world turned upside down for a while. *That fierce, very angry voice yelling at me was NOT the voice of Big Bob Till, but of somebody else!* I realized that it was somebody who, if he caught up with me, might not know that I *wasn't* Tom Till and I would get one of the worst thrashings a boy ever got. "What," I asked myself, as I panted and dodged and sweat and grunted and hurried and worried—"what will happen to me?"

I made a dive around the wall-type tent, planning to dart into the path that went through the forest of giant ragweeds to the bridge. At the bridge I would rush up the incline on the other side and gallop across.

As soon as I would get across the bridge, I'd leap over the rail fence, hurry through the woods to the spring, swing into the path made by barefoot boys' bare

feet, and in only a little while after that I'd be across the road from "Theodore Collins" on our mailbox and would be safe.

I took a fleeting glance over my shoulder to see who was chasing me, and say! my pursuer was not only *not* Bob Till but wasn't a boy at all—instead he was a woman wearing brown slacks and a woman's hat!

Boy oh boy, was I ever in the middle of a situation! In that quick over-the-shoulder glance I noticed that her hat was straw-colored and looked a lot like the kind Little Jim's Mom wears to church. Even in that quarter of a jiffy while I was seeing her over my shoulder, I noticed that the hat was the same color as the ripe wheat on Big Jim's Pop's farm and that there were several heads of wheat slanted across its left side instead of a feather like lots of women's hats have on them.

What on earth! Why was I, Bill Collins, a husky hard-working farm boy with muscles like those of the village blacksmith—"as strong as iron bands"—running from just one helpless woman—*just one!*

But I hardly had time even to wonder "what on earth?" because in that fleeting glance over my shoulder my eyes had seen something else—I'd seen Little Tom Till come storming out of the cornfield behind the forest-green tent, shoot like a blue-jeaned arrow toward the opening, and disappear inside.

Glancing over my shoulder like that, was one of the worst things I could have done. I had seen one red-haired boy dashing into a tent, and I knew where he was right that very second, but I didn't know where I, myself, was. When my eyes got back to the path I was supposed to be running in, I wasn't running in it at all. I had swerved aside, stumbled over a log and was making a head-over-heels tumble in the direction of the creek. If the red boat hadn't been there, I'd have landed in the water. Instead I fell sprawling into the boat itself—that is, that's where I *finally* landed when I came to a stop after rolling down the incline.

Looking up from my upside-down position, I saw the woman's face was hard and had an angry scowl on it. I realized with a gasp that in another jiffy she would be down the incline herself and I would be caught in what I could see were very large, very strong hands. Even though I was saving Tom Till from getting the daylights whaled out of him, I probably would get the *double*-daylights thrashed out of *me*.

If it had been winter and Sugar Creek frozen over, I could have leaped out of the boat and raced across the ice to the other side, but there isn't a boy in the world who can run or walk on the water in the summertime. There was only one way for me to escape that fierce-faced woman, who in another few jiffies would be down that incline herself and into the boat and have me in her clutches.

Quick as a flash I was up and in the prow of the boat unfastening the guy rope. A second later, with one foot in the boat and the other against the bank, I gave the boat a hard shove, and out I shot into the stream.

“You come back here, you—you little red-haired rascal!” the woman’s gruff, angry voice demanded.

For the moment I had forgotten Little Tom Till—I was in such a worried hurry to save myself. Then what to my wondering ears should come sailing out over the water but Tom’s own excited voice, calling, “Hey! Wait for me! WAIT!”

Little Tom’s high-pitched voice coming from behind her, must have astonished the scowling-faced woman. She turned her head quick in the direction of the tent and her eyes landed on Tom who was waving at me and yelling and running toward the creek, looking exactly like me in his western-style blue jeans and maroon-and-gray-striped T-shirt. She must have thought she was seeing double, or that there were two of me: I was out in the nervous water in her red rowboat floating downstream toward the Sugar Creek island; I was also on dry land running like a deer toward the creek, waving my arms and yelling to me in the boat to “Wait for me!”

The situation certainly couldn’t have made sense to her. For a minute she stayed stopped stock-still and stared while Tom scurried down the shore to a place about thirty feet ahead of me where there was a little open space, half climbed and half skid down the embankment, plunged into the water and came splashety-sizzle toward the boat.

It was then that I noticed he was carrying something with him, which was making it hard for him to make fast progress. If my mind had had a voice I think I could have heard it screaming an exclamatory sentence: “*He’s got another water jug with a burlap bag wrapped around it. WHAT on earth!*”

That woman in the straw hat with the little bundle of imitation wheat straw across its right side, came to life and started on a fast run toward the place where Tom had plunged in, like she was going to splash in after him and try to get to the boat first, or else to stop him.

In almost less than no time Tom had hoisted his waterjug over the gunwhale and set it down into the boat at my feet, then he swung himself alongside and climbed in over the stern—which is the way to climb into a boat without upsetting it.

“Hurry!” Little Tom Till panted to me. “Let’s get across to the other side!”

I didn’t know what he was worried about nor what he wanted but I figured he would tell me as soon as he could—that is, if he wanted to. Besides I was in a hurry to get across myself.

I reached for the oars—and that’s when I got one of the most startling surprises of my life. There weren’t any oars in the boat—not even one! Not even a board to use for a paddle! All there was in the boat was a water jug with burlap bags wrapped around it, one very *wet*, red-haired, blue-jeaned, maroon-and-gray-T-shirted boy, and one *dry* one. And all the time our boat was drifting farther downstream toward the island.

In fact, right that very minute, the boat, which I had discovered was an aluminum boat painted red and was very light, was caught in the swift current where the creek divides and half of its current goes down one side of the island and the other half down the other. There wasn’t a thing we could do to stop ourselves from going one way or the other.

Swooshety-swirlety—swishety! Also *hissety*! Those half-angry waters took hold of our boat and away we went down the north channel, between the island and the shore.

We weren’t in any actual danger as far as the water was concerned, though, ’cause it was a safe boat. After awhile, we’d probably drift close enough to an overhanging willow or other tree and we could catch hold, swing ourselves out and climb to safety—or to the shore anyway.

BUT—say! We *were* in danger for another reason.

That woman wasn’t going to let us get away as easily as that. She leaped into fast life and began racing down the shore after us, yelling for us to stop, which we couldn’t.

“What’s she so mad about, anyway?” I asked Little Tom Till.

His answer astonished me so much I almost lost my balance and fell out of the boat: “There’s hundreds and hundreds of dollars in this water jug. It’s the stolen money from the Super Market!”

Boy oh *boy*! No *wonder* there was a cyclone in that woman’s mind! And no *wonder* she didn’t want two red-haired boys in blue jeans and gray-and-maroon-striped shirts in a rowboat to get away!

“She’s as mad as a hornet!” I said to Tom when, like a volley of rifle and shotgun shots a splattering of very angry, very filthy words fell thick and fast all around on us and on our ears from the woman’s very angry, very harsh mannish-sounding voice.

“She’s not a *she*,” Little Tom Till answered. “She’s a *he*. He’s been hiding out in the tent pretending to be a woman, wearing women’s clothes and earrings and hats and using fancy perfumes and stuff.”

Every second the fast current was swirling us downstream closer and closer to an overhanging elm, one that had fallen into the water from the last Sugar Creek storm, and its top extended almost all the way across the channel from the north shore to the island. I could see our boat was going to crash into the leafy branches and we'd be stopped.

I knew if we could manage to steer around the tree's top, we'd be safe for quite awhile on account of there was a thicket that came clear down to the water's edge there and if the fierce-faced man wanted to follow us any further, he would have to leave the shore and run along the edge of the cornfield for maybe fifty yards before he could get back to the creek again.

If only we had even *one* oar, we could steer the boat near the island where there was open water. We could miss the fallen elm's bushy top and——!

And *then*, all of a helpless sudden, we went crashing into the branches *and there we stopped!*

That was when Little Tom Till came to life and proved that he had been created as equal as I had, and maybe even more so. The very second we struck, he scrambled to his feet, grabbing up the jug and the coil of clothesline which was fastened to it and yelling to me, "Come on! Let's get onto the island!"

It certainly was a bright idea, 'cause the very second our boat hit the tree, the current had whirled it around and one end struck and *stuck* against the sandy bank of the island, and all we had to do was to use the boat for an aluminum-floored bridge the rest of the way, which in an awkward hurry, we did. In only a few jiffies we were across and out and clambering up the rugged shore of the island into its thicket of willows and tall weeds and wild shrubbery.

"We're straight across from the sycamore tree and the cave!" Little Tom Till cried. "If we can get across the channel on the other side of the island, and into the cave and go through it to Old Man Paddler's cabin, we'll be safe. Bob's up there helping him cut wood this afternoon—only he's mad at me about something."

The trouble was, the boat that had made such a nice bridge for us to cross on, was the same kind of an aluminum-floored bridge for the woman—the *man*, I mean. He could climb out onto the elm's horizontal trunk, drop down into the boat and get across as quick as anything.

Even as I scrambled up the bank behind my blue-jeaned, red-and-maroon-shirted friend, I glanced back over my shoulder and saw the brown slacks with the woman in them—the *man*, I mean—on the trunk of the tree working his way along through the branches toward the boat. In another second he would drop down into it, and in another would be across and onto the island racing after us.

The chase was on—a wild-running, scared, barefoot-boy's race ahead of a short-tempered thief dressed in woman's slacks, wearing a woman's straw-colored hat, dodging our way across that island which was a thicket of willow and wild shrubbery, with here and there a larger tree, and dozens of little craters hollowed out by the flood waters which nearly every spring went racing across it. Banked against nearly every larger tree trunk were piles of driftwood and cornstalks and stuff the creek had carried from different farmer's fields farther upstream and deposited there.

I guess I never had realized what a jungle that island was. I had been on it many a time when I was just monkeying around, looking for shells, or with my binoculars studying birds. Once in awhile at night in the spring or summer when it was bullfrog season, we would wade in the weed-grown water along the edge of the riffles with lanterns and flashlights looking for the giant-sized brown and dark-green monsters whose eyes in the light were like the headlamps of toy automobiles—bullfrogs, as you probably know, having long hind legs with bulging muscles, which when they are skinned, are snow-white, and when Mom fries them, they taste even better than fried chicken.

But *such* a wilderness! And so many rough-edged rocks for a boy's bare feet to get cut or bruised on, so many briars to scratch him and so many branches to fly back and switch him in the face when another boy has just gone hurrying through ahead of him.

If we had been running from a real woman, or if only he had been wearing a dress instead of slacks, he wouldn't have been able to take such long steps, and there would have been the chance he might get the skirt caught on a branch or a briar and slow him down while we dodged our way ahead of him in our mad race to the other side.

"We're almost there!" Little Tom Till cried to me, panting hard from carrying the jug as well as himself.

I could see the other side of the island now and the nervous, excited water in the racing riffle between the island and the shore. I could see the sycamore tree at the top of the bank and the mouth of the cave just beyond.

Another few seconds and we would be there—and would be out in the fast current on our way to safety. It had been a terribly exciting race, I tell you, with Tom not letting me help carry the jug at all.

"It's not heavy," he panted. "It's made out of plastic, the same as the clothesline, and it's as light as a feather. The money in it is in little rolls with rubber bands around them. I saw him stuff 'em in myself."

The bottle's mouth and neck weren't more than an inch and a half in diameter, I had noticed.

There were about a million questions I wanted to ask Tom, such as, how come he knew the woman was a man? how'd he find out about the money in the first place?—and several other things which my mind was as curious as a cat's to know.

And then, all of a sudden, we burst out into the open at the water's edge, with our pursuer only a few rods behind us, panting and cursing and demanding us to stop.

And then I learned something else from that fierce-voiced villain as he yelled at Tom, "You little rascal! I'll catch you and your brother, Bob, if it's the last thing I ever do. He's broken into his *last* Super Market!"

*That* was one of the saddest, most astonishing things I had ever heard. It startled me into feeling a lot of other questions: Had Bob Till himself broken into the Sugar Creek Super Market last week? Was the man in woman's clothes maybe a detective or secret agent who had been camping out along the creek, watching Bob's movements—his and Tom's?

Things were all mixed up even worse than ever. For a few jiffies, my watermelon mystery wasn't even important in my mind, as—quick as a firefly's fleeting flash—Tom, holding onto the jug's handle with one hand, plunged into the fast riffle without even bothering to look or to ask me where the water was the most shallow, and a second later was up to his waist and losing his balance and falling down.

Up he struggled, and down he went again, sputtering and wallowing along, with me doing the same thing beside him.

And then all of a cringing sudden, Tom let out a scared cry, saying: "Help! h-h-help!" as he lost his balance and went down—*really* down, I mean. The coil of rope in his hand flew into the air like a lasso straight toward me who, at that minute, was quite a few yards from him. Part of the clothesline caught around my upraised hand with which I was trying to balance myself, the line tightened as Tom went down, still holding onto the jug's handle—and then down I went myself, like a steer at a rodeo, the water sweeping me off my feet.

And there we both were, struggling in the racing current—two red-haired boys, one on each end of a brand new plastic clothesline.

Even as I went down I saw the willows on the island part and the maddest-faced man I ever saw in my life came rushing toward us. Also, I saw a puzzled expression on his face like he was wondering what on earth, which one of us was Tom and which was me, and which of us had the water jug with the money in it.

Just that second also, his woman's hat caught on a branch, and off it came and with it a wig of reddish-brown hair, and I noticed the man had a very short haircut.

The woman was an honest-to-goodness man, all right—or *boy*, rather, maybe about as old as Bob Till himself. He had dirt smudges on his rouged cheeks like he had fallen down a few times in his mad race across the island after us. He was panting and gasping for breath and his woman's blouse was torn at the neck.

Tom and I must have looked queer to her—*him*, I mean—with me like a calf on the end of a lasso, and Tom now fifteen feet from me, with the jug in one hand, struggling to stay on his feet, on account of I was downstream farther than he and being sucked along with the current while my feet fought for the pebbly bottom.

Right away, the mean-faced oldish boy seemed to make up his mind who was who and what was what and what he ought to do about it. He made a rushing plunge out into the water and a series of fast lunges straight for Tom, who began to make even faster lunges toward the other shore and the sycamore tree.

“Run! Swim! HURRY!” I yelled in a sputtering voice to Tom—which he couldn't on account of right that very fast-fleeting second, his feet shot out from under him and he went down again ker-flopety-splash-SPLASH!

I knew I could never wade back against the swift current to get to him in time to help him. I'd have to get to the other shore QUICK, race along the bank to a place fifteen or twenty feet above him and plunge in again and hurry out to where he was, which I started to start to do, and got stopped.

The current was stronger near that other shore and the water deeper. My feet were sucked out from under me and again I went down, feeling as I was pulled under, my end of the rope still wrapped around my hand, which, also, without my hardly noticing it, I was holding onto for dear life.

Right that second the bully caught up with Tom, made a lunge with his right arm for the jug, seized Tom with the other, and there was a wild wrestling match with water flying and curses and fast flying arms and it looked like Tom was going to get the living daylight's licked out of him for sure.

Tom was trying to fight back, and couldn't with only one hand and because of the swift current. He was as helpless as Marybelle Elizabeth in a chickenyard fight with Cleopatra.

Right then is when I remembered something important, and it was that when a bevy of furious girls had been beating up on Dragonfly at the spring, I had screamed bloody murder, given several wild loon calls, bellowed like a bull and made a lot of other terrifying bird and animal noises, and it had saved Dragonfly.

Before I knew I was going to do it, I was yelling and screaming every savage sound I could think of in the direction of the one-sided fight, crying for help at the same time, hoping some of the Gang might be somewhere in the neighborhood and hear.

And that's when I heard Big Bob Till's voice answer from the sycamore tree side of the channel. A second later I saw him standing in the black mouth of the cave. He held his hand up to his eyes, shading them like he had been in the dark quite awhile and the afternoon sunlight was too bright for them.

Then he seemed to see his little red-haired brother, Tom, getting a licking within an inch of his life by a butch-haired bully. And *that* is when Bob Till, the fiercest fighter in all Sugar Creek territory—except maybe Big Jim—came to life. It was like the cave was a bow and Bob was a two-legged arrow being shot by a giant as big as the one in the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. I lost my balance then and went down, the rope in my hand went taut, and the other end was torn from Tom's grasp, and the water jug, like a jug-shaped balloon wrapped in burlap, plopped to the surface, swung away and came on a fast downstream float toward me.

All I could see for a jiffy was Tom defending himself like a savage little tiger, and Big Bob Till shooting through the air like a man from a flying trapeze from the high bank out across the ten feet of excited air down and out toward where Tom was in the clutches of the thief—and then I was fighting to save myself from drowning because I was in water over my head. My right hand still clung to the rope on the other end of which was the floating, plunging water jug with stolen Super Market money in it.

**B**EFORE even another second could pass, Bob Till landed feet first in the swift current, and even quicker than that was storming his way through the six or seven feet of open water toward where his little brother, Tom, was holding on for dear life to the very same powerful-muscled overgrown man-sized boy who a little while before was wrestling with him trying to get the water jug away from him. Say, that little guy knew what he was doing.

“Oh no, you don’t! You great big bully!” Tom cried. “You don’t get away so easy. Come on, Bob! It’s him—the thief! Help!... Help!... *H-E-L-P!*”

And Bob helped.

Talk about a fierce, fast fist fight. That was one of the fiercest, fastest ones I ever saw and heard. I mean *really* heard in spite of my own battle to keep myself from losing my own balance in the deep, swift water I was in. If the rock bass and minnows and redhorse and other fish that were down in the water somewhere had been watching that water fight they’d probably have wondered what on earth—only they maybe wouldn’t know very much about the earth but only the water, that being where they lived.

Wham! Biff! Sock!... Wham ... wham ... wham!... Splash!... *SPLASH!* Double-whamety ... *Pow!*

“You great big lummo!” Bob yelled at his opponent. “You *will* try to drown my little brother! I’ll teach you right now!”

The bully staggered backwards, his hands and arms waving in a lot of fast directions as he tried to steady himself from falling. Then he struck the water and went down—and *under*.

Bob seemed to know he had his man licked. He quick turned to his little brother and half sobbed to him: “You poor little guy, fighting that big bully all by yourself!”

“Big Bully,” as Bob had just called the fierce-faced man—who wasn’t a man at all, and certainly wasn’t a woman, but was a powerful muscled boy the size of Big Jim—came up from under the water with a bounce like a cork plops back up after you’ve pushed it under. He came up sputtering and shaking his head and struggling to keep his balance in the rapids.

Spying the water jug floating on the surface down near where I was, he started on a fast half-run, half-swim toward it and me.

One reason the jug hadn't already floated on far beyond me was because one end of the rope was still wrapped around one of my hands, and I was holding onto it for dear life. The other reason was that the middle of the rope which was down under the water was tangled up with and wrapped around the bully's legs. I knew it for sure when I felt the rope tighten around my arm, and then felt myself being jerked off balance—and then down I went again.

It certainly wasn't any time to be thinking funny thoughts right then—what with all the dangerous excitement I was in, and might not get out of without getting badly hurt—but a ridiculous idea plopped into my mind and stayed there for a fast flying second, and was: "I'm like a cowboy at a Sugar Creek rodeo. I've just lassoed a wild steer and my bronco has just thrown me off into a racing raffle, but I'm going to hold onto him!"

Grunt and groan and puff and sputter and yell and scream and tremble with excitement and hold on tight and fight and just about everything else you can think of—we four were really in a struggle for life—almost anyway.

I don't know how many times I lost my balance and went down, nor how many times I thought the bully was going to get the water jug away from us and get away himself.

And then all of a sudden, right in the middle of everything, I saw Bob's powerful right arm swing in a long wide arc, and the fist on the other end of it catch the painted faced tough guy on the jaw—and he went down—and stayed down, and that part of the struggle was over.

I say *that* part was over. We had another and a harder job on our hands—and that was, to save the bully from drowning, 'cause Bob's hard-knuckled, experienced fist knocked him completely out.

I saw the scared expression on Bob's face the very minute I heard his frightened words come crying out of his mouth: "I—I—I've *killed* him! What'll we do *now!*"

"Keep his head above water!" I yelled back. "He can't drown as long as his head is above water!"

Bob made a lunge for the villain, clasped him the best way he could, and began to struggle with him toward the sycamore tree side of the channel—with Little Tom Till and me struggling along beside and behind him, bringing the water jug filled with money.

Well, here I am quite a ways from the end of this mystery about the stolen watermelon with only a few pages left, on account of the friendly people who will make it into a book for you, might think it is too long already.

I can't take any more time now anyway on account of I have to get started quick on the next story.

But it was just like it says in the Bible which our minister is always quoting—and also my parents—where the words are: *“Be sure your sin will find you out.”* That is what the thief's sins had done. The very rope he had stolen, along with the money, had accidentally lassoed his feet, making it easy for us to capture him.

The two gunny sacks which had been wrapped around the water jug came in handy, too, 'cause we used them to make a litter to carry our prisoner on from the sycamore tree to the tool shed in the woods behind Poetry's Pop's barn. We unwrapped the wet sacks from around the jug, spread them out on the ground, cut two poles, using Bob's axe with which he had been helping Old Man Paddler, slipped the sacks over the ends, making a hole in each of the closed corners—and we had one of the finest stretchers you ever saw.

Bob carried one end of the litter and Little Tom and I the other. Boy oh boy, did we ever feel proud, even though we were worried some because our prisoner was still unconscious. We knew he wasn't drowned, on account of he was breathing all right, but he was as pale as a sheet of gray writing paper, except for the rouge on his cheeks.

Little Tom puffed out his story to me as we struggled and grunted along, with me helping as much as I could by asking questions that had been worrying me for quite a while: “How did you know he was the Super Market thief?” I asked him, and he said, “I didn't, at first. I wanted to make a lot of money to get a present for Mother's birthday tomorrow, so I thought up the idea of selling a map to the girl scouts—so the girls could draw a map apiece like we do when we go on our up-north vacations. The green lady worked out a scheme for me to leave the map in a big watermelon they had in the spring.” Tom's face was as innocent as a lamb while he was puffing out his story to me.

“Then what?” I asked him, and he said, “When I saw the melon—how big it was, and how pretty, as big and as pretty as your Ida—I got a sinking feeling in my stomach, wondering where they got it, and if it might be yours, so I scooted up the hill, and hurried to your truck patch to find out.

“I was feeling fine when I saw Ida was still there. I beat it back to the spring, plugged the melon like I promised I would, put my map inside and went home.”

“But how—” I began, wondering still how come he knew our prisoner was a

Super Market thief, but he cut in on me, adding, “I didn’t know till this afternoon. I saw all the women’s clothes on the line behind the tent, and thought she was a woman of some kind, so I gathered a dozen eggs and went down to see if I could sell them to her. I was kinda scared, on account of being afraid of strange women and girls, so I sneaked up on the cornfield side, and accidentally saw her doing it. That’s how I found out.”

“Saw her doing what?” Bob asked, and Tom answered, “She was rolling paper money into small rolls and stuffing them into the spout—it looked like hundreds and hundreds of dollars.

“I was so scared, I couldn’t move. I don’t know what kind of a noise I made but she heard me, jumped like she was shot, quick squeezed the last roll of paper into the jug, shoved it behind a suitcase, and yelled at me, ‘What do you want?’

“‘That’s an awful lot of money,’ I said; ‘where’d you get it?’ And that’s when the chase started.”

“But somebody *did* steal Ida,” I said, and wondered what Tom would say about that. “Somebody sneaked out into our truck patch last night and took her,” I added.

Right that second our prisoner regained consciousness, opened his eyes, and began to struggle to get his hands and feet free, and to sit up and get off our litter, which made us drop him ker-plop onto the ground.

We were busy for the next few minutes, but between grunts and groans and our thief’s filthy language flying thick and fast against our ears, Tom managed to say, “Your prize melon’s all right, and still not plugged. I saw her in the tent back over there by the cornfield, when I dashed in for the jug.”

That’s when our big bully of an overgrown boy growled into the middle of everything that was happening and said, “Maybe I took it myself. I was going to use a watermelon for a piggy bank instead of the water *jug*—now are you satisfied?” And he started in twisting and fighting and trying to get away again—and couldn’t.

But now I *do* have to quit writing.

Several nights later, when Poetry and I were in our cots in the tent under the plum tree, while the drumming of the cicadas was so deafening we could hardly hear ourselves talk, we had one of the happiest times of our lives telling each other everything that had happened.

“Who’d have dreamed Muggs McGinnis would have been hiding out right in our territory?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I answered across the moonlit four feet of space between our cots, “imagine me being a good enough detective to capture him all by myself—Tom

and Bob helping a little, of course.”

When I finished saying such a boastful sentence, it seemed like maybe I *had* been a pretty important hero. It felt fine to be one. But Poetry spoiled my puffed-up feeling by saying, “It was Little Tom Till’s keen mind that solved your mystery for you. That guy, Muggs, actually *was* getting his drinking water from your iron pitcher pump and from the spring with his jug. I, myself, thought of *that!*”

Poetry yawned, rolled over and sat up on the edge of his cot in the moonlight, looking like the shadow of a big fat grizzly, yawned again and said, “I think I’ll go get a drink. I can’t seem to remember whether I got one the other night or not. Want to go along?”

I quick was sitting up on the edge my own cot, and demanding “Oh no, you don’t!”—saying it so loud it could have been heard inside the Collins’ downstairs bedroom—and was, on account of a second later a thundery voice boomed out across the lawn from the window near the telephone, “*Will you boys be quiet out there? You’ll wake up your mother, Bill. I’ve told you for the last time!*”—which is one of the most interesting sounds a boy ever hears around our farm.

Poetry was still thirsty, though, so I said, “I’ve had years of experience pumping that pump. I know how to do it without making it squeak. I’ll get you a drink, myself.”

With that, I crept out of bed and moved out through the moonlight toward the pump platform.

That’s when I heard Pop talking to somebody—to Mom, maybe, I thought—and moved stealthily over to the living room window to see if maybe he was saying anything about Poetry or me or about the exciting experiences we had had capturing Muggs McGinnis.

But say! Pop wasn’t talking to Mom at all, but to Somebody Else—to the best Friend a boy ever had and the Most Important Person in the Universe, the One Who had made the stars and the sky and every wonderful thing in the whole boys’ world. I’d heard Pop pray many a time at our dinner table and in prayer meeting at church, but only once in awhile when he was all by himself.

It seemed like I ought not to be listening but I couldn’t move now or Pop’d hear me, so I waited awhile—and part of his kind of wonderful prayer was:

“... Pour out Thy love upon Muggs McGinnis, and upon all the lost boys in the world. Help them to find out in some way that Christ loved them and poured out His blood upon the cross for the forgiveness of their sins....

“Bless our son, Bill, and our precious little curly-haired Charlotte Ann, so

filled with play and mischief, and help Mother and me bring them up to love Thee with their whole hearts, and to always try to do what is right....”

Mom must have been right there beside Pop, cause when he finished, I heard her say, “Thank you, Theo. I can go to bed now without a worry in the world. I’ve given them all to Him.”

And Pop answered, “I’ve decided you’re not going to have even one hour of insomnia tonight—not even *one*.”

Mom yawned then, and said while she was still doing it:

“The way I feel now, I may not even have one minute.”

I crept away then and moved out through the drumming of the cicadas and the cheeping of the crickets toward the moonlit iron pitcher pump, feeling fine inside and glad to be alive.

Back cover

Seems like there's always a mystery popping up at Sugar Creek. This exciting story is no exception as it lands the Gang right smack in the middle of some peculiar happenings in a watermelon patch in the middle of the night. Author Paul Hutchens is the happy friend of all Young America.

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- Page 12  
having to follow a dumbish barrel-shaped boy *changed to*  
having to follow a dumpish barrel-shaped boy
- Page 75  
go on over to Tills' house *changed to*  
go on over to the Tills' house

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