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Roaring along through the sky 5,000 feet high—which is almost a mile—and at 400 miles an hour was the most thrilling experience of my life up to that time.

Well, come to think of it, I guess riding on the waves of a mad lake, with nothing to hold me up except a life-preserver vest, was really the most thrilling as well as the craziest. As I told you in my last story about the Sugar Creek Gang, being tossed around by those big angry waves was like being scared half to death riding on a Tilt-A-Whirl at a county fair.

I had thought maybe an airplane ride would be even worse. It wasn't at all, but, boy, oh boy, was it different!

Of course none of us thought that Dragonfly, who is the balloon-eyed member of our gang, would get a bad case of vertigo and have to have the stewardess give him first aid to bring him back to normal again. In fact, the pilot actually had to come down to a lower altitude before Dragonfly was all right.

That's getting too far ahead of the story though, and I'll have to wait a chapter or two before I explain what vertigo means.

I'm going to be a doctor when I grow up, you know, and that's why I'm learning the names

of all the medical terms I can while I'm little, which I'm not actually anymore. I'm already ten and three-fourths years old and have red hair and—but it wouldn't be fair to tell you about myself before introducing the rest of the gang.

The Sugar Creek Gang is the most important gang in the whole country, maybe. Anyway, we have more twisted-up adventures than most anybody else in the world, and so far they have all come out all right.

Maybe I'd better take time right now to introduce the members of the gang to you—and to explain why we were taking an airplane ride and where to.

You remember that Circus, who is our acrobat and who also has an acrobatic voice that can climb the musical scale even better than he can climb a tree, had been invited to a big Chicago church to sing over the radio on Thanksgiving Day. Well, the date was changed, and he was going to sing at what is called a youth rally on Labor Day weekend in September instead, and all the gang was going with him.

Little Jim, the littlest and the grandest guy in the gang, and maybe in the whole world, had to go with him to accompany him on the piano anyway, he being an expert pianist. So, of course, we all wanted to go along, and our parents had said we could—that is, they had *finally* said we could.

It took my brownish-gray-haired mom quite a while to make up her mind to let me go, and I had to wash dishes every noon for all the rest of

the summer just to show my appreciation. I even had to do them as if I liked to—while I didn't, although I was beginning to have sense enough not to say so.

The day Mom finally made up her mind was one of the hottest days we'd had that year. I actually never had felt such *tired* weather in all my life. You could lie right down after eating a dinner of fried chicken, noodles, buttered mashed potatoes, and raspberry shortcake, and go to sleep in less than a minute. You could stay asleep all the way through dishwashing time—that is, if Mom didn't get tired of waiting for you to come and help, and call you.

You could even sleep better if you knew that, after the dishes were done, there were potatoes to hoe and beans to pick. But if you happened to be going swimming, or if there was going to be a gang meeting, you weren't even sleepy.

That afternoon there were beans to be picked, so as soon as I had finished my shortcake, I asked to be excused. Dad said yes and let me get up and go into our living room, which was the coolest room in the house, and lie down on the floor until Mom had the dishes ready.

Mom's floor was always clean, but even at that she always made me lay a paper on it before I could put a pillow down to sleep on. I hadn't any more than lain down, it seemed, when her voice came sizzling in from the kitchen and woke me up.

I didn't like to wake up any more than I did any other time. I'd been dreaming the craziest dream. Anyway, it seemed crazy at the time, and anybody would have laughed at it. I never realized, while I was dreaming, that something was going to happen almost like that in real life after we got to Chicago.

I dreamed that I was already a doctor and that I was in a hospital with a lot of nurses in white all around. Also, all around and overhead, airplane engines were droning. One of the members of the Sugar Creek Gang had eaten too much raspberry shortcake and had a stomachache, and the only thing that would help him was for me, the doctor, to give him a blood transfusion. In my dream I was pouring raspberry juice into one of the veins of his arm through a little tin funnel, and he was crying and saying, "I don't like to wash dishes! I don't want to!"

That was when Mom called me to wake up and come to help her.

I woke up halfway at first, and I was as cross as anything, which any doctor will tell you is natural for anybody when he gets waked up without wanting to be.

But my dad, who is a Christian and knows the Bible from A to Z—and not only says he is a Christian, but actually acts like one at home as well as in church—he says the Bible says, "Be angry, and yet do not sin." And that means if somebody or something makes you angry, you

ought to tie up your anger, the way people do a mad bull, and not let it run wild.

Dad says a boy's temper under control is like a fire in a stove, useful for many things. But when it isn't controlled, it's like a fire in a hay-mow or a forest. Some people actually die many years sooner than they ought to because they get mad so many times and stay mad so long it makes them sick.

Maybe my dad tells me these things especially because I'm red-haired and maybe am too quick-tempered. He says if I don't lose my temper all the time, but keep it under control, it'll help me do many important things while I'm growing up.

So, as angry as I was for being waked up and for having to do dishes, I tied up my anger as quick as I could. I didn't say a word or grumble or anything. I didn't even frown.

By the way, do you know how many muscles of your face have to work to make a fierce-looking frown? Maybe you wouldn't believe it, but it actually takes sixty-five, our teacher says. And it takes only thirteen muscles to make a smile. So it's a waste of energy to go around frowning when you're already tired and lazy.

While on the way from the living room to the kitchen to help Mom, I remembered something Dad had told me one day when I was going around our barnyard with a big scowl on my very freckled face. This is what he said: "Bill Collins, you're making the same face while you're

a boy that you'll have to look at in the mirror all the rest of your life."

That had made me scowl deeper than ever, and I went toward the barn still scowling but not saying anything. The minute I got into the barn, though, I took out of my pocket a little round mirror that I was carrying and looked at myself. And because I was angry, I scowled and scowled and made a fierce face and stuck out my tongue at myself and hated myself for a while.

Then I saw a big, long brown rat dart across the barn floor, and in a flash I was chasing after it and calling old Mixy-cat to come and do her work and see to it that there weren't so many live rats around the Collins family's barn.

What Dad had said didn't soak in at all until one day Mom told me almost the same thing, only in different words.

My mom has the kindest face I ever saw, and her forehead is very smooth, without any deep creases in it—either going across it or running up and down. Just for fun one day I asked her if she'd been ironing it, it was so smooth, and do you know what she said?

She said, "I've been ironing it all my life. I've kept the frowns and wrinkles off ever since I was a little girl, so the muscles that make frowns and wrinkles won't have a chance to grow"—which they will if they get too much exercise.

So it would be better for even a girl to be cheerful while she's little enough to be still

growing, so she'll have a face like my mom's when she gets big.

Well, I thought all those thoughts even before I was halfway to the kitchen. On the way, I stepped into our downstairs bedroom for a half jiffy to look at Charlotte Ann. She was my one-year-old baby sister and had pretty brownish-red curls and several small freckles on her nose. She was supposed to be sleeping and wasn't. She was lying there holding a toy in one hand and shaking it and trying to take it apart to see what made it rattle.

I stood looking down at her pretty pink cheeks, and her brownish-red hair, and her chubby little fists, and at the kind of disgusted pucker on her forehead because the toy wouldn't come apart.

"Listen, Charlotte Ann," I said, scowling at her, "you're making the same kind of face now you'll have to look at in the mirror all the rest of your life. You've got to think pretty thoughts if you want to have a pretty face."

Then I went out into the kitchen and washed my hands with soap, which is what you're supposed to do before you dry dishes, or else maybe Mom will have to wash the dishes over again and the drying towel too.

I still felt cranky, but I kept thinking about the airplane trip the gang was going to take to Chicago—all the gang except me, so far—so I kept my fire in the stove. I knew that pretty soon my parents would have to decide something, and I kept on hoping it would be "Yes."

My mom had been teaching me to sing tenor, and sometimes on Sunday nights, when she'd play the organ in our front room, she and Dad and I would sing trios, which helped to make us all like each other better. So while we were doing dishes that noon, Mom and I started singing different songs we used in school and also some of the gospel songs we used in church. And the next thing we knew, the dishes were done and put away, and I was free to go and pick beans if I wanted to, or if I didn't want to.

I was wishing I could run lickety-sizzle out across our yard, through the gate, across the dusty gravel road, and vault over the rail fence on the other side. I'd fly down the path through the woods, down the hill past the big birch tree to the spring, where the gang was supposed to meet at two o'clock, if they could. Sometimes we couldn't because most of us had to work some of the time. Today was one of the days I couldn't.

As soon as I'd finished the last dish, which was our big long platter that had had the fried chicken on it, I went back into our bathroom. I looked past my ordinary-looking face and saw my dad's reflection in the mirror. He was standing outside our bathroom window, which was closed tight to keep out some of the terrific heat that was outdoors. Standing right beside him was Old Man Paddler.

For those of you who've never heard of Old Man Paddler, I'd better say that he's one of the

best friends the Sugar Creek Gang ever had or ever will have. He lives up in the hills above Sugar Creek and likes kids, and he has put us boys into his will, which he says he's already made.

He and my dad were standing there talking, and the old man's gnarled hands were gesturing around in a sort of circle, and he was moving them up and down and pointing toward the sky.

Right away I guessed he was talking about the airplane trip to Chicago. I could see his long white whiskers bobbing up and down the way a man's whiskers do when he's talking. All of a sudden, he and Dad reached out and shook hands and then started walking toward the porch.

All of another sudden a great thrill came running and jumped *kersmack* into the middle of my heart. I was so happy it began to hurt inside terribly, because somehow I knew that I was going to get to go with the rest of the gang.

And just that minute, as Dad was opening the screen door to our kitchen to let Old Man Paddler in first, Dad said, "All right, we'll let him go!"

My hands weren't even dry when I left that bathroom. In fact, I hardly saw the towel that slipped from the rack where I'd tossed it up in too big a hurry. I wanted to make a dive for that old man's whiskers and hug him. Instead, I just stood there trembling and seeing myself sailing along through the air with big white clouds all

around our airplane and the earth away down below.

Pretty soon we were all in the living room, where it was cooler than in the kitchen, and were all sitting on different chairs. I had my bare feet twisted around and underneath my chair and fastened onto the rounds and was rocking back and forth, noticing that with every rock the chair crept sideways a little over the rug.

It was kind of like a meeting of some sort at first, with all of us sitting quiet. Then Dad cleared his throat and said in his big voice, "Well, Bill, Mr. Paddler has persuaded us to let him invest a little money in you. He wants to pay your way to Chicago by airplane. His nephew, Barry Boyland, has agreed to come and be chaperone to the whole Sugar Creek Gang."

There was a twinkle in the old man's eyes, several of them in Dad's, and also some in Mom's. Dad finished by saying that the beans could be picked later in the day when it was cooler, and that I really ought to meet with the gang today, if I wanted to, and—

As quick as I could, after I'd courteously thanked the kind, trembling-voiced old man, I was out of the house, running through the heat waves, toward our front gate. I frisked across the road, stirring up a lot of dust, and vaulted over the rail fence. Then I went like greased lightning toward the spring, imagining myself to be an airplane and trying to make a noise

like one, wishing I *was* one, and almost bursting to tell the news to the rest of the gang.

My dad's last words were ringing in my ears as I flew through the woods, with my voice droning like an airplane. This is what he said while we were still in the living room: "Of course, Bill, we shall expect you to keep your eyes open and learn a lot of things while you're there. Make it an educational trip as well as a pleasure trip."

My own answer was very quick. "Sure," I said, already halfway across the room to the door.

I remembered my promise later, though—and kept it too, when I wrote a letter to my parents from Chicago.

Zzzzz-rrrrrr! On my way to the spring!

2

The minute I got to the top of the hill that is just above the spring where our gang nearly always meets, I looked down and saw nearly all the gang there, sprawled on the long, mashed-down green-and-brown grass, each one lying in a different direction. As usual, Circus was perched on a limb of a tree, chattering like a monkey, getting ready to do an acrobatic stunt of some kind.

I dashed past the old beech tree that has all our initials carved on its smooth gray bark and, after turning a somersault, was soon lying down beside everybody, panting and trying to stop breathing so hard. I tell you, it felt good to know I had good news for them, and it felt good to be with the gang again, after thinking all day that I'd have to pick beans instead of being allowed to go in swimming.

Good old gang! I thought, still panting.

There was Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of the gang, who has maybe the keenest mind of all of us, especially when it comes to arithmetic. We named him Poetry because he knows so many different poems, and any minute something might remind him of one. Then we'd either have to listen to it or else shush him up, if we could. He was my best friend most of the

time. He and Circus were always in a good-natured argument with each other.

In fact, they were in one that very minute. Circus called down from the limb of the tree where he was and said, "Say, Poetry, do you know why I like you?"

"Why?" Poetry's squawky voice called up to him.

"'Cause," Circus called back down, "'cause in the winter I can use you for a windbreak to keep the cold wind off, and in the summertime I can lie down behind you in the shade to keep cool."

It was a very old joke, but we laughed anyway.

Circus came sliding down out of his tree right that minute to lie down beside Poetry on the shady side of him, which started a good-natured fight.

I told the gang my good news. Then I told them the crazy dream I'd had about the doctor, who was myself, giving a blood transfusion with raspberry juice.

That reminded Big Jim that one time, before he'd moved into Sugar Creek territory, he'd had to have a blood transfusion himself, because he had been hurt in a mowing machine accident. He rolled up his right trouser leg to show us a white scar with a lot of stitch scars from one end of it to the other, making it look like a long white worm with eight pairs of legs. We'd seen the scar before, but I just never told you about it.

Then Big Jim rolled over and sat up and grinned and said, "I have a special kind of blood, which is called type B. Not more than seven people in a hundred have it. They had a hard time finding anybody to give me his blood, and I almost died."

Of course, I was interested in that, since I was going to be a doctor. We all let him tell his story over again, even though we'd heard it a good many times.

Then we talked about what we'd like to see when we got to Chicago. Little Jim said he wanted to visit the zoo to see if maybe his pet bear was there. He'd had one once and had to sell it to some zoo when it got too big and too cross to be a pet.

When he mentioned the bear, I looked over at him, and there were tears in his eyes. He'd really liked that cub very much.

That brave little guy had saved all our lives once. He'd shot the cub's fierce mother when she was so mad she could have killed all of us.

But I'd better not get started on that story. *This* story is about the Sugar Creek Gang in Chicago, so I can't get off on that exciting bear's tale now.

Also, Little Jim said, he wanted to go to one of the big department stores when we got to Chicago and ride up and down on an escalator.

Big Jim wanted to see the Federal Reserve Bank, because he's interested in business and wants to be a banker sometime. Big Jim is the oldest member of our gang. He has fuzz on his

upper lip most of the time, was once a Boy Scout, and has the best manners. He is always especially courteous to Sylvia, our minister's oldest daughter, and can lick the stuffing out of any boy his age.

Big Jim still has a scar on the knuckles of his right hand where the skin was split open on a bank robber's jaw once. *That* was some experience! The Sugar Creek Gang captured that robber in the middle of the night, saving Old Man Paddler's life. And if we hadn't, we wouldn't be having our free airplane trip to Chicago!

That's another thing I found out. The old man was going to pay *all* our fares himself and also pay his nephew, Barry Boyland, a salary while he was being our chaperone. Barry, you know, was the big, brown-faced, grand young man who took us on our camping trip up north.

Well, there we were, lying in the grass just above the spring, talking, laughing, doing stunts, each one trying to say something funnier than the other one. Big Jim, Little Jim, Circus, Dragonfly, Poetry, and—oh, yes—Tom Till.

Little Tom is the new member of our gang and has red hair and can't help it. For a minute, while we were lying there, I looked over at his nose and noticed that it was nice and straight where I'd once smashed it in a fight, and it looked like any boy's nose ought to.

Tom's parents were poor, mostly because his dad spent most of his money for whiskey.

Tom's dad is always bragging about how he can take a drink of whiskey or else leave it alone, whichever he wants to. Dad says every sad old man in the world who is a drunk now used to brag about how he could take a drink or else leave it alone when he wanted to.

Maybe I'd better say too that Tom's big brother Bob had been licked good and hard once in a fight with Big Jim, and that he hated Big Jim terribly and might do most anything to get even with him.

And while I'm telling you about drinking people, I ought to tell you that Circus's dad used to be one, but he's what the Bible calls "born again" now, and his money goes into clothes and food and shoes for his family instead of into his stomach, which is getting well again after having ulcers.

And that's all the Sugar Creek Gang except me, Bill Collins, whose real and full name is William Jasper Collins, a name I don't like and which my parents call me sometimes when I haven't been behaving myself. I'd actually rather be good than to have them call me that.

We were lying there, each of us chewing on the end of different pieces of grass, as boys do. For a minute I thought of how cows sometimes lie down like that and chew the grass they've already eaten, swallowing backward to bring it up into their mouths. Then, when they've chewed it all they want to, they swallow it down into their other stomach and manufacture it into milk. Just as I was thinking of how our lit-

tle Charlotte Ann was getting big enough to stop drinking milk out of a bottle and to drink it like a human being, I heard a noise up the creek.

It sounded like a lot of boys swimming in *our* swimming hole!

Big Jim jerked his head up real quick, making me think not of a cow but of a general in an army.

If there was anything our gang didn't like, it was for an outside gang of boys to come into Sugar Creek territory and act as if they owned the place. That's why we'd had the fierce Battle of Bumblebee Hill the summer before, when Big Bob Till and his gang of rough town boys had come out and eaten up our strawberries. That was the time Big Jim had licked Big Bob for the first time Bob had ever been licked, and also the time when I'd smashed little red-haired Tom's nose, and all the rest of us had licked all the rest of *them*.

So, while I was lying there, sprawled out like a small cow, listening to the hollering up the creek, my fists began to double up, and my temper started to get hot. I could see the rest of the gang was feeling the same way. There really wasn't anything very selfish about our gang, and we wouldn't have cared much if other people used our swimming hole, if they'd *ask* and be careful not to spoil it. But the last time Bob's gang had been there, they'd broken down the two or three pretty little ash saplings on which we usually hung our clothes, and they'd

turned our diving raft upside down and left it with mud smeared all over the top.

I rolled over, bumping into Poetry and getting stopped as though I had bumped into a stone wall, at the very moment Dragonfly, who is always seeing things first, said, "Look! There's our raft floating downstream!"

And sure enough it was—upside down and floating right toward where we were. In fact it looked as if it would bump into the bank right in front of the spring.

Well, that was too much. It looked like there was going to be another famous battle.

We scrambled to our feet. That is, we started to, but Big Jim stopped us by saying, "Ssh! Lie down. *All* of you. Keep still! Wait till I see what the note says."

What note? I thought. Then I saw a piece of paper lying on top of the raft, and a big rock lying on top of it to hold it down, so the wind wouldn't blow it off.

As the rest of us kept still and lay where we were, Big Jim stood up with a grim face and walked over to the spring and down the steep little bank to the edge of the creek. He *made* us lie still, or we wouldn't have, because that raft upside down was like a red flag being waved in front of seven mad bulls that weren't tied.

I looked over the top of Poetry to Little Jim, and he was holding onto his stick, which he nearly always carried, very tight, so tight that his knuckles were white.

In a flash, Big Jim had his clothes off and

was wading and swimming out toward the raft. In another flash, he was dragging the raft after him toward our shore, while we lay like the springs in a bunch of jack-in-the-boxes, waiting for somebody to press the button.

“See!” Dragonfly hissed. “See where they cut the ropes! Our *new ropes!*”

I was already seeing it. They’d cut the lines that we’d put on the raft to anchor it to the bottom.

Big Jim used one of the ropes to tie the raft to the root of a tree that grew there on the bank of the creek. Then he lifted the rock off the piece of paper, and without even stopping to dress, because he wasn’t dry yet anyway, he picked up his clothes and came back to where we were.

I could see the big muscles on his arms, especially the ones between his shoulders and his elbows, which are called the biceps muscles, and I thought how much bigger they were than mine and also how hard they were when he tensed them. Our gang was always showing each other our biceps and looking proud because each week they seemed a little bigger and harder, but weren’t.

Well, Big Jim handed the note to Poetry, who sat up and read it, his squawky voice sounding more than ever like a duck with a bad cold and also as if he was having a chill. His hand was shaking a little too, while he held it, and this is what he read:

To the Sugar Creek Gang:

Gentlemen and cowards! A swimming hole is no place for a choir platform. Anyway, we can't use it, so we're shipping it down to you, express collect. If you don't like it, you can lump it!

Well, the minute Poetry finished reading the note out loud, we were all ready to fight. It was an insult. Maybe you know that the Sugar Creek Gang all went to church every Sunday and weren't ashamed of it. In fact, anybody in the world that wants to amount to a hill of soup beans ought to go to church.

"It's an *insult!*" Poetry squawked. "Let's go up there and lick the stuffin's out of them!"

By that time we were all rolled over on our stomachs and were waiting for orders from Big Jim.

"Read the signature," Poetry said and passed the note to Big Jim.

Big Jim looked at it, and we all squirmed around and read over his shoulders, and this is what it said:

Yours truly,
THE HELLFIRE GANG

The silly bunch of copycats! I thought. My dad had told me once that more than a hundred years ago, when a famous evangelist was preaching in a town, there was a wild gang of boys there who had called themselves The Hellfire Club.

Anyway, maybe you know that Bob Till's dad didn't believe in God and that Bob and little red-haired Tom had never been to Sunday school in their lives until I had got Tom to start going with the Collins family.

The next thing I knew, Big Jim had folded the paper and tucked it into one of the pockets of his overalls, which right that minute he was starting to pull on. He did it very slowly, as if he was thinking. His jaw was set hard, and his lips were pressed together in a straight line, which meant plenty.

But when he got through dressing, he plunked himself down on the grass again! With fists still doubled up, he stared out across the woods toward a stump, where I saw a little reddish-brown chipmunk sitting straight up, holding an acorn or something in its forepaws and eating very, very fast, the way chipmunks do. Then Big Jim rolled over and lay in the sun.

What? I thought. *Are we going to lie here like a bunch of saps and let the Hellfire Gang spoil our swimming hole?*

Then I looked over the top of Dragonfly's head and saw Little Tom Till's messed-up red hair and his five or six hundred freckles and his bright blue eyes, which looked kind of like there was a sad fire in them. And I knew there wasn't going to be any fight, and why. Big Jim simply wouldn't lead the gang into battle under such circumstances.

It's a terrible letdown, though, to be all keyed up for a good fight and then not get to have it,

especially when you know the other gang needs a licking. I remembered our other fight, when Big Jim had led us to victory. I remembered the way he did it. How he stepped out from the bushes where he had been lying in ambush. How he walked stiff-legged, the way a dog does when it walks out toward a new dog it's never seen before. How he looked up to the top of the hill, where Bob and his gang stood calling us all kinds of names. How Big Jim stood there and said, "Fellows, it isn't a question of whether we're afraid to fight. There isn't a man among us that's got a drop of coward's blood in him!"

We still didn't have any of that kind of blood, but we didn't dare fight with Little Tom belonging to *our* gang and his brother belonging to the other. It wouldn't be fair to Tom.

I had to tell you about this almost-fight, though, so you'll understand what happened in Chicago when Big Jim and Bob met again under the strangest circumstances you ever saw.

Of course, none of us knew that Bob would be in Chicago ahead of us. And certainly none of us ever dreamed why he'd be there, but he was.