

# 1

If I hadn't been the janitor of our little one-room red brick schoolhouse, I don't suppose I would have cared so much when Poetry's wet pet lamb walked around all over the floor with his muddy feet.

Lambs, you know, are not supposed to go to school, and even though the Sugar Creek Gang knew that, they thought they'd like to see what it was like to have one come in spite of the fact that it was, as a certain poem says, "against the rule."

It certainly made the children laugh and play—and it also made some of them cry and work, especially me. That is, I had to mop the floor, and I had to stay in at recess to do it, with Poetry and all the rest of the gang helping me. It took longer to get the floor clean than it should have, because the lamb accidentally turned over a pail of sudsy water, and it scattered itself in every direction there was.

Maybe before I tell you what the teacher said about the lamb at school, I'd better explain why it was there, and who I mean when I say "Poetry," and also when I say "The Sugar Creek Gang," because maybe you've never heard about us. Then you'll understand that we really weren't trying to get ourselves into trouble

when we took that innocent lamb to school that Monday morning.

The idea had first come to us when we were having our gang meeting the second Saturday after school started. We held our meeting in an abandoned graveyard away up on the other side of Bumblebee Hill, which is the nickname for Strawberry Hill that we'd given it after we'd killed a bear and later fought a tough town gang there. In fact, the bumblebees helped us lick that tough, swearing bunch of boys.

As I said, the second Saturday after school started, we had our gang meeting in that spooky old cemetery, which they didn't bury people in anymore. And that was the time we decided to let Poetry's lamb follow him to school the very next Monday morning.

Right after dinner that Saturday, after I'd dried the dishes and Mom and Dad had both said I didn't have to work that afternoon, I made a dive for our kitchen door. I stopped outside only long enough to keep the door from slamming, so it wouldn't wake up my little one-year-old baby sister, Charlotte Ann. Then like a wild deer, I galloped out across our grassy yard, passed the big walnut tree with the high swing in it, swished across the road past our tin mailbox, which had on it *Theodore Collins*, my Dad's name. And then I touched one hand on the top rail of the fence, vaulted over, and ran.

*Ran*, I tell you, straight down the path through the woods that leads to the spring. At the biggest tree I swerved to the right and fol-

lowed another path, which had been made by boys' feet. Soon, gasping and panting and swinging my straw hat, I was at the bottom of Bumblebee Hill, where the gang was supposed to meet first.

We all had a spooky feeling about meeting in that graveyard because there were so many stories in the world about graveyards having ghosts in them. So we'd planned to all go there together, and if there *were* any ghosts, we could—well, we could all run away together anyway.

I'd stopped to get rid of some of my extra breath, always having too much after running like that, when I heard a noise of underbrush crashing and breaking and a heavy body running.

I looked up, and there lumbering toward me was my best friend, Leslie Thompson, whose nickname is Poetry. Right that same minute he saw me, and he began to quote between puffs one of his more than one hundred memorized poems. It was about the wind, which I guess his heavy breathing had reminded him of. It went like this:

I saw you toss the kites on high  
And blow the birds about the sky;  
And all around I heard you pass  
Like ladies' skirts across the grass—  
O wind, a-blowing all day long!  
O wind, that sings so loud a song!

That was one of my favorite poems.

Pretty soon Poetry and I were lying in the long mashed-down grass, watching the white clouds hanging in the lazy blue sky and listening to each other catch his breath.

He started quoting the second verse, getting about halfway through when he was very suddenly interrupted by somebody's spraying water in his face with a squirt gun.

Even I was half mad for a minute, because some of the water spattered in *my* face. Besides, I'd been sort of dreaming about the wind that Poetry's poem was describing, and nobody likes to have his thoughts interrupted.

Poetry had just been saying:

“I saw the different things you did,  
But always, you, yourself, you hid;  
I felt you push, I heard you call,  
I could not see yourself at all . . .”

Then he started to gasp and sputter and get red in the face and roll over and sit up and say something, and from the bushes behind us there came a squawky voice, imitating Poetry's. It said:

“The rain is raining all around,  
It rains on field and tree;  
It rains on umbrellas here,  
And on the ships at sea.”

I knew right away which one of the Sugar Creek Gang it was, because he was the only one

of us who was more disgusted than the rest of us with Poetry's poetry. He was always quoting one of them himself just to make it seem ridiculous. Even if I hadn't heard his voice and seen his brown hair on his hatless head, his blue eyes, and monkeylike face, I'd have known it was Circus.

He came cartwheeling toward us in grand style, just like an acrobat on a county fair stage, only better.

The next minute Circus and Poetry and I were all in a tangled-up scramble like a bunch of boys in a football game. Poetry especially was grunting and trying to unroll himself from the rest of us. In fact, our six pairs of legs and arms, making twelve altogether, sort of looked like a lot of fishing worms in a knot.

We hadn't any more than unscrambled ourselves when there came more running feet in our direction, and in another minute we were four instead of three. This time it was a spindle-legged little guy with very large, bulging eyes and a nose that was crooked at the end. His actual name was Roy Gilbert, but we called him Dragonfly, because his eyes were enormous—almost too big for his little head, which a *real* dragonfly's eyes are, but which, of course, Dragonfly's eyes weren't.

That little chattering, pop-eyed member of our gang was always seeing things before the rest of us were, and sometimes he saw things that really weren't there at all. He was right though, when he saw that big savage bear, which

we killed and which I told you about in one of the other Sugar Creek Gang stories. He was also right the time he saw that bank robber, whom we helped capture. On top of that, Dragonfly was also right when he saw the ghost running—or flying or something—in that same old cemetery one night.

But that's almost telling you a secret that I'm saving until another chapter and which didn't happen until after Poetry's innocent lamb had followed him to school.

Anyway, pretty soon Big Jim, the leader of our gang, came swishing down the path. He stopped in the shade of the bushes beside us and started catching his breath like the rest of us. I couldn't help but notice that the little fuzzy mustache he had shaved off just before we had taken our trip to Chicago was still off, with not even a sign of its having begun to grow again. In fact, it hadn't been long enough to shave in the first place. Big Jim was a great leader, I tell you—a fierce fighter and as strong as anything. His hands were calloused from hard work, which he even *liked* to do.

Each one of us lay in a different direction, chattering away and waiting for the rest to come.

Little Jim, our smallest, was nearly always late because he had to practice his piano lesson right after the noon meal each Saturday. He was getting to be a great player, his mom being the best musician in all Sugar Creek territory.

Pretty soon I heard somebody coming. I looked around a corner of the elder bush I was

lying under, and it was Little Jim, just poking along, barefoot, his new, clean blue denim overalls rolled up halfway to his knees and his half-worn-out brown straw hat on backward and his little mouselike face looking very content. He was carrying an ash stick about three feet long, with stripes on it, the stripes having been made with his pocketknife by cutting off the bark, so that it looked like a big three-foot-long piece of stick candy.

“Hi, Little Jim!” different ones of us called to him.

He kept on doing what he was doing, which was knocking off the tops of different weeds with his stick, not paying any attention to us. Then he stooped and rolled up his right over-all leg, which had just come down. While he was still stooped over, he grunted, “Hi, everybody.” Then he straightened up and grinned.

Little Jim flopped himself down beside us just in time to get up with us, for at that same minute from the other direction came little red-haired, freckled-faced Tom Till, the new member of our gang. Fiery-tempered Tom was a great guy even if his big brother, Bob, had caused us, especially Big Jim, a lot of trouble.

Anyway, the minute Little Jim and Tom got there, we scrambled to our different-sized bare feet and started up Bumblebee Hill to the cemetery and—you can believe this or not—to run into another mystery, which I’ll tell you about as soon as I get to it.

Writing a story, you know, is like building a

tall building. If you put the top on first, without any good foundation, the house will fall down. So I have to save the top of the story, which is the mystery, for later. And the mystery is the ghost that Dragonfly saw one very dark night.

“Here we go,” Big Jim called to us, unfolding his long legs and rambling up the hill with the rest of us scurrying after him. Suddenly he stopped, looked back at us, and with a strange expression on his mustacheless face said, “Anybody afraid?”

And we yelled a big noisy “No!”—all except Dragonfly, whose mother was what is called a superstitious person and actually believed in such things as ghosts. She even believed that if a black cat ran across the road in front of you, it meant you were going to have bad luck.

Anyway, when Dragonfly didn’t act as though he was glad we were going up to have our meeting in the old cemetery, I knew the reason, and I felt sorry for him.

“Come on, fraidy-cat!” I said and grabbed him by the arm.

Poetry grabbed him by the other arm, and away we went to make plans that were going to make some of the schoolchildren laugh and play and some of them cry and work.

We certainly didn’t know, when we started up that hill for our first fall gang meeting, that the whole fall was going to be filled with exciting adventures. One especially was going to make my fiery red hair stand on end and scare me and the rest of the gang half to death.



## 2

Poetry was puffing along beside me. Seeing what I had in my hand, he said, “Our new teacher wants us to gather all kinds of weed seeds and classify them.”

He took the long, green, empty flower spike out of my hand and looked at it like a college professor and said in a deep, important-sounding voice, “*That*, Bill Collins, is blue vervain. In the middle of summer, here at the bottom, there was a little blue flower ring, which, as summer moved along, slowly crept up the spike, the old flowers dying and the new ones coming out, until finally the ring slipped off the nice green lady’s finger—I mean, it slipped off Lucille’s finger.”

*Bang!* Something inside me fired up when he said that, and that was the end of *that* speech. The next thing Poetry knew, he was lying flat on the grass beside a wild rosebush where I’d shoved him, sticking out my foot to trip him at the same time.

“I don’t *like* her!” I yelled down at him, meaning I didn’t want anybody to know that I thought Circus’s ordinary-looking sister, whose name was Lucille, had nice curls.

You see, ever since last year, when I’d tried to kill a spider for one of Circus’s many sisters,

some of the gang—Poetry especially—had been teasing me about her. And I wouldn't stand for it. In fact, if there's anybody I like less than anybody else, it's some awkward *girl*, although Circus's sister did have nice curls.

Big Jim led us into the middle of the old graveyard to where there was a big pine tree, and right beside it on the west side stood a tall tombstone with a square base. The rest of it was shaped like a monument in a city park. The grass there was nice and long, so we all dropped down, half sitting and half lying, each one of us chewing grass stems, like cows when they rest and chew their cud. And there we had our meeting.

And then, while I was lying on my back with my elbows up and my hands folded under the back of my head, I saw on the tall monument-shaped tombstone something that made me sit up and gasp. I had the funniest feeling when I realized what I was seeing.

"S'matter?" Dragonfly wanted to know, looking scared and not feeling very good about having the meeting there anyway.

"Look at that, will you?" I sort of half whispered and pointed to what was above the name on the tombstone. In fact, I was pointing with my finger right toward a carved hand, which had one of its fingers pointing up.

We'd all seen that tombstone before, and we'd all read what was on it, but it was something brand-new on it that had made me gasp. That carved hand with one of its fingers pointing up had never been there before!

We stared at it, and this is what we saw:

SARAH, BELOVED WIFE  
OF  
SENETH PADDLER

And right above the name was the carved hand, pointing straight toward the top of the tombstone and toward the sky. And at the end of the pointing finger, about an inch above it, was a ribbon-shaped piece of marble with these words carved on it—with brand-new carving, as if it had been done only yesterday:

THERE IS REST IN HEAVEN

All of us felt very sad for a while because we all knew who Seneth Paddler was, and we knew his wife had been dead for a long time, but none of us had ever thought much about his wife. But that new carving meant that the old man still remembered her and was maybe very lonesome for her and wanted to meet her again sometime in heaven.

None of us said anything for a minute, each one of us maybe thinking about what a kind man Old Man Paddler was—that grand old long-whiskered man who liked us so well and whose life we'd once saved. We'd captured the robber that had him all tied and gagged in his cabin up in the hills above the swamp and the old sycamore tree.

Poetry was the first one of us to say any-

thing. I was watching Little Jim's face to see what maybe he was thinking about, and he had a very innocent look, as he nearly always did have. He looked away quick when he saw me looking at him and took a swipe at a goldenrod plume with his stick, just as Poetry spoke up and said, "She was only *thirty-seven* years old." He was especially good in arithmetic.

And Dragonfly said in a voice that sounded like a scared boy's voice coming through a hollow log, "M-my m-mother is just thirty-seven years old."

That started us all talking in kind of low voices about what happened to people when they died and their bodies were buried somewhere.

"They go straight to heaven if they're saved," Little Jim said, and of course he was right. He even quoted a Bible verse to prove it. He knew as many Bible verses as Poetry knew poems. That was the reason he was always piping up and saying things like that. Little Jim was the best Christian in the whole gang.

But when you're in a graveyard, and you know there isn't any such thing as a ghost, and when you all of a sudden get to talking about things like that, you feel kind of spooky anyway.

Maybe it was what Dragonfly said just then that made *me* feel spooky. I don't know, but right after that he said, "My mother saw an actual honest-to-goodness ghost one time, walking right across our front yard at night. It had a crazy voice that sounded like a baby crying and—"

“I don’t believe it!” Poetry squawked, interrupting him.

We all agreed with Poetry—all except Dragonfly, of course.

“It could have been one of your dad’s white horses,” I said, and Circus said with a grin on his monkeylike face, “or one of your lambs or sheep.”

Well, we told a few ghost stories to each other until Dragonfly began to look scared. Then we talked about school and our new teacher, Miss Lilly, who was very nice and even pretty for a schoolteacher, and she was so kind. Every single one of us boys liked her.

Pretty soon we were tired of telling ghost stories and also tired of trying to convince Dragonfly that his mom had seen only a white horse or a lamb or a sheep. The word *lamb* reminded Poetry of a poem, which he started to quote in a half-man and half-boy voice, and this is the way the poem went. You know it.

“Mary had a little lamb,  
Its fleece was white as snow,  
And everywhere that Mary went,  
The lamb was sure to go.

It followed her to school one day,  
Which was against the rule;  
It made the children laugh and play  
To see a lamb at school.”

There were several other verses, but the idea was like striking a match to a pile of kerosene-soaked kindling wood. It flared up in our minds, and we decided that, if Poetry wanted to, he could let his pet lamb follow him to school the very next Monday morning.

He would let it follow him to school early, before the teacher came, and he would tie it in the woodshed. Then, maybe along about ten o'clock, he would ask to be excused and would go outdoors and untie the lamb and let it see where he went. We all knew, of course, that it would follow him right into the schoolhouse.

Little Jim didn't exactly like the idea, although there was a mischievous grin on his small face and a twinkle in his sparkling very blue eyes. His eyes were as blue, I thought as I lay there beside him in the tall grass beside Sarah Paddler's tombstone, as blue as the blue sky up there in the direction toward which the finger was pointing.

Well, we brought it to a vote, and the score was seven to none in favor of Poetry's taking his lamb to school Monday morning—none of us knowing that it was going to be a rainy morning and that there would be a mud puddle for the lamb to fall in just a few feet from the schoolhouse door, just before Poetry let it follow him inside.