1

One tough guy in the Sugar Creek territory was enough to keep us all on the lookout all the time for different kinds of trouble. We'd certainly had plenty with Big Bob Till, who, as you maybe know, was the big brother of Little Tom Till, our newest gang member.

But when a new quick-tempered boy, whose name was Shorty Long, moved into the neighborhood and started coming to our school, and when Shorty and Bob began to pal around together, we never knew whether we'd get through even one day without something happening to start a fight or get one of the gang into trouble with our teacher. On top of that, we had a new teacher, a *man* teacher, who didn't exactly know that most of us tried to behave ourselves most of the time.

Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of our gang, had made up a poem about our new teacher, whom not a one of us liked very well at first because of not *wanting* a new teacher. We'd liked our pretty woman teacher so well. This is the way the poem went:

The Sugar Creek Gang had the worst of
teachers,
And "Black" his name was called.

His round red face had the homeliest
of features;
He was fat and forty and bald.

Poetry was always writing a new poem or quoting one somebody else wrote.

Maybe it was a library book that was to blame for some of the trouble we had in this story, though. I'm not quite sure, but about the minute my pal Poetry and I saw the picture in a book called *The Hoosier Schoolmaster,* Poetry had a very mischievous idea come into his mind, which he couldn't get out, no matter how he tried.

This is the way it happened. I was staying at his house one night, and just before we went to sleep we sat up in his big bed for a while, reading and looking at that picture. It was a full-page glossy picture of a man schoolteacher up on the roof of a country schoolhouse, and he was holding a wide board across the top of the chimney. The schoolhouse's only door was open, and a gang of tough-looking boys was tumbling out along with a lot of smoke.

"Have you ever read the story?" I said to Poetry, and he said, "No, have you?" and when I said "No," we both read a part of it. The story was about a teacher whose very bad boys in the school had locked him out of the building. He smoked them out just the way a boy smokes a skunk out of a woodchuck den along Sugar Creek.

That put the idea in Poetry's head and then

into mine, and it stayed there until a week or two after Christmas before it got us into trouble. Then, just like a time bomb going off, suddenly that innocent idea, which an innocent author had written in an innocent library book, exploded.

It was a fine Saturday afternoon at our house with bright sunlight on the snow and the weather just right for coasting. I was standing by our kitchen sink, getting ready to start drying a big stack of dishes, which my mom had just rinsed with steaming hot water out of the teakettle.

I was reaching for a drying towel when Mom said, "Better wash your hands first, Bill," which I had forgotten to do, as I do once in a while. I washed my hands with soap in our bathroom, came back, grabbed the towel off the rack by the range, and started in carefully wiping the dishes.

I didn't exactly want to. The clock on the shelf said it was one o'clock, and the gang was supposed to meet on Bumblebee Hill right that very minute with our sleds. We were going to have the time of our lives coasting, and rolling in the snow, and making huge balls and snowmen and everything.

You should have seen those dishes fly—that is, they *started* to!

"Be careful," Mom said and meant it. "Those are my best dinner plates."

"I will," I said, and I was for a while, but my mind wasn't anywhere near those fancy plates

Mom was washing and I was drying. In fact, I thought there wasn't any sense in washing them anyway, because they weren't the ones we had used that day at all. They'd been standing on the shelf in the cupboard for several months without being used.

"I don't see why we have to wash them," I said, "when they aren't even dirty."

"We're going to have company for dinner tomorrow," Mom explained, "and we *have* to wash them."

"Wash them *before* we use them?" I said. It didn't make sense. Why, that very minute the gang would be hollering and screaming and coasting down the hill and having a wonderful time.

"Certainly," Mom said. "We want them to sparkle so that, when the table is set and the guests come in, they'll see how beautiful they really are. See? Notice how dull this one is?" She held up one that hadn't been washed yet in her hot sudsy water or rinsed in my hot clear water, or wiped and polished with my clean dry towel, which Mom's tea towels always were—Mom being an extraclean housekeeper and couldn't help it because her mother had been that way too. And being that kind of a housekeeper is contagious, like catching measles or smallpox or mumps or something else boys don't like.

For some reason I remembered a part of a book I'd read called *Alice in Wonderland*. It was about a crazy queen who started to cry and say,

"Oh! Oh! My finger's bleeding!" And when Alice told her to wrap her finger up, the queen said, "Oh no, I haven't pricked it yet," meaning it was bleeding *before* she had stuck a needle into it, which was a fairy story and was certainly crazy.

So I said to Mom, "Seems funny to wash dishes *before* they're dirty—seems like a fairy story, like having your finger start bleeding before you stick a needle in it." I knew she had read *Alice in Wonderland,* because she'd read it to me herself when I was little.

But Mom was very smart. She said, with a mischievous sound in her voice, "That's a splendid idea. Let's pretend this is Bill Collins in Wonderland and get the dishes done right away. Fairy stories are always interesting, don't you think?"

I didn't right then, but there wasn't any use arguing. In fact, Mom said arguing wasn't ever polite, so I quit and said, "Who's coming for dinner tomorrow?" I wondered if it might be some of the gang and hoped it would be. I didn't know a one of the gang who would notice whether the dishes sparkled or not, although most of their moms probably would.

"Oh—a surprise," she said.

"Who?" I said. "My cousin Wally and his new baby sister?"

Perhaps you know I had a homely, red-haired cousin named Walford, who lived in the city and had a new baby sister. Mom and Dad had been to see the baby, but I hadn't and

didn't want to. And I certainly didn't exactly want to see Wally, but I *would* like to see his wacky Airedale, and, if Wally *was* coming, I hoped he would bring the wire-haired dog along.

"It's a surprise," Mom said again, and at that minute there was a whistle at our front gate.

I looked over the top of my stack of steaming dishes out through a clear place in the frosted window and saw a broad-faced, barrel-shaped boy. Holding onto a sled rope, he was lifting up the latch on our wide gate with a red-mittened hand.

Another boy was there too. Hardly looking, I could tell that it was Dragonfly, because he is spindle-legged and has large eyes like a dragonfly. He had on a brand-new cap with earmuffs. Dragonfly was forever getting the gang into trouble because he always was doing harebrained things without thinking. He also was allergic to nearly everything and was always sneezing at the wrong time, for example, just when we were supposed to be quiet. Also he was about the only one in the gang whose mother was superstitious, thinking it was bad luck if a black cat crosses the road in front of you or good luck if you find a horseshoe and hang it above one of the doors in your house.

Just as Poetry had the latch of the wide gate lifted, I saw Dragonfly make a quick move. He stepped with one foot on the iron pipe at the bottom of the gate's frame and gave the gate a

shove. Then he jumped on with the other foot and rode on the gate while it was swinging open. This was something Dad wouldn't let *me* do, and which any boy shouldn't do, because if he keeps on doing it, it will make the gate sag and maybe drag on the ground.

Well, when I saw that, I forgot there was a window between me and the out-of-doors, and also that my mom was beside me, and also that my baby sister, Charlotte Ann, was asleep in the bedroom in her baby bed. Without thinking, I yelled real loud, "Hey, Dragonfly, you crazy goof! Don't do that!"

Right away I remembered Charlotte Ann was in the other room, because Mom told me. And also Charlotte Ann woke up and made the kind of a noise a baby always makes when she wakes up and doesn't want to.

Just that second, the gate Dragonfly was on was as wide open as it could go, and Dragonfly, who didn't have a very good hold with his hands—the gate being icy anyway—slipped off and went sprawling head over heels into a snowdrift in our yard.

It was a funny sight, but not *very* funny, because I heard my dad's great big voice calling from the barn, yelling something and sounding the way he sounds when somebody has done something he shouldn't and is supposed to quit quick or he'd be sorry.

I made a dive for our back door, swung it open, and with one of my mom's good plates still in my hands, and without my cap on, I

rushed out on our back board walk and yelled to Poetry and Dragonfly. "I'll be there in about an hour! I've got to finish tomorrow's dishes first! Better go on down the hill and tell the gang I'll be there in maybe an hour or two," which is what is called sarcasm.

And Poetry yelled, "We'll come and help you!"

But that wasn't a good idea. Our kitchen door was still open, and Mom heard me and also heard Poetry. She said to me, "Bill Collins, come back in here. The very idea! I can't have those boys coming in with all that snow. I've just scrubbed the floor!"

That is why they didn't come in and also why barrel-shaped Poetry and spindle-legged Dragonfly started building a snowman right in our front yard, while they waited for Mom and me to finish.

Pretty soon I was done, though. I grabbed my coat from its hook in the corner of the kitchen and pulled my hat on my red head, with the earmuffs tucked inside. It wasn't a very cold day. In fact, it was warm enough for the snow to pack good for making snowballs and snowmen and everything.

I put on my boots at the door, said goodbye to Mom, and swished out through the snow to Poetry and Dragonfly, grabbing my sled rope, which was right beside our back door. I could already hear the rest of the gang yelling on Bumblebee Hill. The three of us went as fast as we could through our gate.

My dad was standing there, looking at the gate to see if Dragonfly had been too heavy for it, and just as we left, he said, "Never ride on a gate, boys, if you want to live long."

His voice was kind of fierce, the way it sometimes is, and he was looking at Dragonfly. Then he looked at me and winked, and I knew he wasn't mad but still didn't want any boy to be dumb enough to ride on our gate again.

"Yes sir, Mr. Collins," Dragonfly said politely, grabbing his sled rope and starting on the run across the road to a place in the rail fence where I always climbed through on my way to the woods.

"Wait a minute!" Dad said, and we waited.

His big bushy eyebrows were straight across, so I knew he liked us all right. "What?" I said.

He said, "You boys know, of course, that your new teacher, Mr. Black, is going to keep on teaching the Sugar Creek School—that the board can't ask him to resign just because the boys in the school liked their other teacher better."

Imagine my dad saying such a thing, just when we had been thinking about having a lot of fun.

"Yes sir," I said, remembering the beech switches behind the teacher's desk.

"Yes sir," Poetry said politely.

"Yes sir," Dragonfly yelled to him from the rail fence, where he was already halfway through.

We all hurried through the fence, and, yelling and running and panting, dragged our

sleds through the woods to Bumblebee Hill to where the gang was having fun.

We coasted for a long time. Even Little Tom Till, the red-haired, freckled-faced little brother of Big Bob Till, who was Big Jim's worst enemy, was there.

Time flew fast, and all of a sudden Circus, who had rolled a big snowball down the hill, said, "Let's make a snowman—let's make Mr. Black!"

That sounded like fun, so we started in, not knowing that Circus was going to make the most ridiculous-looking snowman I'd ever seen and not knowing something else very exciting, which I'm going to tell you about just as quick as I can.

2

When we got through, it certainly was the craziest snowman I had ever seen. It didn't have any legs, because we had to use a very large snowball for its foundation, but it had another even larger snowball for its stomach, since our new teacher was round in the middle, especially in front, and it had a smaller head.

Circus, whose idea it was to make it funny, had gotten some corn silk out of our corn crib and had made "hair," putting it all around the sides of its head but not putting any in the middle of the top or in the front, so that it looked like an honest-to-goodness baldheaded man.

Then, while different ones of us were putting a row of buttons on his coat—which were black walnuts, which we stuck into the snow in his stomach—Circus and Dragonfly disappeared, leaving only Poetry and Little Jim and Little Tom Till and me. Big Jim had had to go with his dad that afternoon to take a load of cattle to the city.

I was sitting on my sled, which was crosswise on the top of Little Jim's, which was crosswise on Poetry's, making my seat just about knee-high. Our snowman was at the bottom of the hill, and not far from us was a beech tree.

Little Jim was standing there under its low-

hanging branches, looking up into it as though he was thinking something very important, which he nearly always is. Little Jim was the best Christian in the gang and was always thinking about and sometimes saying something he had learned in church or that his parents taught him from the Bible.

There were nearly half the leaves still on the tree in spite of its being winter and nearly every other tree in the woods being as bare as Old Mother Hubbard's cupboard. A beech tree usually keeps on a lot of its old frostbitten brown leaves nearly all winter and only drops them in the spring when the new leaves start to come and push them off.

It was the same tree where one summer day there had been a big old mother bear and her cub. All of a sudden, while sitting there on my stack of sleds, I was remembering that fight we'd had with the fierce bear. I guessed maybe Little Jim was remembering it also. Everything was so quiet, I said to him, "I bet you're thinking about how you killed a bear right there."

Little Jim, who had his stick, which he always carried with him, said, "Nope, something else."

Poetry spoke up from where he was standing beside Mr. Black's snow statue and said, "I'll bet you're thinking about the little cub which you had for a pet after you killed the bear."

Little Jim took a swipe with his stick at the trunk of the tree, and I noticed that his stick went *ker-whack* right on some initials on the

trunk that said "W. J. C.," which meant "William Jasper Collins," which is my full name—only nobody ever calls me by the middle name except my dad, who calls me that only when I've done something I shouldn't.

Then Little Jim said to Poetry, just as his stick *ker-whamm*ed the initials, "Nope, something else." Then he whirled around and started making marks that looked like rabbit tracks in the snow with his stick.

Tom Till spoke up and said, "I'll bet you're thinking about the fight we had that day."

It was in that fight that I'd licked little red-haired Tom Till, who with his big brother, Bob, had belonged to another gang. But now Little Tom's family lived in our neighborhood, and Tom had joined our gang, also went to our Sunday school, and was a good friend. But Bob was still a tough guy and hated Big Jim and all of us, and we never knew when he was going to start some new trouble in the Sugar Creek territory.

"Well," I said to Little Jim, who was looking up into the tree again as though he was still thinking something important, "what *are* you thinking about?"

And he said, "I was just thinking about all the leaves and wondering why they didn't fall off like the ones on the maple trees do. Don't they know they're dead?"

I looked at the tree Little Jim was looking at, and it was the first time I'd noticed that the beech tree still had nearly every one of its leaves on it. They were very brown, even brown-

er than some of the maple and walnut tree leaves had been when they'd all fallen off last fall.

"How could they know they're dead, if they *are* dead?" Poetry said.

Just that second I heard Circus and Dragonfly coming up from the direction of the bayou, which was down close to Sugar Creek itself. Circus had his knife and was just finishing trimming the small branch he had in his hand. Dragonfly had a long fierce-looking switch and was swinging it around and saying loud and fierce, "All right, Bill Collins, you can take a licking for throwing that snowball—take that—and that—and that—" Dragonfly was making fierce swings with his switch and grunting every time he swung.

I knew what he was thinking about—the snowball I'd thrown in our schoolyard that week, the one that had accidentally hit our new teacher right in the middle of the top of his bald head.

Circus stuck both those switches into the snowman, right where his right hand was supposed to be. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out an ear of corn and began to shell it, shoving handfuls of the big yellow kernels into his pocket at the same time. A jiffy later, all that was left was a long red corncob, which he broke in half and stuck one of the halves into the snowman's face for a nose.

He took the other half of the corncob and with his knife made a hole in its side near the

bottom. Then he took a small stick out of his pocket and stuck it into the cob.

"What on earth?" I said.

He said, "All right, everybody, shut your eyes," which we wouldn't.

We watched him finish what he was doing, which was making a pipe for the snowman to smoke. A moment later it was sticking into the snowman's face right under his nose—a corncob pipe. It looked very funny, and we all laughed, all except Little Jim, who just giggled a little.

We all stood back and looked at it, and it was the funniest-looking snowman I'd ever seen—brown "hair" all around his head, and none on top, and a big red nose, and a corncob pipe sticking out at an angle, and black walnuts for buttons on his coat, and a couple of fierce-looking switches in his hand. Also there were two thin corn silk eyebrows that curled up a little.

"There's only one thing wrong with it," Poetry said in his ducklike voice. He was standing beside me and squinting up at the ridiculous-looking snowman.

"What?" I said, thinking how perfect it was.

"You can't tell who it is supposed to be. It needs some extra identification."

"It's perfect," I said and looked at Little Jim to see if he didn't think the same thing. But he was looking up into the beech tree again, as if he was still thinking about something mysterious and wasn't interested in an ordinary snowman.

I looked toward Dragonfly, and he was listening in the direction of a half-dozen little cedar trees near the bayou, as though he was either seeing or hearing something, which he seemed to think he was.

Suddenly he said, "*Psst,* gang, quiet! I think I saw something move over there. *Sh!* Don't look now, or he'll—"

We all looked, of course, but didn't see anything, although I had a funny feeling inside of me that said, *What if it's Mr. Black watching us? What if all of a sudden he should come walking out from behind those cedar trees and see the snowman we've made of him, and what if he'd decide to use one or two of the switches on us?* Not a one of us was sure he didn't not like us enough to do that to us.

Poetry spoke up then and said, "I say it's not quite perfect. There's one thing wrong with it, and I'm going to fix that right this very minute." With that remark, he pulled off one of his red mittens, shoved one of his hands inside his coat pocket, pulled something out, and shuffled toward Mr. Black's snow statue.

And then I saw what he had, as plain as day. It was a red, hardback book with gold letters on it, which said *The Hoosier Schoolmaster.* I knew right away it was the book he and I had read from in his bedroom one night. I remembered especially the part where the tough gang of boys in the story caused the teacher a lot of trouble and locked him out of the schoolhouse. Then the teacher, who was very smart,

had climbed up on top of the school and put a board across the top of the chimney. And the smoke, which couldn't get out of the chimney, had poured out of the stove inside, and all the tough boys had been smoked out.

"What are you going to do?" I said to Poetry.

He said, "Nothing," but right away was doing it—sticking two sticks in the snowman's stomach side by side. Then he opened *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* to the place where there was the picture of the teacher on the roof and laid the open book across the two sticks.

"There you are, sir," Poetry said, talking to the snowman. "The Hoosier schoolmaster himself." Then Poetry made a bow as low as he could, being so round that he grunted every time he stooped over very far.

Well, it *was* funny, and most of us laughed. Circus scooped up a snowball and started to throw it at the snowman, but we all stopped him, not wanting to have all our hard work spoiled in a few minutes. Besides, Poetry suddenly wanted to take a picture of it, and his camera was at his house, which was away down past the sycamore tree and the cave, where we all wanted to go after while to see Old Man Paddler. We decided to leave "Mr. Black" out there by himself at the bottom of Bumblebee Hill until we came back later.

"He ought to have a hat on," Dragonfly said. "He'll catch his death of cold with his bald head."

"Or he might get stung on the head by a bumblebee," Circus said.

Little Jim spoke up all of a sudden and said, as though he was almost angry, "Can anybody *help* it that he gets bald? My dad's beginning to lose some of his hair on top—" Then he grabbed his stick, which he had leaned up against the beech tree, and struck very fiercely at a tall brown mullein stalk that was standing there in a little open space. The seeds scattered in every direction, one of them hitting me hard right on my freckled face just below my right eye. It stung like everything.

Then Little Jim started running as fast as he could go in the direction of the sycamore tree, as if he was mad at us for something we'd done wrong.

In fact, when he said that, I felt a kind of sickish feeling inside of me, as though maybe I *had* done something wrong. I grabbed my own stick and started off on the run after Little Jim, calling out to the rest of the gang to hurry up and saying, "Last one to the sycamore tree is a cow's tail."

Then we all were running and jumping and diving around bushes and trees and leaping over snow-covered brush piles toward the sycamore tree and the mouth of the cave that comes out at the other end in the cellar of Old Man Paddler's cabin.