

# 1

I guess I never did get tired thinking about all the interesting and exciting things that happened to the Sugar Creek Gang when we went camping far up in the North. One of the happiest memories was of the time when Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of our gang, and I were lost out in the forest. While we were trying to get unlost we met a brown-faced Indian boy, whose name was Snow-in-the-Face, and his big brother, whose name was Eagle Eye.

Little Snow-in-the-Face was the cutest little Indian boy I had ever seen. In fact, he was the *first* one I'd ever seen up close. I kept thinking about him and wishing that the whole Sugar Creek Gang could go again up into that wonderful country that everybody calls the Paul Bunyan Playground and see how Snow-in-the-Face was getting along and how his big brother's Indian Sunday school was growing, which, as you know, they were having every Sunday in an old railroad coach they had taken into the forest and fixed up as a church.

I never had any idea that we would get to go back the very next summer. But here I am, telling you about how we happened to get to go, and how quick we started, and all the exciting things that happened on the way and after

we got there—*especially* after we got there. Boy, oh, boy! It was fun—especially that night when we ran *ker-smack* into a kidnapper mystery, and some of us who were mixed up in it were scared almost half to death.

Imagine a very dark night with only enough moonlight to make things look spooky, and strange screaming sounds echoing through the forest and over the lake, and then finding a kidnapped girl all wrapped in an Indian blanket with a handkerchief stuffed into her mouth and—but that’s getting ahead of the story, and I’d better not tell you how that happened until I get to it, because it might spoil the story for you. And I hope you won’t start turning the pages of this book real fast and read the mystery first, because that wouldn’t be fair.

Anyway, this is how we got to go.

Some of us from the Sugar Creek Gang were lying in the long mashed-down grass in a level place not far from where the hill goes down real steep to the spring at the bottom, where my dad is always sending me to get a pail of cold fresh water for us to drink at our house. We were all lying in different directions, talking and laughing and yawning and pretending to be sleepy. Some of us were tumbling around a little and making a nuisance of ourselves to each other. Most of us had long stems of bluegrass in our mouths and were chewing on the ends, and all of us were feeling great. I had my binoculars up to my eyes looking around at different things.

First I watched a red squirrel high up in a big sugar tree, lying flat and lazy on the top of a gray branch as though he was taking a two-o'clock-in-the-afternoon sunbath, which was what time of day it was that Saturday. I had been lying on my back looking up at the squirrel.

Then I rolled over and got onto my knees and focused the binoculars on Sugar Creek. Sugar Creek's face was lazy here, because it was a wide part of the creek, and the water moved very slowly, hardly moving, and was as quiet as Pass Lake had been up in Minnesota in the Paul Bunyan country on a very quiet day. There were little whitish patches of different-shaped specks of foam floating along on the brownish-blue water.

While I was looking at Sugar Creek with its wide, quiet face and dreaming about a big blue-water lake up North, I saw some V-shaped waves coming out across the creek from the opposite shore. The pointed end of the V was coming straight toward the spring and bringing the rest of the V along with it. I knew right away it was a muskrat swimming toward our side of the creek.

As I looked at the brownish muskrat through my binoculars, it seemed very close. I could see its pretty chestnut-brown fur. Its head was broad and sort of blunt, and I knew if I could have seen its tail it would have been about half as long as the muskrat, deeper than it was wide, and that it would have scales on it and only a few scattered hairs. I quickly grabbed

a big rock and threw it as straight and hard as I could right toward the acute angle of the long moving V, which was still coming across the creek toward us.

And would you believe this? I'm not always such a good shot with a rock, but this time that rock went straight toward where the muskrat was headed. And by the time the rock and the muskrat got to the same place, the rock went *kerswishety-splash* right on the broad blunt head of the musquash, which is another and kind of fancy name for a muskrat.

Circus, the acrobat in our gang, was the only one who saw me do what I had done. He yelled out to me in a voice that sounded like a circus barker's voice, "Atta boy, Bill! Boy, oh, boy, that was a great shot! I couldn't have done any better myself!"

"Better than *what?*" nearly all the rest of the gang woke up and asked him at the same time.

"Bill killed an *Ondatra zibethica*," Circus said, which is the Latin name for a muskrat. Circus's dad is a trapper, and Circus has a good animal book in his library. "Socked it in the head with a rock."

Everybody looked out toward Sugar Creek to the place where the rock had socked the *Ondatra* and where the two forks of the V were getting wider and wider, almost disappearing into nothing, the way waves do when they get old enough.

"Look at those waves!" Poetry said, meaning the new waves my big rock had started.

There was a widening circle going out from where it had struck.

“Reminds me of the waves on Pass Lake where we spent our vacation last summer,” Poetry said. “Remember the ones we had a tilt-a-whirl ride on when Eagle Eye’s boat upset and we got separated from it? If we hadn’t had our life vests on we’d have been drowned because it was too far from the shore to swim!”

“Sure,” Dragonfly piped up, “and that’s the reason why every boy in the world who is in a boat on a lake or river ought to wear a life vest, or else there ought to be plenty of life preservers in the boat, just in case.”

“Hey!” Little Jim piped up, squeaking in his mouselike voice. “Your On-onda-something-or-other has come to life away down the creek!”

And sure enough it had. Way down the creek, maybe fifty feet farther, there was another V moving along toward the Sugar Creek bridge, which meant I hadn’t killed the musquash at all but only scared it. Maybe my rock hadn’t even hit it, and it had ducked and swum under water the way *Ondatra zibethicas* do in Sugar Creek and as loons do in Pass Lake in northern Minnesota.

“I’m thirsty,” Circus said. He jumped up from where he had been lying on his back with his feet propped up on a big hollow stump. That hollow stump was the same one his dad had slipped down inside once and had gotten bit by a black widow spider that had had her web inside.

Right away we were all scurrying down the steep hill to the spring and getting a drink of water apiece, either stooping down and drinking like cows or else using the paper cups that we kept in a little container we had put on the tree that leaned over the spring—in place of the old tin cup that we'd battered into a flat piece of tin and thrown into Sugar Creek.

All of a sudden, we heard a strange noise up at the top of the hill that sounded like somebody moving along through last year's dead leaves and at the same time talking or mumbling to himself about something.

"*Sh!*" Dragonfly said, shushing us, he being the one who nearly always heard or saw something before any of the rest of us did.

We all hushed, and then I heard a man's voice talking to himself or something up there at the top of the hill.

"*Sh!*" I said, and we all stopped whatever we had been doing and didn't move, all except Little Jim. He lost his balance and, to keep from falling the wrong direction—which was into a puddle of cold clean water on the other side of the spring—he had to step awkwardly in several places, jumping from one rock to another and using his pretty stick-candy-looking stick to help him.

We kept hushed for a minute, and the sound up at the top of the hill kept right on—leaves rasping and rustling and a man's voice mumbling something as though he was talking to himself.

All of us had our eyes on Big Jim, our leader. I was looking at his fuzzy mustache, which was like the down on a baby pigeon, wondering who was up on the hilltop, thinking about how I wished I could get a little fuzz on *my* upper lip, and wondering if I could make mine grow if I used some kind of cream on it or something, the way girls do when they want to look older than they are.

Big Jim looked around at the irregular circle of us and nodded to me, motioning with his thumb for me to follow him. He stopped all the rest of the gang from following. And the next minute I was creeping quietly up that steep incline behind Big Jim.

Little Jim also came along, because right at the last second Big Jim motioned to him that he could, as he had a hurt look in his eyes as if maybe nobody thought he was important because he was so little.

I had a trembling feeling inside of me. I just knew there was going to be a surprise at the top of that hill and maybe a mystery. Also, I felt proud that Big Jim had picked me out to go up with him, because he nearly always picks Circus, who is next biggest in the gang.

I didn't need to feel proud, though, because when I heard a little slithering noise behind me, I knew why Circus didn't get invited—he was halfway up a small sapling that grew near the spring. He was already almost high enough to see what was going on at the top of the hill. Circus was doing what he was

always doing anyway, climbing trees most any time or all the time, looking like a monkey even when he wasn't up a tree. The only thing that kept him from hanging by his tail like a monkey was that he didn't have any tail, but he could hang by his legs anyway.

When we had almost reached the top, I felt Little Jim's small hand take hold of my arm tight, as if he was scared, because we could still hear somebody walking around and talking to himself.

Big Jim stopped us, and we all very slowly half crawled the rest of the way up. My heart was pounding like everything. I just knew there was going to be excitement at the top. And when you know there is going to be excitement, you can't wait for it but get excited right away.

"Listen!" Little Jim whispered to me. "He's pounding something."

"*Sh!*" Big Jim said to us, frowning fiercely, and we kept still.

*What's going on up there?* I wondered and wished I was a little farther up, but Big Jim had stopped us again so we could listen.

One, two, three—*pound, pound, pound.* There were nine or ten whacks with something on something, and then the pounding stopped, and we heard footsteps going away.

I looked back down the hill at the rest of the gang. Dragonfly's eyes were large and round, as they are when he is half scared or excited. Poetry had a scowl on his broad face,

since he was the one who had a detectivelike mind and was maybe disappointed that Big Jim had made him stay at the bottom of the hill. Little red-haired Tom Till's freckled face looked very strange. He was stooped over, trying to pry a root loose out of the ground so that he'd be ready to throw it at somebody or something if he got a chance or if he had to. His face looked as if he was ready for some kind of fight and that he half hoped there might be one.

And if I had been down there at the bottom of the incline at the spring and somebody else had been looking down at me, he would have seen *another* red-haired, freckled-faced boy, whose hair was trying to stand up on end under his old straw hat and who wasn't much to look at but who had a fiery temper, which had to be watched all the time or it would explode on somebody or something.

Maybe, in case you've never read anything about the Sugar Creek Gang before, I'd better tell you that I am red-haired and freckled-faced and do have a fiery temper some of the time—and that my name is Bill Collins. I have a great mom and dad and a little baby sister, whose name is Charlotte Ann, and I'm the only boy in the Collins family.

I whirled around quickly from looking down the hill at the rest of the gang and from seeing Circus, who was up the elm sapling trying to see over the crest of the hill but probably couldn't. Big Jim had his finger up to his lips for all of us to keep still, which we did.

The pounding had stopped, and we could hear footsteps moving along in the woods, getting fainter and fainter.

Then Big Jim said to us, "He can't hear us now. His shoes are making so much noise in the leaves."

We hurried to the top and looked, and Little Jim whispered, "It's somebody wearing old overalls," which it was, and he was disappearing around the corner of the path that led from the spring down the creek, going toward the old sycamore tree and the swamp.

Big Jim gave us the signal, and all of us broke out of our very painful silence and were acting like ourselves again but wondering who on earth had been there and what he had been doing and why.

All of a sudden, Dragonfly, who had been looking around for shoe tracks with Poetry, let out a yell and said, "Hey, gang, come here! Here's a *letter* nailed onto the old Black Widow Stump!" which was the name we'd given the stump after Circus's dad had been bitten there.

We all made a rush to where Dragonfly's dragonflylike eyes were studying something on the stump, and then I was reading the envelope, which said, in very awkward old handwriting:

U R G E N T

To the Sugar Creek Gang  
(Personal. Please open at once.)

## 2

I just stood there with all the rest of the members of the Sugar Creek Gang, staring at the envelope and the crazy old handwriting on it that said, “Personal. Please open at once.”

Big Jim, the leader of our gang, reached out and tore the envelope off the nail that had been driven through the corner where the stamp would have been if there had been one. He handed it to me. “Read it out loud to all of us,” he said.

I couldn’t imagine what was on the inside. I didn’t recognize the writing and couldn’t even guess who had written it.

“Stand back, everybody,” Big Jim ordered, “and let him have plenty of room.”

“Yeah, let him have plenty of room. It might explode,” Dragonfly said.

I tore open the envelope in a hurry, and this is what I read:

Members of the Sugar Creek Gang—Big Jim, Little Jim, Poetry, Circus, Dragonfly, Bill Collins, and Tom Till—as soon as you can after reading this, make a beeline for Bumblebee Hill, climb through the barbed-wire fence at the top, and stop at the tombstone of Sarah Paddler in the old

abandoned cemetery. There you will find another letter giving you instructions what to do next. It is VERY IMPORTANT.

G U E S S

WHO

I read the letter out loud in a sort of trembling voice because I was a little scared. Then I looked around at different ones to see what they were thinking, but couldn't tell.

"What'll we do?" Little Jim piped up.

Little Tom Till swallowed hard as if he had taken too big a bite of something and was trying to swallow it. Then he sort of stuttered, "M-maybe a ghost wrote it."

I looked quickly at Dragonfly since he believes there is such a thing as a ghost, because his mother thinks there is, and right away he had a funny expression on his face. His dragonflylike eyes looked even larger than they were. "My mother told me to stay out of that cemetery," he said.

"Aw, fraidy-cat," Poetry said, "there isn't any such thing as a ghost. Besides, ghosts can't write."

"Oh, yes, they can," Dragonfly said. "I saw it in the newspaper once that a senator or somebody's speech was written by a ghostwriter and—"

"That's *crazy!*" Poetry said. "A ghostwriter is a person nobody knows, who writes something for somebody else, and nobody knows it. But it's a real person and not a ghost."

Poetry read an awful lot of the many books his dad and mom were always buying for him, and he was as smart as anything.

Tom Till spoke up then and said, “A ghost wouldn’t know that Bumblebee Hill had its name changed from Strawberry Hill to Bumblebee Hill, would it?”

And right away I was remembering that hill where the gang had had a fierce fight with a town gang, when Little Tom had still belonged to that other gang. We had all stirred up a bumblebees’ nest and had gotten stung in different places, which had hurt worse than each other’s fists had, and the fight had broken up. We’d given that hill a new name.

In that fight, as you may know, two red-haired boys had had a terrible battle. One of the red-haired, freckled-faced boys had licked the other one all to smithereens for a while—until I started fighting a little harder, and then I’d licked him even worse, all in the same fight.

Big Jim said, “A ghost probably couldn’t spell our names. Anyway, let’s get going to the old cemetery and see what happens.”

With that, Circus was already on his way, running like a deer. All of us were right at his heels, running as fast as we could go.

Talking about spelling must have reminded Poetry of a poem. As you know, he was always learning new poems by heart and quoting them to us. He knew maybe a hundred of them, and you never knew when he was going to start one at the wrong time. He hardly ever

got to finish one, though, because of the gang's stopping him or else it was too long to finish before we all thought of something we'd rather do than listen to his poem.

Anyway, while he and I were puffing along with the rest of the gang toward Bumblebee Hill, he started puffing out a new one I'd never heard before, and this is the way it went:

“The teacher has no E Z time  
To teach his A B C's:  
It per C V rance takes sublime,  
And all his N R G's.  
In K C doesn't use the birch  
All kindness does S A,  
The scholars who X L at church,  
In school will 1/2 to pay . . .”

“Don't use the word *birch*,” I panted to Poetry, and he panted back at me, “Why?”

“Because it reminds me of *beech*, and *beech* reminds me of a beech switch, which reminds me of a schoolteacher, and that reminds me of school, and—”

Poetry cut in on my sentence and said, “*Birch* reminds me of a birch tree away up North where we were on our camping trip once, and where I'd like to go again this year. In fact, it's getting so hot that I don't see how we can stand not going up there again.”

I looked out of the corner of my right eye at him as we dashed along behind and beside and in front of the gang toward Bumblebee

Hill. I said, "I don't see why we have to stay where it is so hot all summer."

That started him off on his poem again, and he got another whole verse in before we reached the bottom of Bumblebee Hill and had to save most of our wind for climbing and not much for talking. This is the next verse, which he puffed out to me. The poem was still talking about a schoolteacher and went:

"They can't C Y he makes them learn  
L S N and his rules.  
They C K chance to overturn,  
Preferring 2 B fools."

I found out later how to spell out the poem, when he showed it to me in his mother's old scrapbook. It was a clever poem, I thought.

*Puff, puff, puff*, up the hill we went, and at the cemetery we stopped. It was a real spooky place, all overgrown with weeds and choke-cherry and blue vervain and mullein stalks. The blue vervain was one of the prettiest wild-flowers in all Sugar Creek territory, but all the farmers called it a weed, and maybe it was. But up real close and under a magnifying glass, its flowers are very pretty.

Just as I was climbing through the fence beside Little Jim, holding two strands of barbed wire high enough apart for him to slither through and not get his nice new blue shirt caught, Little Jim, who is a sort of a dreamer and is always imagining what something or

other looks like, said to me, "They look like upside-down candelabra, don't they?" Little Jim knew I liked flowers myself, because my mom liked them so well and always wanted me to pick some and set them in vases in different parts of our house.

"What looks like what?" Dragonfly said and sneezed, and I knew right away that he was allergic to something in the cemetery, as he was allergic to nearly everything in Sugar Creek in the summertime. And when people are allergic to things like that, they nearly always sneeze a lot.

Little Jim finished getting through without getting his shirt caught and said, "The flower spikes which branch off from the stem of the vervain look like upside-down candelabra."

I remembered that his mother, besides being the best pianist in all Sugar Creek territory, was maybe the prettiest mom of all the Sugar Creek Gang's moms. She also had all kinds of flowers in a special garden at their home, and she talked about flowers so much that Little Jim probably knew all the different kinds of words that people use when they talk about flowers.

Little Jim broke off a stalk of vervain, and I noticed that there was a purplish ring of small flowers at the very bottom of every one of the slender flower spikes, which is the way vervain do their flowering. They begin with a little purple ring at the bottom of the spike about the first of July, and the flowers keep on blooming

all summer. The ring creeps up higher and higher until school starts about the first of September. Pretty soon the flowers get clear to the top, and then, like blue rings slipping off the ends of green fingers, they are all gone.

Well, soon there we all were, standing around in a sort of half circle, looking over each other's shoulders and between each other's heads, right in front of Old Man Paddler's dead wife's tall tombstone. Her name had been Sarah Paddler, and she had died a long time ago.

There were a couple of other tombstones there, too, for the old man's two boys. They had died about the same time many years ago, and now that kind old man, whom the Sugar Creek Gang loved so well, had maybe been using all the love that he'd had left over when his own boys died and was pouring it out on us *live* boys, instead of wasting it on a dog or a lot of other things.

Carved or chiseled on the tombstone was the figure of a hand with the forefinger pointing up toward the sky, and right below the hand were the words:

There Is Rest in Heaven.

Standing on a little ledge, and fastened onto the tombstone with tape, was an envelope like the one we had just found and had read down at the Black Widow Stump, and on it said:

U R G E N T  
To the Sugar Creek Gang  
(Personal. Open at once.)

This time Big Jim took the envelope and handed it to Little Jim, who read it in his squeaky voice to all of us, and this is what it said:

The Sugar Creek Gang is on the right track;  
Now turn right around and hurry right back—  
Go straight to the old hollow sycamore tree,  
And there, if you look, you will see what you see.

This time it wasn't signed "Guess Who," but the poetry sounded like Poetry's poetry, and I looked at him. He was busy studying the ground, though, to see if he could find any shoe tracks.

"Last one to the sycamore tree is a cow's tail," Circus said and was ready to make a dive for the cemetery fence.

Dragonfly got a funny look on his face, as if he was going to sneeze but wasn't quite sure whether he was or not. He looked toward the sun, which hurt his eyes a little, and that maybe made tears, which, with his face raised like that, tickled his nose on the inside. Anyway, he let out one of his favorite sneezes, which was half blocked like a football kick but went off to one side. Then he sneezed again three times fast, as if he couldn't help it, and said, "I'm allergic to something in this old graveyard. I'm allergic to ghosts."

Right away we were all dashing toward the barbed-wire fence, and all of us got through without tearing our clothes and went *zippety-zip-zip, dash, swerve, swish-swish-swish* toward the spring again. Then it was down the path that led along the top of the hill toward Sugar Creek bridge. And across the old north road. And up a steep bank. And down the path toward the old sycamore and the swamp—and also toward the entrance to the cave, which is a long cave, as you know, and the other end comes out in the basement of Old Man Paddler’s log cabin back up in the hills.

“I’m thirsty,” Poetry puffed beside me.

“So am I,” I said, and right that second I remembered that when I’d gone to the spring in the first place, more than maybe an hour ago, I’d taken a pail from our milk house and was supposed to bring back a pail of sparkling cool water when I came home. “There isn’t any hurry,” Dad had told me, “but when you do come back, be *sure* to bring a pail of water.”

“I will,” I had said to him, and now as we raced past the spring, I remembered that the water pail was on a flat stone down at the bottom of the hill by the spring.

“Who do you suppose is writing all these notes?” I said to Poetry, forgetting the water again.

“Yeah, who do you suppose?” Poetry said from behind me.

“Come on, you guys!” Dragonfly yelled back to us from up ahead, and we all swished on.

It was quite a long run to the sycamore tree, but we got there quick and found Circus and Big Jim already inside the big long opening in its side, looking for the letter or whatever it was we were supposed to find. In a jiffy Circus had out a paper and was waving it around in the air for us to see.

When we gathered around, I saw that it was an envelope with our names on it, but this was an actual honest-to-goodness letter with a postmark. When I got close enough to see, I saw it said "Pass Lake, Minnesota."

And something in my heart went flippety-flop. I just knew who the letter was from. For some reason I knew what was going to be inside. It was going to be a letter from the same friendly big man on whose Pass Lake property we'd had our camp last summer, and he was inviting us to come up again for a week or two or maybe more.

It certainly didn't take us long to find out that I was right, which I knew I was.

"It's from Santa Claus!" Dragonfly said.

Santa Claus was the name we'd given the man whom we'd liked so well on our camping trip and whose wife had made such good black-berry pies.

We all read the letter and felt so wonderful inside we wanted to yell and scream.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

There was one paragraph in the letter that bothered us, though, and it was:

Be sure, of course, to get your parents' consent, all of you, and be sure to bring along your fishing tackle. Fishing is good. Little Snow-in-the-Face will be eager to see you all. He has been very sick this past week and has been taken to the government hospital. Be sure to pray for him. His big brother, Eagle Eye, still has a Sunday school going here, but his mother and father are not yet believers on the Lord Jesus Christ, and that makes it hard for him. But Snow-in-the-Face is a very brave little Christian.

And right that second, we heard footsteps coming in our direction. Looking up, I saw a brown smiling face and a row of shining white teeth with one all-gold tooth right in front, and I knew it was Barry Boyland, Old Man Paddler's nephew, who had taken us to Pass Lake last year.

"Hi, gang!" he called to us, and we called back to him, "Hello, Barry." Then we all swarmed around him to tell him about the letter and to ask questions, all of us knowing that he was the one who had written the notes for us, just to make the last letter more mysterious and more of a surprise.

Well, it was time to go home and try to convince our parents that we all needed a vacation very badly. For some reason I wasn't sure my folks would say I could go.