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When you just *know* there's going to be some exciting trouble in the next twelve minutes or less, you have to make your red head do some quick clear thinking, if you can.

Not a one of the Sugar Creek Gang knew *what* was going to happen, but the very minute I heard that outboard motor roaring out on the lake, sounding as if it was coming straight toward the shore and the old icehouse we were all in, I said, "Quick, gang! Let's get out of here and get this ransom money back to camp!"

Little Jim's gunnysack had a lot of money in it right that minute, money that we'd dug up out of the sawdust in that abandoned icehouse. The sack was nearly filled with stuffed fish, big and middle-sized northern and walleyed pike with thousands and thousands of dollars sewed up inside.

I won't take time right now to tell you all you maybe ought to know about how we happened to find that ransom money buried in the sawdust of the icehouse. That'd take too long, and, besides, you've probably read all about it in the last story about the Sugar Creek Gang, which is called *The Treasure Hunt*.

I'd better tell you, though, that a little St. Paul girl named Marie Ostberg had been kid-

napped and the kidnapper had hidden up in the Chippewa Forest of northern Minnesota in what is called “Paul Bunyan Country,” where we were camping. Our gang had found the girl in the middle of the night and then captured the kidnapper in an old Indian cemetery the next night.

Then we had a very mysterious and exciting time hunting for the ransom money in one of the strangest places in all the world to find money. At last we found it in this very old ice-house, sewed up inside these great big fish, which we’d been digging up and stuffing into the gunnysack.

In maybe another seven minutes we’d have had it all dug up and into the sack and would have been on our way back to camp. But all of a startling sudden we heard that outboard motor roaring in our direction. We knew that unless we moved fast we would never be able to get out and far enough away into the bushes not to be seen.

“What’s the sense of being scared?” Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of our gang, asked me right after I’d ordered us all to get going quick. “The kidnapper’s caught and in jail, isn’t he?”

“Sure, but old hook-nosed John Till’s running loose up here somewhere,” I said.

John Till was a very fierce man and the unpleasant dad of one of the members of our gang. He had been in jail a lot of times in his wicked life and was staying in a cabin not more

than a quarter of a mile up the shore from where we were right that minute.

Poetry, the barrel-shaped member of the gang, who knew 101 poems by heart and was always quoting one, turned around quick, scrambled back across the sawdust we'd been digging in, and peeped through a crack between the logs toward the lake.

"Who is it?" I asked.

And he said in his ducklike, squawky voice, "I can't tell, but he looks awful mad."

Well, anybody knows that nobody could see well enough *that* far to see a person's face and be able to tell whether it had a mad look on it. But if it was John Till, who hated us boys anyway, he probably *would* be mad and would do savage things to all of us if he caught us in that icehouse taking the money.

So we all scrambled as fast as we could out of that icehouse and into the open, carrying Little Jim's gunnysack full of fish. We made a dive across an open space to a clump of bushes, where we wouldn't be seen by anybody on the lake.

Circus, the acrobatic member of our gang, was with us, and he, being the strongest of us, grabbed up the sack, swung it over his shoulder, and loped on ahead.

"Hurry!" we panted to each other and didn't stop running until we reached the top of the hill, which we did just as we heard the outboard motor stop. There we all dropped down on the grass, gasping and panting and happy

that we were safe. But I was feeling pretty bad to think that there were probably a half dozen other fish still buried in the sawdust in that old log icehouse.

“Quick, Poetry, give me your knife,” Circus ordered.

“What for?” Poetry said and at the same time shoved his hand in his pocket and pulled out his official Boy Scout knife. He handed it over to Circus, who quick opened the heavy cutting blade and started ripping open the sewed-up stomach of the northern pike he’d just pulled out of the sack.

“There’s no sense in carrying home a six-pound northern pike with only a quarter of a pound of twenty-dollar bills in it,” Circus said.

I knew he was right. It was a long way back to our camp, and if for any reason we had to run fast, we could do it better without having to lug along those great big fish, especially the biggest one.

I didn’t bother to watch Circus then, because I started peering through the foliage of some oak undergrowth back toward the lake. And I saw a man come around the corner of the icehouse and stop. The old door hung open, but I could see several boards nailed across the opening on the inside.

“Look!” Dragonfly said. “He’s got a big string of fish.”

And sure enough he had.

Little Jim, who was beside me, holding onto the stick he always carried with him when

we were on a hike or out in the woods, whispered close to my ear, "I'll bet he's got a lot more money sewed up in a lot more fish and is going to bury it in the sawdust where these were."

I happened to have my high-powered binoculars with me, so I quick unsnapped the carrying case they were in. I zipped them out and raised them to my eyes, and right away it seemed I was only about one-third as far away as I really was. I gasped so loud at what I saw—or rather *whom* I saw—that my gasp was almost a yell.

"*Sh!*" Circus said to us, just as if *he* was the leader of our gang, which he wasn't.

I was leader today—that is, I was supposed to be, because our real leader, Big Jim, wasn't with us. He was back at camp with Little Tom Till, the newest member of our gang.

"It's old John Till, all right," I said. I could see his stooped shoulders, dark complexion, red hair, bulgy eyes, bushy eyebrows, and hook nose.

"What if he finds we've dug up part of the fish and run away with them?" Little Jim asked in a half-scared voice.

"Maybe he won't," I said and hoped he wouldn't.

While I was watching John Till toss his stringer of fish into the icehouse and clamber up the boards after them, Circus was slashing open fish and taking out the ransom money, which was folded in nice plastic bags, the kind

my mom uses in our kitchen back home at Sugar Creek.

We all helped Circus do what he was doing, all of us maybe more excited than we'd been in a long time, while different ones of us took turns watching what John Till was doing.

I knew that soon he would be out of that icehouse again and probably would go back to the big white boat he'd come to shore in. He'd shove off and row out a few feet, and then there would be a roar of his motor, and away he would go out across the sunlit water, his boat making a long widening V behind him. Then we would sneak back and get the rest of the money.

Everything was now pretty clear in my mind as to what had been going on the last day or two. Perhaps John Till had been what police call an "accomplice" of the real kidnapper, and it had been his special job to look after the ransom money. He'd decided that the best way in the world to hide it where nobody would ever think of finding it would be to catch some big fish, cut them open, clean out the entrails, fold the money in plastic, stuff it inside the fish, and sew them up, the way my mother sews up a chicken she's stuffed with dressing just before she slides it into the oven for our dinner.

Then he would dig down deep in the sawdust of the icehouse till he came to some ice, lay the fish on it, and cover it up. Nobody would *ever* think to look inside a fish for money. Even if they accidentally dug up a fish, it'd be cov-

ered with sticky wet sawdust, and they wouldn't see the stitches in its stomach.

While I was thinking that and also watching the shadow of John Till through the doorway of the icehouse, all of a sudden there was a quick gasp beside me.

I said to Circus, "What on earth?" thinking maybe he'd found something terribly special.

But he hadn't. He dropped his knife, leaped to his feet, and said, "You guys stay here! I'll be right back."

"Stop!" I said. "Where are you going?" I remembered I was supposed to be the leader.

But Circus had his own ideas about that. He squirmed out of my grasp, almost tearing his shirt because I had hold of it and didn't want to let go.

The next second there were only four of us left—barrel-shaped Poetry; kind-faced, great Little Jim; pop-eyed Dragonfly; and me, red-haired, fiery-tempered, freckle-faced Bill Collins. Circus, I saw, was streaking through the bushes as fast as he could go toward the lake and the icehouse but not getting out in the open where John Till could see him.

What on earth? I thought. I didn't dare yell or try to stop him by whistling, or John Till would have heard me. And then who knows what might happen? I didn't have the slightest idea what Circus was up to.

He darted like a scared chipmunk out from some bushes not far from the icehouse and made a dive for the open door.

*He's crazy! I thought. He's going to try to—
what is he going to try to do?*

I soon found out. It happened so fast that I didn't even have time to think.

Swish! Wham! A half-dozen flying movements and it was all over. Circus grabbed that icehouse door, swung it shut, lifted the big heavy bar and threw it into place, and old hook-nosed John Till was locked inside.

2

Circus no more slammed that icehouse door shut and dropped the heavy bar into place, locking John Till in, than there was a loud pounding and a yelling that sounded as if there was a madman inside.

What to do next was the question. We were an awfully long way from camp, and we five boys certainly weren't big enough to capture him ourselves. Besides, yesterday when we'd first seen him, he'd had a big hunting knife, and who knew but what he might have a gun too? Anybody as fierce and as mad as John Till was right that minute—well, you couldn't tell what he might do if he got a chance.

Circus was coming in our direction now as fast as he could. When a few seconds later he came puffing up to us, he exclaimed, "Come on, gang. Let's run back to camp and get help."

And right that minute I got a bright idea of my own. In fact, it had been swishing around in my mind ever since I'd seen Circus wham that door shut. I said, "Come on, gang. Follow me, and we'll get help in a hurry."

I grabbed up the gunnysack, which had the rest of the stuffed fish in it and the packets of ransom money, and it felt as light as a feather

as I started on a dash straight toward the ice-house again.

“Where are you going?” Poetry yelled.

“Back to camp,” I said. “Come on!”

“Camp’s in the other direction,” Dragonfly called after me.

“Do as I say,” I yelled back over my shoulder and kept on running like a deer, right for the icehouse.

It felt good to realize that all the gang was following along after me, that I *was* actually the leader—for a while anyway. I had what I thought was a great idea. My dad once told me what happens to a person when he becomes a leader. First, he gets an idea about something that he thinks is wonderful and that ought to be done, and right away he starts getting a lot of people to help him do it.

You see, while Circus was slamming that door and shutting old John Till inside, I was watching with my binoculars. I’d seen John’s white boat, which was beached there at the lake, and had noticed that the outboard motor, which was tilted forward in the stern, had a beautiful black shroud on it. I saw it was the same kind our camp director had, and I’d been learning how to run it during the past week. That boat had a powerful motor and could go terribly fast on a lake.

(If there is something I’d rather do than anything else, it is to sit in the stern of a boat, with one hand on the steering handle and, facing the prow, go roaring out across the water

with the wind blowing into my freckled face as I watch the shoreline flash by.)

I also knew that the water in many of the big blue-water lakes up here in the north woods was kept fresh because the Mississippi River flowed through them, flowing from one lake to another. I'd studied a map of the territory and knew that, if we could use that boat, we could go roaring up the lake terribly fast, pass the old Indian cemetery in three or four minutes, and a little later come to a place where the Mississippi flowed out of this lake into a long narrow channel into the lake on which we had our tents pitched. Once we got into that other lake, we'd race up the shore and get back to camp in less than half the time it would take us to hike through the woods carrying a heavy sack of fish.

We could leave John Till locked up in the icehouse while we were gone and hurry back with Big Jim and maybe some other help. Before long we'd have John Till *really* captured. After that, we'd tell the police what we'd done, and then we could claim the reward for finding the thousands and thousands of dollars that the little Ostberg girl's dad had paid to the kidnapper.

In a minute I was hurrying past the icehouse with my gunnysack of fish. I stopped just for a second to listen, but everything was pretty quiet. I noticed that the heavy door was really strong, and I didn't see any way John Till could get out. There also was only one place where

he could even *see* out, and that was through a crack on the side next to the lake.

And then all of us were in the boat, had shoved off, and were rowing out to deep enough water to make it safe to start the motor without its propeller striking on the bottom. It was a pretty sunshiny day, with only a few scattered white clouds in the sky.

I was pretty nervous and scared and also brave at the same time. It wasn't our boat or our motor, but we weren't *stealing* it. We were amateur detectives using the criminal's boat to get some help to capture him.

In another minute we'd be gone. Poetry sat in the middle on a seat by himself, Dragonfly and Little Jim were in the one right in front of me, and Circus had a narrow seat up in the prow.

"I don't see why you don't let me run it," Poetry complained. "After all, I taught you how to run it in the first place."

"*Sh!*" I said. "Can't you cooperate?" That is a word my dad sometimes uses when he wants me to obey him. "You keep your eye on the gunnysack there between your feet."

I quick opened the gasoline shutoff valve as far as it would turn, being sure first that the air vent on the tank was open. Then I shoved the speed control lever over to where it said "Start," primed the motor, and gave the starter knob a fast sharp pull. John Till's powerful motor roared itself to life, and the boat started whizzing up the lake. I made a couple of other

quick adjustments, and away we went, the wind blowing hard in our faces or against our backs, depending on which direction we were facing.

Circus yelled over the tops of the other kids' heads to me and said, "Hey, Bill. He's yelling and screaming for us to stop."

"Let him yell," I said. "We'll give him something to yell about a little later." I shoved the speed control lever to the right, and our boat really shot forward, Circus's prow raised itself partway out of the water, and we went flying up the shore at a terrific rate of speed.

It had been a wonderful vacation for all of us, I thought, and yet we still had a half-dozen days before we would get into the station wagon and drive the long day and a half back to Sugar Creek. We'd had a lot of fun fishing and swimming and solving mysteries, such as finding a kidnapped little girl, capturing the kidnapper, and digging up the ransom money—a lot of which was right there in the boat with us, some still in the stomachs of the fish in the gunnysack. The rest of the money was probably all sewed into the other fish that John Till had with him right that minute while he was locked up in that icehouse jail. Of course, we still had to actually capture him.

Thinking that, I said to Poetry as he sat grinning in front of me—one of his pudgy hands holding onto the gunwale on each side—"I'll bet Big Jim'll want to call the police and let *them* capture John."

Not a one of us liked that idea very well,

and we all said so, although we'd all had enough dangerous experiences for one vacation.

It was Little Jim's newest hobby that helped make this last story of our northern camping trip one we'd never forget as long as we lived.

And this is the way his hobby got mixed up with our mystery. Our boat had just rounded a bend and was about to swish past the old Indian cemetery where we'd had so many exciting experiences and—as you maybe know—where we'd caught the kidnapper himself one spooky night, when all of a sudden Little Jim yelled, "Hey, gang, there's a whiskey bottle floating out there in the water. Let's stop and get it."

He pointed toward the shore where the cemetery was, and there *was* what looked like a whiskey bottle floating on the surface.

"We don't have time to stop," I yelled to Little Jim and didn't bother to throttle the motor even a little bit. But when I saw that little guy's happy face suddenly get a sad expression on it and saw him drop his head the way a friendly dog does when you scold it, I felt sorry for him and decided that maybe seventeen seconds' lost time wouldn't make any difference. So I shoved the speed control lever to "Slow" and shoved the steering handle around so that we'd cut a wide circle, and then we were putt-putting slowly back toward the floating bottle.

You see, all the members of the Sugar Creek Gang were almost as interested in Little Jim's new hobby as he was. For about a week he'd been collecting all the old empty whiskey bot-

bles he could find. Being an honest-to-goodness Christian boy who hated whiskey because it was a terrible enemy of mankind and made so many people in the world sad and caused so much trouble, he had been putting gospel tracts in the bottles with a little note, which he scribbled in his own handwriting.

A gospel tract, just in case you might never have heard of one, is a little folder with a printed message on it telling whoever reads it something important out of the Bible, especially how to be saved and become a Christian.

The kind of awkward scribble that Little Jim tucked into each bottle along with the tract always said the same thing, which was: "Whoever finds this, please believe that God loves you. If you're not saved, remember Jesus died on the cross for you and wants you to pray to Him and thank Him for doing it and give your heart to Him *quick*. If you don't know how to do it, send me your name and address, and I'll send you a free book telling you how."

Little Jim would sign his name, Jim Foote. He also gave his Sugar Creek address. Then he'd cork up the bottle good and tight and toss it out into the lake for somebody to find and read.

We'd all been having fun helping him, and we could hardly wait till we got back home to Sugar Creek to see if Little Jim had any mail from anybody who had found one of his notes.

You see, Little Jim had his mind made up that sometime, when he was grown up, he was

going to be a missionary, but he couldn't wait that long to be one so he was trying to be one *now*. Since he was a great guy and also one of my best friends, I had decided I wasn't going to wait till I was any more grown up than I was before doing it too.

Our boat was gliding slowly up alongside the bobbing bottle, and Circus, who was closer to it than Little Jim, reached out his hand and caught hold of it and started to hand it over to Little Jim. Then he let out a yell and said, "Hey, it's got something tied to it!"

I saw it had. There was a piece of heavy fishing line tied around the bottle's neck, and something was fastened to the other end away down in the water somewhere.