

1

I've been racking my brain, which is supposed to be under my red hair, trying to remember if I've ever told you the story of the haunted house at Sugar Creek and what happened there one night when we went on a coon hunt with Circus's dad's long-nosed, long-eared, long-legged, long-voiced, long-tongued hounds.

Circus is the name of the acrobatic member of our gang, and his dad is the father of a large family of nearly all girls and only one boy. His dad is the best hunter in all Sugar Creek territory.

The things that happened around and in and on top of that old haunted house would make any boy's red hair stand on end and also scare the living daylights out of him—which is what they did to me.

As I said, I've been racking my brain to see if I've ever told you about that haunted house, and I can't remember having written even half a paragraph about it. So here I go with that spooky, weird, and breathtaking story about the old abandoned house that was way up on a hill above Sugar Creek on some wooded property that belonged to Old Man Paddler.

Old Man Paddler is the kindest, friendliest, longest-whiskered old man who ever lived. He

likes kids a lot and is always doing something that will make them happy or that will be good for them.

Of course, you know there isn't any such thing as a haunted house, which usually is supposed to be a house that nobody lives in but which is visited every now and then by a "ghost." Not a one of us believed in ghosts, except Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member of our gang. He is superstitious because his mother is.

When we heard about that old house in the woods and about the strange noises inside it that nobody could explain—well, it looked as if we were in for another exciting experience, different from any we'd had in our whole lives. It was while we were having a gang meeting one summer day on Bumblebee Hill that we first learned about it.

As quick as I had finished dinner that day, I looked across the table to where my grayish-brown-haired mom sat with my little sister Charlotte Ann in her lap.

My face must have had a question mark on it, because when Mom looked at me, she said the most surprising thing. I couldn't even imagine her saying it, it was so strange. She said, "Certainly, Bill, if you want to. I'm feeling just fine and not a bit tired. I can do the dishes alone for a change. So if you want to skip out and go down to your meeting with the gang, you just run along."

Imagine that! Mom nearly always expected me to do the dishes after every noon meal—

and so did Dad. And when both Mom and Dad expected me to do a thing, I nearly always did it, even when I didn't expect to myself.

I looked at Dad's big gray-green eyes under his shaggy brown eyebrows to see if Mom meant it, and if he was going to agree with her.

You could have knocked me over with a toothpick when he said, "That's right, Son, you run along to your gang meeting. Your mother and I have some things to talk over, and I'll knock off a little while from work and help her with the dishes myself."

Hearing him say that, and in such a way, made me suspicious that they wanted to get rid of me so they could talk about something that might especially interest me if I could hear it.

Still, I knew that in another minute I would dive for the screen door, shove it open, and make a wild dash across the yard. I would pass the big swing in our walnut tree, zip through the gate and across the graveled road, vault over the rail fence and run *swish-zip-zip-zippety-sizzle* down the path that had been made by barefoot boys' bare feet to the spring.

There I'd swerve to the right and dash up along another rail fence that bordered the top of a bluff just above the bayou. Then I'd swing right again and sprint to the foot of Bumblebee Hill and up its lazy slope to the old abandoned cemetery at the top. There we were going to have our gang meeting just as soon after lunch that day as all the members of the gang could get away from their houses and get there.

But with both of my parents wanting me to get lost in a hurry so that they could talk about something, I suddenly wished I could hear what they were going to say. I knew it wasn't polite to "eavesdrop," so I decided I wouldn't. It was almost by accident that I heard part of what they said—just enough to make me curious and want to find out more.

Right away I excused myself, scooped up my straw hat from the floor, where it wasn't supposed to be, and swished out our east door, which in the summertime is always open to help get a breeze through the house.

I was going so fast that I was halfway across our grassy yard before I heard the screen door slam behind me. Then I also heard something else, and it was, "*Bill Collins!* Come back here and close the door like a gentleman!"

When Dad says it like that, I always obey in a hurry.

I was trying hard to learn to shut doors like a gentleman around our house, but not having any older brothers or sisters to set an example for me, it was kind of hard. The only examples I had were my dad and mom, and they always shut the screen doors carefully anyway.

Well, I put on the brakes quick, stopped before I got to the walnut tree, dashed back, opened the screen door again, and shut it like a gentleman, which means quietly.

Then I saw our pitcher pump standing at the end of the boardwalk that runs out toward our barn. I saw the drinking cup hanging on a

wire hook on it. I decided to get a drink, because I always liked to hear the pump handle squeak when I pumped the pump.

After a cool gulp or two, I tossed what water was left in the cup out into a little puddle where maybe forty-seven yellow butterflies were getting a drink themselves. They were the kind of butterfly boys like to catch and also the kind that lay eggs on cabbage plants in the garden and whose worms hatch out of the eggs and eat up the cabbages. Those forty-seven—more or less—yellow butterflies all came to life quick and fluttered up in forty-seven different directions. Right away they started to light again all around the muddy edge of the little puddle of water.

I decided to go back past the screen door again, and just as I got there I stopped out of curiosity to find out if Mom and Dad were talking about me or something I had done and shouldn't have.

This is what I heard Dad's big gruff voice say: "Yes, it's too bad. Poor boy. He's got a tick and will have to have a doctor's care."

Who's got a tick—and what of it? I wondered, for there were all kinds of wood ticks around Sugar Creek and also different kinds up North, where we'd gone on a camping trip once.

Then I heard Mom say in her worried voice, which she sometimes uses when she is worrying out loud, "Yes, Theodore"—which is my dad's first name—"it's too terribly bad, and

it's his parents' own fault. They're always picking on him, and that's made him nervous."

"Poor Dragonfly," Dad's gruff voice said. "I wonder if I should have a talk with his father."

What they were saying didn't make sense at all. In my mind's eye I could see Dragonfly standing stark naked with both of his parents standing beside him, looking him over from head to toe and picking ticks off him, and Dragonfly not feeling well and having to go to the doctor. I wanted to call into the kitchen and ask Dad or Mom if Dragonfly was very sick, but instead I decided to run on down to the gang meeting, which I did.

Boy oh boy, I felt good as I dashed out across our grassy yard. I swerved out of the way when I came to the walnut tree, reached up and caught hold of the ropes on either side of the swing, swung myself up, leaped off, and dashed on through the gate past "Theodore Collins" on the mailbox. I made bare-foot tracks on the dust of the road as I vaulted over the rail fence, and away I went, feeling like a million dollars.

Even as I ran, I noticed the path was bordered on either side with wildflowers, such as buttercups, harebells, dandelions, oxeye daisies, and a lot of others. There were also mayapples, great big patches of them, with shining, light green leaves.

If there is anything in all the world that feels better than anything else, it is to run through a woods with bare feet on a shaded

path, smelling sweet-smelling flowers and pine trees and seeing different-colored butterflies flitting around—and maybe scaring up a rabbit and watching it run *hoppety-sizzle* in some direction or other to get away from what it thinks is danger.

I stopped at the spring to get another cool drink and looked out across Sugar Creek. I noticed that it was very quiet, not having a ripple on it but only a lot of different-shaped splotches of foam, which I knew were clusters of very small air bubbles sticking together. For just a second I thought about how well I liked old Sugar Creek and how I would like to go in swimming right that very minute with the rest of the gang.

Then, as I hurried on up along the rail fence toward Bumblebee Hill, I decided that Sugar Creek's unruffled surface with those specks of foam scattered all over it was kind of like a boy's face with a lot of freckles on it, which was the kind of face I had.

Sugar Creek and I were pretty good friends, I thought, as I dashed on.

I must have gotten an earlier start than any of the rest of the gang, because, when I came to the bottom of Bumblebee Hill, there wasn't a one of them there. Instead of going on up to the cemetery at the top, I just lay down in the grass at the foot of the hill and waited, hating to go up to the cemetery all by myself for some reason, even though there wasn't any such thing in the world as a ghost.

For a while I lay on my back watching some big white clouds up there in the sky, which looked sort of like the snow-white packs of wool that Dad shears off our sheep and ties into big white bundles for selling. I thought about how interesting it would be if I could make a quick jump clear up there and float from one cloud to another as if I was as light as a feather. Then I got to thinking again about how white they were, like my mom's sheets hanging on the line on Monday, and from that I thought of my parents and Charlotte Ann and her almost-snow-white soft skin and how cute she was when Mom was washing her face.

That made me think of Dragonfly, and at that very second I felt an ant or something crawling on my hand. That reminded me of Dragonfly's ticks. Also, at the very same time, I heard somebody sneeze and heard feet running, and I knew Dragonfly himself was coming.

I rolled over quick and sat up and squinted at him, not being able to see him very well because of looking up into the bright blue sky and at the snow-white clouds.

"Hi, Dragonfly," I said and looked at him to see if he appeared to be in good health, and he did, and I was glad of it.

"Hi, yourself," he said and plopped himself down on the ground and panted a while. He wheezed a bit, because he had a little asthma in the summer.

I looked at him, and he looked at me with his dragonflylike eyes, and he reached out with

his right hand and took hold of the fruit of a mayapple that grew close to where I'd been lying and started to pull it off. The lemon-shaped yellow fruit had been hanging the way the fruit of all mayapples do—from a little stem that was fastened at the fork of the mayapple stalk just under the spreading leaves.

“Did you ever taste one?” Dragonfly wanted to know and started to lift the round, smooth apple to his lips.

But all of a sudden he was interrupted by an excited small-boy voice calling out from somewhere not far away, “Hey, you, *stop!* Mayapples are *poison!*”

Even without looking, I knew it was Little Jim, the littlest member of our gang. He came dashing up to where we were, and I noticed he had with him a wildflower guide, which was open to a picture of a pretty green mayapple illustration. Finding out all he could about wildflowers and telling us about them whenever he found one he'd never found before—stuff like that—was one of Little Jim's hobbies.

Dragonfly didn't like to be stopped from doing what he wanted to do, so he bit into the mayapple. Then he screwed up his face into a homely twisted expression and spit out his bite quickly, drew his arm back, and hurled the rest of the apple up toward one of the white clouds that hung in the sky above Sugar Creek.

We all took a quick look at Little Jim's book, and I felt better when I read that “while the leaves and the stem of the mayapple are

poisonous, the fruit is not, but tastes very sour.”

There isn't anything much prettier in all Sugar Creek territory, though, than a bed of mayapples growing in a shady place under a tree, each stalk about a foot high, and each one having a snow-white flower with a yellow center. They were very nice to look at even though they weren't good to eat.

“Look,” Little Jim said, “here's a flower that's blossomed late. It's supposed to blossom in May, you know. See, it's got six petals, and the center has exactly twice as many yellow stamens.”

“So what?” Dragonfly asked, still with his lips puckered up and also rinsing out his mouth with saliva, which he spit out in the direction of Bumblebee Hill.

“They're *all* like that,” Little Jim said. “Every one that's ever born has only *one* white flower on it, and every white flower has just six petals and exactly *twelve* yellow stamens in its center!”

“Who cares?” Dragonfly asked in a disgusted mumbling voice.

Little Jim knew that it was important. I understood that little guy like an open book, and I knew what he was thinking about. I didn't say anything with my voice but only with my eyes when he looked into my green ones with his very clear blue ones. In fact, I didn't say anything about what we were thinking until quite a while later—not till a lot later in this story, when we were having some excitement that made some of our adventures in other years look like two cents.

2

Pretty soon the rest of the gang was there: Circus, the acrobatic member; Big Jim, our leader and the oldest one of us and the fiercest fighter; Poetry, the roundest one of us, who was the most mischievous and also the one who knew 101 poems by heart and was always quoting one at the wrong time.

We all lay down in the tall grass in the old cemetery and for a while didn't do anything except just tumble around and act lazy—all except little Jim, who kept moseying around with his flower guide, looking for new wildflowers and marking a page in his book whenever he found one and also putting down the date, which was the tenth of July.

All of a sudden, Big Jim sat up, looked from one to the other of us, then startled us by asking, "You guys hear there's a haunted house up on a hill about a mile down the creek on the other side of Old Man Paddler's cabin?"

"There is not," the rest of us told him.

But Big Jim said, "Oh, there isn't, isn't there? Look." He pulled a piece of newspaper out of his pocket, which he unfolded quickly, and we saw a picture of a weird-shaped house that looked maybe a hundred years old. Weeds and vines were growing all around it, the steps

were broken down, and torn blinds hung at dirty windows. Its front face had about the loneliest expression I'd ever seen a house have—like a very sad old man who needed a haircut and a shave and was hungry and didn't have a friend in the world.

Big Jim read out loud from the newspaper, and as he read I got more and more interested, and so also did all of us. Dragonfly looked worried, and Little Jim's eyes got big and bright.

I studied the picture of the old house in Big Jim's hand and noticed that the paper was a copy of the *Sugar Creek Times*. I'd read the *Sugar Creek Times* every week for a long time, but I hadn't seen any picture in it such as that, and so I couldn't believe it.

"Let me see the date," I said. I reached for the paper, but Big Jim jerked his arm away and held the paper at arm's length.

Poetry, who happened to be lying in the direction in which Big Jim had stretched out his arm, grabbed the paper and held on, and in a minute we were all seeing the date.

It was a very old *Sugar Creek Times*, which had been printed forty years ago. It was yellow with age and musty smelling, but there it was as plain as day—a picture of an old stone house, and the news caption below it said—with a big question mark after it—

HAUNTED HOUSE?

I shifted my position, being uncomfortable

because of sitting on my left bare foot, and also because of sitting on something kind of hard, which didn't feel very good to sit on. I shoved my hand under me, worked my fingers down into the matted grass to see what it was, then rolled over quick. It was a flint arrowhead, the kind Indians used many years ago.

"Hey, gang, look what I found!" I said and held up the triangle-shaped, sharp-edged piece of rock for us all to see. Thinking about the haunted house and Dragonfly, I said in a serious voice, but with a mischievous grin in my mind, "This arrowhead was on the end of an arrow that maybe killed a lot of people a long time ago when Indians lived around here. One man probably was shot right here in the graveyard. And when he fell dead, he fell right where Dragonfly is lying now. The very minute he died, his ghost jumped up and started running around the country until it found a place to live, and when it saw that old house, it decided that was just the place, so it moved in!"

Poetry knew I was only trying to be funny, so he tried to be the same way and said in an excited voice, "Hey, Dragonfly, get up *quick!* You're lying on a ghost."

Well, it wasn't funny to Dragonfly. Poor little guy, he couldn't help it that he was superstitious, and maybe we shouldn't have kidded him about it. But we liked Dragonfly a lot, and Dad says if anybody kids you it's a sign he likes you and be sure not to get mad.

Dragonfly frowned instead of jumping as

we'd expected him to. He got a stubborn look on his face and said, "Yes, and as soon as the ghost found out that it was a ghost, it turned a somersault backwards and knocked the breath out of two or three people."

With that, Dragonfly came alive and made a backward somersault in our direction. The next thing I knew, Poetry and I were being bowled over and mauled as if a steamroller had hit us.

It was good fun, but we still weren't having quite as much fun as we wanted to, certainly not as much excitement, so we held a gang meeting to decide on something interesting to do.

"I move we go up into the hills to Old Man Paddler's cabin and let him tell us an exciting story," Little Jim said.

Circus said, "Second the motion," and in a jiffy we had all voted "Yes" and were on our way. It was always fun to go up to Old Man Paddler's clapboard-roofed cabin in the hills.

At the rate we ran, it took us only a little while to get to the spring, where we all stopped and got a drink.

Circus, the fastest runner of any of us, got there first and was down on his knees on a stone beside the bubbling spring when we arrived at the old linden tree and looked down at him.

"You guys," he called up to us. "Take a look at this!"

In a second I was down there beside Circus,

frowning at a track of some kind that looked a lot like a baby's small hand that had its fingers spread and had been pressed down flat in the mud.

Poetry came puffing down next, with the rest of the gang scrambling after him. The minute he saw the track, he said, "That's a *ghost's* tracks. Look, there are a whole lot of them. See there, Dragonfly?"

"It's a wild animal of some kind," Little Jim said.

For some reason, I felt a strange, creepy feeling going up and down my spine, the way I get when I'm beginning to be scared.

Then Big Jim let out a low, surprised whistle and said, "Look at *that*, will you? It's got one toe missing!"

"One *finger*, you mean," Poetry said, and either Big Jim or Poetry was right.

On the other side of the little cement pool that my dad had made there to hold the spring-water—so that anytime anybody wanted to, he could dip in a pail or a cup and get a drink—was a stretch of mud. And the spread toes or fingers of some animal walking on the flat of its hands or feet had made maybe a dozen tracks there.

"Suppose it's maybe a bear?" Dragonfly wanted to know.

"Probably a monstrous coon," Circus said. "One that's been caught in a trap, maybe, and lost one of its toes."

I'd seen thousands of possum and squirrel

and rabbit and coon tracks in my life, but those were the strangest tracks I'd ever seen. And for some reason I was getting the most curious feeling in my mind that I'd had in a long time.

"Maybe it *is* a terribly big coon's tracks," Little Jim said.

I wished it was, but the tracks were too big for that, and they were too small for a bear, which we didn't have in Sugar Creek territory anyway. Also they looked too much as if they'd been made by a baby's hand, I thought, to be the tracks of any kind of vermin that lived in Sugar Creek.

Circus, who knew animal tracks better than any of the rest of us, acted worried. "It's too big for a coon," he decided, "but I know how to find out for sure."

"How?" we asked.

He said, "I'll go get old Blue Jay. If it's a coon, he'll open up with a wild bawl, and if it's something else, he'll just sniff at it and act lazy and disgusted and walk away."

"Who's old Blue Jay?" Dragonfly wanted to know.

Circus said, "It's dad's new bluetick coonhound, which he just bought. It won't take me more'n a jiffy. You guys stay right here, but don't you dare touch those tracks till old Jay's smelled them."

With that, Circus straightened up and scrambled *lickety-sizzle* up the little incline and past the linden tree. Seconds later I heard him

running through the dead leaves and grass as fast as anything.

Suddenly Big Jim turned to me and said, "Want to go along, Bill?"

"Sure," Poetry said, "he wants to go. Go ahead and go with him, Bill."

Somehow I felt my redheaded temper starting to get warm, and I wanted to sock something or somebody. I knew they'd said that because all the gang had found out that one of Circus's many sisters, who was kind of ordinary-looking but was also kind of nice, had sent me a pretty card on my birthday. Also, she was the only one of the different-sized awkward girls that came to our school who sometimes smiled back at me across the schoolroom when I ought to be studying arithmetic and wasn't.

But I had already learned that if I acted bothered when the gang teased me like that, then they would tease me even worse, so I said, "Sure, I'll go. Want to go with me, Dragonfly?"

He looked up quickly from studying the tracks and shook his head "No" while his raspy voice said "Yes" at the same time. Then he shook his head "No" again, with a kind of ridiculous-looking twist of his neck, and started clambering up the incline toward the linden trees as fast as he could with me right after him.

At the top, we saw a flash of Circus's blue overalls in the path that scalloped its way up the creek to the Sugar Creek bridge. We yelled to him to wait, which he did, and pretty soon

the three of us were running and panting and talking as we hurried along past oak and maple and beech and all other kinds of trees. Dragonfly was sneezing every now and then, because it was hay fever season and he always was allergic to a lot of things anyway, including ragweed and goldenrod, which grew all along the path.

I felt terribly bashful as we got close to Circus's house. All of a sudden I looked ahead and spied something like a girl out in their front yard. I noticed that she was about the size I was and was wearing a red dress that was almost exactly like the one my mom wears around the house sometimes and which Mom says is her favorite housedress. Mom had a pretty red print dress with a zipper front and a belt that tied in the back and two pockets up close to the neck, shaped like flowerpots.

When Circus ran ahead, all of a sudden I got an upside-down notion in my red head that I wanted to climb up on the rail fence that ran along the edge of Circus's lane and balance myself and walk on the top rail awhile. Before I could have stopped myself from doing it, even if I had known I was going to do it, I *was* doing it—walking along with my bare feet, balancing myself to keep from falling off. I managed to move in the direction of the red dress with the flowerpot pockets, although I was not able to see the dress very well because I had to watch where I was walking.

Everything would have been all right if I hadn't tried to see if I could stand on one leg

and hold the other straight out in front of me and make a complete turn by hopping with the other foot. The next thing I knew, I was on the ground on the other side of the fence in Circus's pop's cornfield, feeling very foolish and wondering, *What on earth?*

I decided to stay there awhile and not let anyone see me, which I did, crawling on my hands and knees between the corn rows toward Circus's house. All of a sudden, I began to notice the tracks my hands were making in the soft brown dirt. They were almost exactly like those we'd seen at the spring at Sugar Creek, only of course they were a lot larger.

Then I heard Circus coming back. He had with him the prettiest hound I'd ever seen—a great big, large-boned, straight-legged dog with a silky black head and black ears and a blue-and-white tail that was shaped like a question mark or else maybe like the sickle my dad uses to cut weeds. The rest of the hound was darkish white with small blue spots all over him, clear down to the very end of his toes. The hound had the saddest, lazy expression I ever saw on a dog's face, but he had kind eyes that looked as though he thought a boy was a good friend.

I wished Little Jim were there. If there is anything he likes to do better than anything else it is to stroke a friendly dog on the head.

"Look!" Circus said after we'd been hurrying back up the creek toward the spring. He stopped, while we all caught our breath—especially Dragonfly, who was slower because he had short

breath. "See how long his ears are? His ear spread is twenty-four inches from the tip of one ear to the tip of the other."

Circus spread the dog's ears out like a boy spreading out the wings of a pigeon. The hound twisted its head sideways a little, reached up real quick, and licked Circus's hand. Then, because Circus's face happened to be close by, he got licked in the face with old Blue Jay's long red tongue.

"He's a genuine bluetick," Circus said. "Dad paid a hundred dollars for him. He's the best coonhound we ever had, and he won't chase anything *except* coons."

"What makes you call him a bluetick?" Dragonfly asked, and I noticed, as he said it, that he twisted his neck again, funnylike.

Circus said, "Because of these little blue spots all over him. That's the name dog experts give to that kind of a dog."

Well, pretty soon we were there, and Circus took old Blue Jay, with his sickle tail over his back, down the incline to the spring at the base of the leaning linden tree. The rest of us watched to see what he'd do when he smelled the strange-looking tracks.

"It's pretty nearly bound to be a coon," Circus said, "because coons always wash their food before they eat it, and this great big terrible old coon probably stopped there and washed his breakfast this morning."

I knew coons did that, so I thought maybe Circus was right.

I don't know what I expected Blue Jay to do when he got to the base of the old linden tree and started to smell the funny-looking hand-like tracks of the animal or ghost or whatever it was. I remembered that, even before we got there, Circus had said Blue Jay was a very special kind of coon dog and that you could tell by the sound of his bawl when he was on a trail just what kind of vermin he was following. You could also tell by the sound of his bark whether he was still trailing or whether he had chased the coon or whatever it was to a tree or a den. On the trail it was one kind of bark, and when he was "treed" it was another.

But I certainly didn't expect to hear such a *weird* dog voice.

The very minute Blue Jay's nose came within a foot or two of those strange tracks, he began acting very excited and half mad—like a boy when he has walked with his bare feet through a patch of nettles, and his feet and legs itch so much that he can't stand it.

Old Blue Jay sniffled and snuffled with a noise like a very small boy who has a cold but doesn't have any handkerchief. The blue-ticked hair on his back stood up, the way a dog's hair does when he is angry at another dog or a person or a cat. He didn't act at all as I'd seen dogs act when they strike an animal's trail and are trying to decide which way it has gone so as to start following it.

He lifted his long nose off the ground and let out a long, high-pitched wail that sounded

almost like a ghost is supposed to sound at midnight in a haunted house beside an abandoned graveyard.

The next thing I knew, he had leaped across the puddle of water on the other side of the spring and was running along the edge of Sugar Creek, following the path that ran in the opposite direction from the swimming hole, straight toward the old sycamore tree and the cave. Every few seconds he let out a long, very weird-sounding high-pitched cry. I knew that if I heard it at night along Sugar Creek, it would send cold, bloodcurdling chills up and down my spine—which it was doing right that very minute anyway.

I had followed a coon chase on quite a few different nights when the Sugar Creek Gang had gone hunting with Circus's pop and his long-nosed, long-voiced, long-eared, long-tongued, long-legged, long-tailed dogs, and I was all set to follow old Blue Jay on a daytime hunt.

That hound certainly was a fast trailer. Quick as anything, he was nose-diving up and down the hill, wherever the trail went. Pretty soon he was bawling and running as fast as anything straight down the path toward the old hollow sycamore tree, which grows at the edge of the swamp and where our gang had so many exciting experiences.

We galloped along after him, stopping now and then when it seemed he had lost the trail. Whenever he lost it, he began running around in every direction, circling chokecherry shrubs

and papaw bushes and wild rosebushes and brier patches and diving in and out of little thickets until he found the trail again. But he still kept going in the general direction of the swamp and the sycamore tree.

“It’s a coon,” Big Jim said, “and it’s heading for the old sycamore tree.”

“How can you tell it’s a coon?” Dragonfly said from behind us, running as close to me as he could and having a hard time to keep up.

“Yeah, how can you?” Poetry puffed from beside me somewhere.

And Big Jim said, “I can’t for sure, but he acts as crazy as a coon dog is supposed to act when it’s on a coon trail.”

Well, I knew that Circus, who knew more about his dad’s hound than any of the rest of us did, would maybe know, so I asked him.

He said between puffs as he dashed along with me, “I don’t know. If it’s a coon, I’d think it wouldn’t go in such crazy circles.”