LAMAR AND ME

Robert David Ward

Illustrations by Julia Ward Youngblood

To Madie and Julia and Evelyn
Who Always Knew More Than I Did

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Introduction to the Digital Edition

"Daddy tell us a story about when you were little." The stage was set as Mama cleaned the kitchen and Rob, Susan, and I sat around the table after dinner. Remembering back, we were most likely attempting to avoid homework, chores, or maybe even bedtime. Our request almost always worked.

Daddy was a storyteller. He would make us choose the evening's offering and we were limited to one story. Did we want to hear about Lamar and the attempt to fly? Maybe Lamar and the giant megaphone, or the one about Lamar and the steam cannon? We loved them all! How to choose?

We finally convinced Daddy to write all of the stories down, and the hardcover edition of "Lamar and Me" was published in 1983. Many years later the adventures of these two still make us laugh out loud! The digital edition gives us the opportunity to share our love of these stories with a new generation and perhaps inspire them to share the stories of "when you were little."

Enjoy!
Julia Ward Youngblood
October, 2018

Foreword

Robert David Ward, a history professor at Georgia Southern College in Statesboro, has written a classic study of two boys growing up in Alabama during the 1930s and 1940s. The adventures in *Lamar And Me* are played out within the environs of Montevallo, a small town whose main cause for being was to house the state college for women. David and his alter-ego, Lamar, manage to explore, investigate, and attempt to alter their world. As far as the irrepressible duo was concerned, the planet earth was theirs to master. Usually their exploits failed, but they were no more dismayed or discouraged than boys before them, including Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, or girls such as Scout Finch of *To Kill A Mocking Bird* who lived further south in Alabama.

Thousands of Southerners will identify instantly with the idiomatic conversations of David and Lamar as well as those of their families, relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Speech patterns and provincialism aside, their lives will strike a universal chord among Americans of all ages no matter the geographical area in which they live. Lamar and David's story has a timeless appeal because one knows that inevitably their youthful idyl will end. Readers will realize that the boys' journey to adulthood is, in many ways, their own.

The author never strives for sentimental effect or fake nostalgia. The protagonists are real, and the narrative rings true. There are triumphs that defy the young men's ability to express in words and failures as sharp and painful as stepping on a nail. Nowhere is there a note of false romanticism. Instead, the episodes are poignant and usually hilarious (they are even funnier on a second or third reading).

The author's daughter, Julia Ward Youngblood, is responsible for the illustrations, and they are just right for the time and mood. With insight and affection, Professor Ward has written meaningfully of a time not so long ago, but, all the same, gone forever.

William Warren Rogers
History Department
Florida State University

I

Montevallo

I heard the story at an early age and I suffered through endless repetitions of it in ensuing years. But I never believed it. It was useful in impressing strangers, and helpful in moments of conversational duress, but that was it.

Our town, so goes the legend, was named by an early group of attentive and observant Spanish explorers who happened to be strolling by. Perhaps they were on their way to Birmingham and had poor maps. At this point official tellers of the story narrow their eyes and suggest that there is good reason to believe that it was DeSoto himself who did the honors. Coming into town on State Highway 25, the Spaniards, in my unofficial version, stopped on top of Holloway Hill and gazed out on the mountains and ridges beyond. Far away in the distance ran another ridge as high as the one they stood on, and in the valley between a lower ridge ran parallel between its taller brothers. Even now the sight is nice and pleasing although it has been years since it threw anyone into an aesthetic fit. But there is no accounting for Spaniards.

"Name, name, give it a name," all those Spaniards shouted, and DeSoto stepped up and looked at the scene and went into deep thought.

"I name it Monte Vallo," said DeSoto, "the mountain in a valley."

And his fellow Spaniards all cheered and laughed and ran around yelling "Monte Vallo" for a while.

All of this may not impress you and you may think that DeSoto was less than brilliant and imaginative. But you have to remember that DeSoto had been naming things all through Florida and Alabama. Naming things like "DeFuniak Springs" and "Three Notch" and "Hissop" is heavy work and inclined to take it out of a man.

In truth our town is named Montevallo, and for local boosters that has always been sufficient proof that the Spaniards named it just like the story said. Logical types will notice the problems in such reasoning, and even in my youth my developing rationalism found it wanting. If the Spaniards had named the town how indeed had later settlers learned of it? No one claimed that our city limit signs had been erected by the Spanish, and it seemed highly unlikely that the later English and Scotch-Irish settlers had been avid readers of early Spanish travel accounts. At that time I was ignorant of the fact that in most of life's human affairs the critical spirit is either wasted or simply inapplicable. A little fraud and pretense is never sufficient reason to deny one's birthright.

The things and the people that have touched us are unique in our own eyes—an unavoidable reflection of our own sense of worth and importance. But granting that, an impressive case can still be made for the uniqueness of Montevallo. It was a small town during the years that Lamar and I were players on its narrow stage. But it often rose above its provincial setting and it helped to endow a surprisingly large number of its children with the force and drive and aspiration that

produces the directors, the achievers, and the movers of this world.

Montevallo is located within a few miles of the exact geographical center of the State of Alabama, almost precisely on the line of demarcation between the flat and sandy plains of the south and the mountainous mineral belt of the north. The major use of being the center of anything is that everything else is around you. In our case if a giant pin was stuck into the center of Alabama and the state was given a good spin, Montevallo would revolve slowly in a small circle while the poor people of Mobile in the south or Huntsville in the north would have to hang on for dear life.

Settlers may have been attracted to our area by its abundant limestone water and the surprising fertility of the hard red clay. But by the 1930's only an ever-decreasing number still tried to wrest a living from land made sterile through overuse. We were agricultural in our own special way, and we had little in common with the large farms of the southern Black Belt. Shelby County was marked with the marginal farms of a proud and independent people, staunchly Populist in the turmoils of the 1890's, and always a citadel for the patriot who failed to understand how outsiders could place taxes on whiskey. All of this was one factor in our heritage.

Amid the rolling and rocky hills that surrounded us, nature, perhaps realizing the limitations of supplying scenery alone, saw fit to embed a goodly quantity of high grade coal and lesser amounts of low grade iron ore. Montevallo coal was famous for its heating qualities and low ash, and the slag heap, a man-made mountain, still stands as testimony to the tons of coal hauled to the surface with sweat and constant danger. The effect of the coal mining industry was

to produce a *rural* proletariat that would have reduced Marx to tears and did reduce the mine owners to apoplexy and anger. Here was another element in our makeup.

These diverse strains might well have produced a rough and ready little town to act as the trade center for the area. And they did. But the effects were modified and transmuted by unremembered political trades and deals that made the town the site of Alabama College, The State College for Women. And it was this factor that came to dominate the town as farming faded away and the coal mines closed in spasmodic answer to the voices of supply and demand.

Perhaps the presence of hundreds of young ladies would have automatically provided a more gracious and gentler note. But if it had failed, there was the tone of intellectual and academic certainty that was absolutely radiated by our college faculty. This was a faculty of the old school. This means that while professors today have sunk in the social order and are poorly paid, professors at that time were highly respected and poorly paid. In addition, our professors were largely untroubled by nagging questions of doubt and untainted by the acid of relativity that eats away at the certitudes of truth and meaning.

Our faculty exuded knowledge and authority. No chemical process in its right mind would have dared to disobey Mr. Kennerly. No historical fact could possibly rise to refute Dr. Hallie Farmer, and even Freud himself would have quailed and retired in shock after facing the sheer authoritarian power of Dr. Minnie Steckel, Professor of Psychology.

On the adult level there was little town and gown controversy. The real wedges of separation often came down to the question of whether the son of a coal miner could find co-existence with the son of a professor of

music. Such questions were generally answered in the affirmative following a perfunctory number of fights.

Montevallo was a town where the Klan could march, striking miners could parade to air their grievances, and the college could invite the learned and erudite of the world to share their wisdom. Luckily these almost never happened at the same time. Montevallo simply wasn't your normal anywhere.

This was the setting that forced and shaped a distinctive generation until times changed and people died and nothing was the same anymore. We knew the people of our town and they knew us—the small town extension of family and belonging that brings a sharp sense of identity and wraps us in a security that never ends. And it was people more than places that set the tone and quality of our life. We had the sober and strait-laced, but we were blessed as well with the independent and the eccentric. There was Miss Eddy who bought a Studebaker and became the scourge of the streets. Specializing in tight turns, she cut down bicycle riders at every corner and climaxed her career by driving up the steps of the post office. In a vague and abstract way she was miffed at its poor choice of location. There was Miss Wells, our second grade teacher, who never hit anything in her 1938 Pontiac, but who down-shifted exactly one block from her driveway with such violence that passengers cringed in terror, dogs ran in fear, and a chill swept over the neighborhood as if a giant piece of chalk had been scraped on a blackboard. It was timidly and diplomatically suggested that it was unnecessary and even harmful to downshift at such high speeds, but a withering glare from Miss Wells immediately put such idiocies in proper perspective. There was Mr. J. Alec Moore, who, bemused and absorbed in the world around him, forgot to shift at all and drove for years in first gear.

Few towns could have boasted the free spirit and the talent of Mrs. Wooley who lived across the street from me. She would march along pushing her lawn mower through the grass and do a perfect front flip in the air. This maneuver was executed so rapidly that it confused the senses and was not generally accepted until the third observation. No one in town overlooked or forgot Mr. Weems' reaction to the famous Orson Welles broadcast of a Martian invasion. Mr. Weems was stunned by the news and then infuriated beyond reason by the arrogance of those green devils. By God, no dirty Martian was going to invade Mr. Weems' country without paying for it! He rushed into the street screaming a warning to the neighborhood and shouting pleas to an unknown authority to let him enlist in the fight. It was the equal of the gruff and taciturn Mr. Frost running after the departing milkman yelling out his order for "three buttles of bottle milk."

Above all else it was the college that dominated our life. The table-talk of deans and professors, the problem of students and grades and academic policies were the ususal subjects that we heard and absorbed. The college campus was our own special preserve. We played on the circular slides that served as fire-escapes for Main Dormitory, we secretly climbed up to the high cat-walks above the stage in Palmer Hall, and we practiced an unnecessary stealth and deception to gain entry to the rock-walled enclave of the King Family cemetery that broke the clean sweep of the college hockey field. We were old hands with colleges, blasé at the pomp and ceremony of inaugurations and graduations, infinitely superior to those silly screaming college girls at their annual College Night activities. Students came and went, temporary occupants of our world and of an area that belonged to us.

I never met Lamar. I always knew him. We were born two blocks and two months apart and the parallels helped to cement our affinity. Lamar was an only son with three older sisters—exactly the same genetic split that enriched my life even as I longed for a brother. We were born with the advent of the Great Depression, we were children of the last gasps of the older American society that disappeared forever in the Second World War. We were too young to fight that war—a compensation of history to a generation that lived its youth in straitened circumstances and found its prizes in its own inventions.

Lamar and I were friends. We were friends without rationale or declaration. No part of our relationship was ever stated or explained. The common denominators were all in place, we were bound together by an inexhaustable urge to know, to try, to find out, and to discover. This was an urge that our school signally failed to satisfy, dedicated though it was to the tenets of progressive education." But we were not to be denied. We turned to our own resources, we read widely and haphazardly, and we carried the usual boyhood projects beyond the bounds of tree houses, scooters and stilts.

Perhaps it was simple ignorance of some of our activities that produced our parents' toleration and understanding. But not entirely. I still find it hard to imagine Mrs. Appleton's calm acceptance as we burned a hole in the floor of Lamar's bedroom—not the last time that our experiments ran awry! Or her equanimity in the face of the endless fires we built in her backyard, our necessary preliminary as we took counsel and gave consideration to our latest plans. I remember her with fondness and great pleasure, a happy memory not purchased by the chocolate ice cream she was known to dispense.

The names and the people in these stories are real. There is no need to protect the innocent when all are in that category. Read on and learn again with me that the joy is in the seeking, and finding is anti-climactic in the end.

II

Lamar And The Giant Megaphone

It was a Saturday morning, a thing for rejoicing and a producer of a heady freedom. With breakfast eaten, and only my sister Evelyn remanded to the table to finish her bowl of oatmeal that grew and multiplied as she toyed with it, I addressed the day. There was no question of what must be done. There was urgent business to take up with Lamar, a half-formed idea that needed our collective wisdom.

"Mother," I said in the ritual notification of intent, "I'm going down to see Lamar."

And my Mother responded, as she always did, that that was fine but don't bother the Appletons and be sure to be back for lunch. I was never certain about that "don't bother the Appletons." Its meaning was locked fast in the adult mind. How was it possible for me ever to bother the Appletons?

Down the front walk, three giant steps, and a leap that landed me on the sidewalk with a solid thunk produced by my boots (the ones with a pocket on the side to hold a knife.) I was on my way.

Highland Street is four blocks long. It runs from the north gate of the college campus to the Siluria Road, and my house was at this junction. Lamar also lived on Highland and I turned to the right and started my

walk. I passed the vacant lots covered with sage grass and came even with the Klotzman's house. This was a new house, a rarity in those days, and I remembered the hours spent watching its construction that began with a mule pulling a scoop as a basement was hollowed out of the red clay. This was Harry's house. Several years older than Harry, and bound by the ethics of age, I could not include him in the important matters shared with Lamar. But he was always available for regular games and when we played army he proved himself a loyal and imaginative trooper. I liked Harry.

I walked faster as the end of the block drew near. A right turn would have taken me to Margaret's house (if you blew your fists she would answer) but this was no time for girls and trivialities. I passed the brick and rubble that marked the ruins of the Kroell house. It had caught on fire one night and the combined efforts of the volunteer fire department and the entire citizenry had failed to stem the blaze. The house was a total loss, but like all of our fires this one had served a positive social function. It had brought the town together *en masse*, it was a time to see old friends, catch up on the gossip and news and then return to your own routines invigorated by participation in a dramatic event. We played among the ruins, searched for the fortune that rumor said was hidden in the house and received our first introduction to the transiency of human affairs as we looked at the goldfish that still lived in the pool behind the house.

Next came the second Klotzman house, the home of Melvin. I knew that one Klotzman father was named Sam and the other Joe but I was confused as to which father was which. It was simpler to think in terms of Harry and Melvin, the real inhabitants of my world. Melvin was best remembered as the only boy in town who could put both legs over his shoulders and walk on his hands—his spider act, we called it. If Melvin was at

Lamar's he would have to be included in the idea. With the selfishness of youth I rather hoped that he wasn't.

On to the end of the block and Lamar's. And there, on the corner of the next block was his house. It was a small, low white frame house with Lamar's bedroom tacked on the back, an addition to the house as he had been to the family.

This was no ordinary morning. There on the front porch sat Mr. Appleton reading the paper. I rarely saw Mr. Appleton, and it seemed to me that he simply never talked. But I viewed his silence as benign and I held him in the greatest awe and esteem. He raised his hand in silent greeting as I walked up on the porch and the effusiveness of that greeting filled me with pleasure and embarassment as I nodded and went into the house.

Into the living room, down the hall to the left, through the girls' room and I had arrived.

"Hello," I said to Lamar who was sitting on the floor and reading a small pamphlet.

"Hello," said Lamar, "what do you know about the strange disappearance of Dr. Diesel?"

"What was strange about it?" I responded in a play for time.

"Well," said Lamar, "he invented the diesel engine and then disappeared."

Had there been some cause and effect in this? Might it really be quite normal to invent a diesel engine and then disappear? We had no answers and were left to muse upon the mystery. In later years I have been tempted to investigate this question. But memory has surmounted temptation and I have managed to leave the matter as we left it that Saturday morning. I like it better that way.

"I was reading," I said to Lamar, "about giant megaphones."

If you made a megaphone big enough it would carry even a whisper long distances and it had the added attraction of confusing a listener as to the source of the sound.

"Do you think," I added unnecessarily, "that we could build a giant megaphone?"

"No question about it," said Lamar. " How big should it be?"

"We'll have to work that out," I said, for I knew that this was one of the best parts of any project.

For an hour we sat on the floor and drew pictures of megaphones and debated the pros and cons of construction. And at the end we had our plans in mind. Our megaphone would be eight feet long, two inches wide for our mouths and about two and a half feet high at the large end.

It was the materials for construction that troubled us the most. It was understood, of course, that we could not *buy* materials. We always built with what we could find, we scrounged old boards, we pulled out nails and straightened them, we collected bits of string and rope. There was no other way to do it. But the giant megaphone did not fit the pattern of earlier projects. If we built it out of lumber it would be so heavy we could never move it and our available lumber supply was far too low anyway. The giant megaphone, we decided, would have to be built out of newspaper. There was plenty of that available and it seemed to solve the problem of weight. We would build it up from layers of newspaper held together by flour paste. For later generations who turn automatically to Borden's glue or mucilage I shed a tear. Flour paste built a million kites and glued a thousand valentines. It was a universal adhesive where paper was involved. It was readily removed from the fingers by licking, and the taste, while different, was not bad—not bad at all!

We laid our plans to collect newspaper at Lamar's house and at mine and then moved into the area of parental consent. Out of Lamar's room and into the kitchen where Mrs. Appleton was preparing lunch.

"Mother," said Lamar, "we've got to have a lot of flour to make flour paste."

"Oh," said Mrs. Appleton, looking up from the pot she was stirring, "there's not much wind for kites today."

"We're not making kites," said Lamar, "we're going to make a giant megaphone."

In your usual day the question of giant megaphones rarely if ever comes up. And if it did it would certainly be greeted with at least surprise and questions. But not from Mrs. Appleton.

"That sounds nice," she said. "You know where the flour is, get what you need."

And so we did. A woman like that is a joy forever.

It was decided that I would go home for lunch and return as soon as possible with all the newspapers I could find. Off I went, full of barely repressed excitement, considering the problems of folding newspaper, imagination racing in prospect of using the megaphone in strange and wondrous ways. I was home in time for lunch, hungry as usual but consumed by urgency to begin construction. My eating speed, never slow in normal situations, attracted the attention of my sisters and in defense I reported on the Giant Megaphone project. The reception was less than overwhelming, and I endured the comments of the pessimists of this world, ever ready to stifle the great idea and puncture the grand illusion. The best that I received was amused toleration, summed up in those soul-withering words—"Oh, David." It is clear in retrospect why we never hear of the Wright Sisters.

My arms burdened with a stack of newspapers I ran

to Lamar's house. And Lamar was ready. He had a stack of newspapers quite as large as mine and was busily mixing a huge bucket of flour paste. And so we began. We rolled and we daubed and we shaped. We discovered the tendency of wet newspaper to collapse. But we persevered. The megaphone grew in length and thickness, and the hours rolled by in the face of our single-minded concentration. But even darkness triumphs over enthusiasm, and we realized with regret that our project would have to go over to the morrow. Layers of newspaper, soggy with flour paste, take time to dry—surety demanded slowness and the day was at an end.

"I'll see you after dinner tomorrow," I said, and I walked home in the fading twilight, tired, satisfied, and sure that all life needed to give it meaning was a project still unfinished.

The next day being Sunday meant, in my scale of values, half a day lost from the great project. Sunday School could be enlivened through various strategems from the semi-legitimate baiting of our teacher with unanswerable theological questions to the completely illegitimate blowing of snuff into the air to produce gigantic collective sneezing fits. But there was little that one could do about the church service and the sermon that followed. This was the context that bred martyrs. The very young and the very old went to sleep while the rest had resort to rigid mental discipline as the minutes begrudgingly went their way. But in time, as they always did, came the words of release and rejoicing—"Let us all stand and sing our closing hymn number 396." While indifferent to the earlier singing, I always sang that last one with intense spirit and feeling.

I will not linger over Sunday dinner, nor did I then. There was work to be done and a great effort could

bring the giant megaphone to completion. I ran all the way to Lamar's, and I found him already in the backyard mixing more flour paste.

By this time the megaphone loomed above us and we were forced to climb a step ladder as we added necessary plies of paper. The megaphone was huge! It was the largest thing we had ever made, it was a thing of beauty wrought by our own hands. Struck with the pride of creation we circled it with admiring looks.

"Let's try it out," I said, overcome with anticipation.

"No," said Lamar, "we'll have to wait until tomorrow. By the time school's out it should be dry. We can carry it around to the front, prop it on the porch rail and talk all the way to town."

I bowed to Lamar's technical realism even as I regretted the passing of yet another day. For we had passed the problems that had plagued us. We stood on the threshold of fruition. Would it work?

Monday came and we went to school. I spent the day enmeshed in smugness, tolerantly superior of my fellows who were denied the supreme pleasure of going home to a giant megaphone. And when three o'clock finally came Lamar and I raced for his house. The moment was at hand.

The megaphone was heavy, far heavier that we had supposed. But we managed to carry it to the front porch, and with massive effort we picked it up and propped it on the porch railing. Sitting on its point of balance it could be swung around at will and it allowed the operator to sit in a porch chair, out of sight of the street. We could see all the way to the end of Highland Street and we waited for a victim.

For at least five minutes nothing stirred. The street was quiet, devoid of traffic. And then, one block away we saw a bicycle approaching. Rita Joyce Day was riding home from school. Aiming the megaphone,

Lamar, in a soft but authoritarian voice said:

"Rita Joyce come in the house right now."

Still a hundred yards from her house, she abruptly stopped her bike. She looked around her, baffled and amazed at her parents' ability to project their authority to such a distance. Lamar struck again:

"Rita Joyce, I said come in the house *right now.*"

Slowly she wheeled her bike down the sidewalk, propped it on a tree in her yard and sulkily, we thought, went into her house. She did not appear again.

We were convulsed with laughter, we were beside ourselves with a mixture of amusement and triumph. The giant megaphone worked! It really worked!

"Let me try it," I said, and I changed places with Lamar. "Let's try for some distance this time."

"Fine," said Lamar, "but remember that you barely have to whisper."

At this moment, two blocks away, Miss Bessie came out of her house. She turned left, walking slowly, perhaps on her way to town.

"Miss Bessie," I said through the megaphone, "Miss Bessie."

She stopped and looked behind her. She looked to the left and right. No one was about, the street was deserted. Shaking her head she started on her way.

"Miss Beeeeesie," I said again, this time with a wail of terror in my voice.

Miss Bessie jumped. She spun around, looking in all directions. And then, before I had time to speak again, headed for her house at a rapid rate, casting furtive looks at the houses along the way.

We had overachieved, the effect was beyond our expectations or desires. Miss Bessie had been afraid. It was no longer funny.

We never used the giant megaphone after that. It sat

for awhile in Lamar's backyard until rain reduced it to a giant mound of soggy paper.

"You know," said Lamar, "I think it was really more fun to build it than to use it."

"Yes," I answered. "I think you're right."

We moved on to other things.

III

Lamar And The Urge To Fly

It was one of those days when everything seems to be in neutral. My usual reading did not attract me, everyone at home was involved in their own pursuits. There was no one to talk to and nothing I really wanted to do. It was a fallow time. So I went to see Lamar.

I found him seated on the floor in his room, surrounded by hundreds of pieces of paper, laboriously writing and discarding his results in an ever-growing pile.

"What in the world are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm practicing forgery," said Lamar.

And he certainly was. On each piece of paper was written the words "Pass—R. L. Harrison."

Lamar delivered newspapers every afternoon and Sunday morning and I delivered on Sundays only. When we picked up our papers at 4:30 AM in front of the Alabama Power Company (it was the only place downtown that was lighted) our first job was to insert a copy of the picture show schedule for the coming week in each of our papers. Our pay for this additional work was two picture show passes each week. Mr. Harrison, our newspaper distributor, wrote the passes on the back of deposit slips from the Merchants and Planters Bank.

"But Lamar," I said, "why forge picture show

passes? We have stacks of real ones that we never use."

"I know," said Lamar, "I guess it was the challenge of the thing. I started to just trace one but that seemed like cheating. What do you think of it?"

I examined the last one that Lamar had done and compared it with the genuine article. There was simply no question about it. Lamar could write "R. L. Harrison" better than Mr. Harrison himself.

"Its perfect," I said, "I can't really tell which one is real."

"Yes," said Lamar, "I think I've got it. Notice how peculiar he makes r's and the n on the end looks more like a u."

At a great loss in deposit slips to the Merchants and Planters Bank, Lamar wrote out hundreds of passes. We added our genuine ones to the stack and although we still went to the picture show only on Saturday we never knew if we were using forgeries or not. It added an extra dimension to the weekly cowboy show.

With forgery perfected we sat on the floor and our conversation wandered over a diversity of subjects. This was a standard, if unplanned, procedure. Inevitably we stumbled on ideas that deserved further consideration. We were discussing the relative merits of Spitfires and Messerschmidt 109's, and I had contributed the point that a 109 was hard to pull out of a dive to the left (or was it the right?) due to the tremendous torque of its engine. It was at this point that Lamar said:

"I wish I could fly."

To the outsider, conditioned to the mental strait-jackets of thought, Lamar meant that he would like to learn to pilot a plane. But I instantly knew what he really meant—he wanted to be able to fly himself, to soar off independently of machines, to sail on high as an act of his own volition.

whole armies anywhere you want and the surprise is going to be terrific."

"I don't know," I said. "It looks like the Germans lost a lot of men in Crete. I guess they did have surprise, but if the British had reacted a little quicker they might have held their own a little better."

"No," said Lamar, "I don't think it would have helped. Parachute troops are going to be used everywhere before the war is over. It's going to be a revolution in war."

"Maybe so," I said, with lingering doubts. "I wonder what it feels like to come down with a parachute?"

"It must be great," said Lamar, "to slowly float down, hanging in the air and looking out miles in all directions."

"Yes," I said, "it would be great to make a jump with a parachute."

"You know," said Lamar, "I think we could make parachutes and try them out. We could take them up on something high and jump off. It wouldn't be like jumping from an airplane and we wouldn't be in the air very long but we would know what it felt like."

"Yes," I said, "I think it can be done. We can make parachutes out of old sheets. We won't be able to fold them up and let them open because we won't have that much time. If we have them spread out they should catch the air immediately and we'll float down."

"Terrific," said Lamar. "Let's see if our Mothers have some old sheets, and we'll need some rope to make the shroud lines."

We had called upon our respective Mothers and each had furnished an old sheet that otherwise would have been used for dust cloths or torn into strips to bandage our cuts and abrasions. I now realize how much more comforting a sheet bandage is than one made of gauze.

attained a height of twelve to fifteen feet. When dried they were light in weight although they lacked the strength that bamboo would have given us. Instead of running string around the tips of the sticks, as we did with ordinary kites, we would have to use much heavier cord and the kite would have to be covered with many layers of newspaper instead of the usual one.

A trip down the dirt road that led to the creek produced three sticks at least twelve feet long, and endless rummaging at my house and Lamar's furnished us with the necessary cord. The sticks were laid together like this ✕ and bound together with rope at their intersection. Heavy cord was strung around the ends. We made a huge piece of newspaper covering, held together, of course, with flour paste, and the frame was placed on top of the paper so that the covering could be trimmed to the proper size.

In the realm of building materials there is little doubt that Lamar and I were born too soon. In later years we would have opted for aluminium poles and sheer nylon covering and cord. But in the aftermath it was just as well that we built crudely and to less than prerequisite standards.

We had debated the possibilities of placing another stick across the bottom of the kite for the flyer to hang from, but it seemed more secure to run an arm around the center of the poles and hang on to the back of the kite. But without a person hanging below it, the kite would still need a tail, and one of enormous length. A pile of rags, torn into strips and tied together produced a tail twenty feet long.

We looked at the kite and we looked at each other. The kite was huge, dwarfing the largest we had ever made. But to our credit we shared a sense of unease, a feeling of miscalculation.

"You know," said Lamar, "I don't believe it can lift us up."

"Yes," I said, "I don't believe a hurricane could pick up that kite with us hanging on it."

"Furthermore," said Lamar, "if it did pick us up I don't think the other one could hold it."

We mused on the situation. It was obvious we would have to optimize the basic factors to have any chance of success. We needed someone to fly much lighter than we were, and we needed a really strong wind to handle the weight. Sooner or later the wind would come, but we had to have a new recruit, a light-weight test pilot.

"Maybe," I said, "we could talk Babe into flying it."

Babe lived across the street from me, and having acquired his name by being the youngest child, retained it after a sister came along.

"I don't think he'll do it," said Lamar, "not after the pine tree incident."

Lamar was referring to a prior flight taken by Babe caused when the three of us had climbed a young pine tree and ridden it down to the ground. Due to a serious lack of communication, Lamar and I had gotten off the tree at the same time, leaving Babe still astride. The pine tree had snapped erect and hurled Babe through the air in a great soaring arc. He landed in a honeysuckle thicket and emerged, miraculously, with only scratches to mark the occasion. Nevertheless he showed a lingering suspicion of our motives.

"Well," I said, "we'll have to convince him, nobody else we know weighs as little as Babe."

"O.K.," said Lamar, "let's have a talk with him."

We found Babe playing in his yard, and with a great show of camaraderie we engaged in idle conversation. It seemed best not to take a direct approach. We needed to arouse his interest step by step.

"Babe," I said, "you won't believe the huge kite that we've made."

"Yes," said Lamar, "when we have a really strong wind we're going to fly it."

Babe was noncommittal but we detected a flicker of interest.

"How big is it?," said Babe.

"Very big," I said, "so big that it could pick up a person."

"Yes," said Lamar, "I really wish I could fly on it, but I'm afraid I weigh too much."

Babe was silent.

"You know," I said, turning to Lamar as if a new thought had suddenly struck, "I bet that Babe would be perfect to fly on that kite."

"I believe you're right," said Lamar, a note of judicious appraisement in his voice.

"No," said Babe.

"Well," I said, "most people would jump at the chance to fly on a kite."

"Yes," said Lamar, "most people have always wanted to fly on a kite and never get the chance."

"No," said Babe.

"People," I announced, "have just one chance in their lives to be famous. If they don't take that chance when it comes it passes them by and never comes again."

"Wouldn't it be great," said Lamar, "to be the first person in the whole world to do something and to make a great contribution to science."

"But it'll kill me," said Babe.

We knew we had him.

It was one thing to cajole Babe but quite another to try our blandishments on the wind. So we waited day after day, being sure to administer optimistic and reinforcing thoughts to Babe. It was a blustery March

but not with winds to our liking. We wanted a really big blow.

And the day came when we decided we had it. The wind was blowing in hard gusts, and with Babe and kite in hand we walked to an open field. We stood the kite on end, and Babe, standing on a stump, put his arms around the center poles. But the wind blew Babe and the kite backward before we could pull hard on the rope.

"We're going to have to time this exactly," said Lamar. "David, you help Babe hold the kite upright. When a really big gust comes I'll pull hard on the rope, David runs to help me and Babe hangs on."

So we tried it. A big gust came. Lamar pulled, I ran, and Babe yelped in terror as the kite left the ground.

At this point there was simultaneous action. The kite vaulted twenty feet into the air. Lamar, his heels dug into the ground, attempted to hold it against a giant pull. And before I reached Lamar a pole on the kite snapped and deposited a screaming Babe, wrapped up in newspaper, back on the ground.

We dug Babe out of the paper and attempted to stop his crying with soft words and enthusiastic congratulations. And as the thought crept over him that he was after all alive and reasonably well he stopped his crying and began to expand in self-admiration of his feat.

"You know," said Babe as we walked home, "I never had any doubt we could do it. It was great up there looking down on both of you."

We nodded our acquiescence and shared a silent look of understanding and amusement on the changeableness of human nature.

We left a proud and superior Babe at his house and walked on toward Lamar's.

"Well," I finally said, "at least we helped someone else fly."

Lamar said nothing and we walked along. But before I left him he spoke, less to me than to the forces of the universe.

"I wish I could fly," he said.

"I wish you could too," I answered and waved goodbye.

IV

It Was Lamar Who Discovered Gunpowder

It was, I suppose, a rather average night at my house. My Mother and my sisters sat in the living room, each immersed in her reading. I was seated on the floor, reading one of the two best books ever written. I was following the adventures of Mandorix the Aeduan in Anderson's *With the Eagles*. When I first read the book I had concluded that it was the greatest book in the world. I was forced to revise this decision after reading Anderson's *Swords in the North*, and I stretched my standards of excellence to include both works in the highest category. After reading each book innumerable times I sometimes felt a tinge of guilt at my name completely filling their library cards. At such moments I did penance by checking out Davis' *Friend of Caesar*. This was a good book, a very good book, but not one of the two greatest books ever written.

I had reached the point where Mandorix, left for dead after the defeat of the legion, had dragged himself to shelter and rubbed himself with butter to ease his wounds. I paused at this point, as I always did, to consider the effect of rubbing oneself with butter. I

have yet to reach a conclusion on the point although a practical test would be simple to perform.

It was during my butter contemplation that my oldest sister spoke. Without any introduction she proceeded to read aloud what struck her as a particularly profound paragraph from the work on French literature she was studying. All of us immediately stopped our reading, and I stopped thinking about butter, and listened. This was a normal procedure in our reading periods. It answered the pressing need to share the new idea or beautiful turn of phrase, and it had the added although unplanned advantage of allowing everyone to profit from the reading of the others. It was, I confess, more than a little upsetting to the uninitiated who later joined our group.

After some discussion of the point raised by my oldest sister, my Mother asked me what I was reading.

"*With the Eagles*," I said

"But you've read that book a hundred times," said my oldest sister, secure in her knowledge that no one else in the family dreamed in French.

I realized that a basic intellectual challenge had been issued but its essential accuracy made it difficult for me to offer rebuttal. Under duress I was not without defenses. My youngest sister, realizing that I was at the point of utter rout, pointed out that I had just finished Van Doren's *Benjamin Franklin*, and that, in her opinion, was somewhat ahead of the sixth grade level. So quickly did the challenge shift from defeat to victory—and just as quickly back to defeat.

"That's true," said my oldest sister, "he reads all those big books but he doesn't understand what he's reading."

"Yes, I do," I hotly replied. Even as I said it I realized its inadequancy. How does one demonstrate an

understanding of Benjamin Franklin in a one sentence rebuttal?

"Now children," said my Mother, and that was quite sufficient.

We returned to our books.

My ego wounded I found no surcease in following Mandorix's adventures. For a time I brooded on the injustices of this world, particularly the propensity to equate age with intelligence. Then my thoughts moved on to other matters. The most important item on my mental agenda was the cryptic note that Lamar had passed to me at school.

It said: "Have made a great discovery. Will see you tomorrow."

A most unsatisfactory note. The first sentence cried for immediate revelation, the second suspended expectation for another day. What had Lamar discovered? I had no hint from the last few days. No project was underway, no experimentation had been announced. I mused on the possibilities until my Mother announced that it was time for bed. I slept.

The next day, as soon as school was out, I headed for Lamar's. I found him sitting on the floor in his room. A quick glance confirmed that whatever the discovery was it had not altered Lamar's room. His narrow bed was its usual rumpled self, the models of the Douglas Dauntless and the Hawker Hurricane still swung from the ceiling on their threads. The chemistry set was in its normal corner spot and showed no signs of recent activity.

"All right," I said, "what's the great discovery?"

Lamar looked up from the book he was reading and smiled a smile of pure triumph.

"I," he said, "have just discovered gunpowder."

While I lacked a standard of reference to measure this disclosure, I felt a strong sense of loss and anti-climax.

"No," I said, a victim of my own expectations, "I think the Chinese beat you to it by several thousand years."

"Not at all, said Lamar, his satisfaction undiminished. "It's quite true that they were the *first* to discover it, but *I've* never discovered it before. As long as I didn't know how to make it, it doesn't matter if forty million Chinese could stir it up."

I immediately realized that Lamar had seized upon a great truth. One man's discovery could still leave millions shrouded in ignorance.

"You're absolutely right," I said, "but how did you discover it?"

"Well," said Lamar, "I was looking through one of my Father's old chemistry books and there it was."

He handed me the book he had been reading:

"Black Powder. Simple black powder is the product of one-third salt-petre, one-third sulphur and one-third charcoal."

"This is terrific," I said. "The charcoal's no problem at all. We've made it lots of times. But where are we going to get sulphur and salt-petre?"

"Yes," said Lamar, "the sulphur and the salt-petre are the problem. I'm afraid we'll have to buy them. I had some sulphur in my chemistry set but I used it up long ago. We'll have to buy them."

We had suddenly entered uncharted waters. We had no idea where one could purchase sulphur and salt-petre, and even worse we had no idea how much they cost. The project teetered on the edge of ignorance and financial insolvency.

"I guess," said Lamar, "that we'll have to ask somebody. When my Daddy gets home I'll ask him if it's possible to buy sulphur."

For the next two hours we roamed around Lamar's backyard and through the empty fields behind his

house. We shot our slingshots at likely targets, we walked around the yard on our stilts, and we climbed the big cherry tree in the side yard. Finally we saw the Appleton's Dodge coming up the street, Mr. Appleton at the wheel. We were at the garage to meet him when he got out.

"Where," said Lamar, "can you buy sulphur?"

Mr Appleton, to his enduring credit, took the question in stride. Drawing on stocks of knowledge we could only guess at, he pondered the question in several minutes of judicious silence.

"At the drug store," he said.

And he walked into the house.

"Why," I said to Lamar, "didn't you ask about the salt-petre?"

"Well," said Lamar, "somehow it seemed best just to ask about the sulphur. I figure if the drug store sells sulphur it may well sell salt-petre too."

So the next day we rode our bikes to town, no hands, four turns to make, and arrived at Wilson's Drug Store. Mr. Wilson was in the back and we walked through the cool dark store, past the soda fountain, past the little wrought iron tables with their marble tops.

"Mr. Wilson," I said, "do you sell sulphur?"

"Only when I get a chance," he said.

"Well," said Lamar, "do you sell salt-petre?"

"All you'll ever need," said Mr. Wilson.

Lamar and I looked at each other, more than a little confused by these examples of mercantile wit.

"Well," said Lamar, "how much sulfur can we get for ten cents?"

"And how much salt-petre can we get for ten cents?"I added.

Our figures were somewhat arbitrarily chosen since Lamar and I were prepared to invest our total assets, one dime each, on the purchase.

"Tell you what," said Mr. Wilson, "I'll let you have a pound of each, twenty cents total."

Each carrying our paper sack we rode back to Lamar's house, one hand for the bike, one hand for the sack.

Having already collected a pile of charcoal, the residue of our countless fires, we took a hammer and pounded it into a fine powder. Then, using a large pail, charcoal, sulphur and salt-petre were stirred together in equal parts. The grayish, granular result certainly *looked* like gunpowder.

"What we need to do," said Lamar, "is to take some of it and run a test. We need to find out how powerful it is and then we'll know how to use it."

I always admired Lamar's pragmatic approach to a problem. He was never at a loss on proper procedure.

"O. K.," I said, "but how will we set it off?"

"I've thought of that," said Lamar. "We'll roll some of it in a piece of newspaper, light one end and let it explode."

So we did. One cup of our powder was rolled up tightly in a page of the Birmingham *News*.

Lamar, as befits the inventor, had now assumed command of the operation. Carefully striking a large kitchen match he applied it to one end of the paper. The paper flared and we retreated to a respectful distance. The paper burned slowly and Lamar and I tensed for the momentary explosion.

Nothing happened.

The flame flickered and died and a last puff of smoke signaled its extinction. We stood quietly for several minutes.

Nothing happened.

"Obviously," said Lamar, "it takes a lot more to set it off than we'd thought."

He walked back to the blackened newspaper and

unrolled its charred remains. At this point there was no further discussion. I walked around and stood on the other side, Lamar crouched down, lit a match and rubbed it in the powder. For several seconds nothing happened. The match burned down and Lamar adjusted his hold to save his fingers from the flame.

Then something happened.

There was a mighty clap of noise, a brilliant flash of light and an impenetrable cloud of dark and acrid smoke. Whether from force or fright I found myself lying on my back, yards away from the explosion. Scrambling to my feet I ran toward the lingering pall of smoke. I peered into the murk, besieged by equal parts of panic and fear. Where *was* Lamar? I was convinced that he had been blown into little pieces, atomized in his own yard. There would be nothing left at all.

Then the smoke cleared. There was Lamar.

"I'm all right," he said, and basically he was.

His eyebrows were gone and all the hair on the front of his head had vanished. His face was black and his eyes and teeth gleamed white.

"Man," said Lamar, "it really went didn't it?"

"Yes," I said, "it really did. I don't believe that's the right way to set it off."

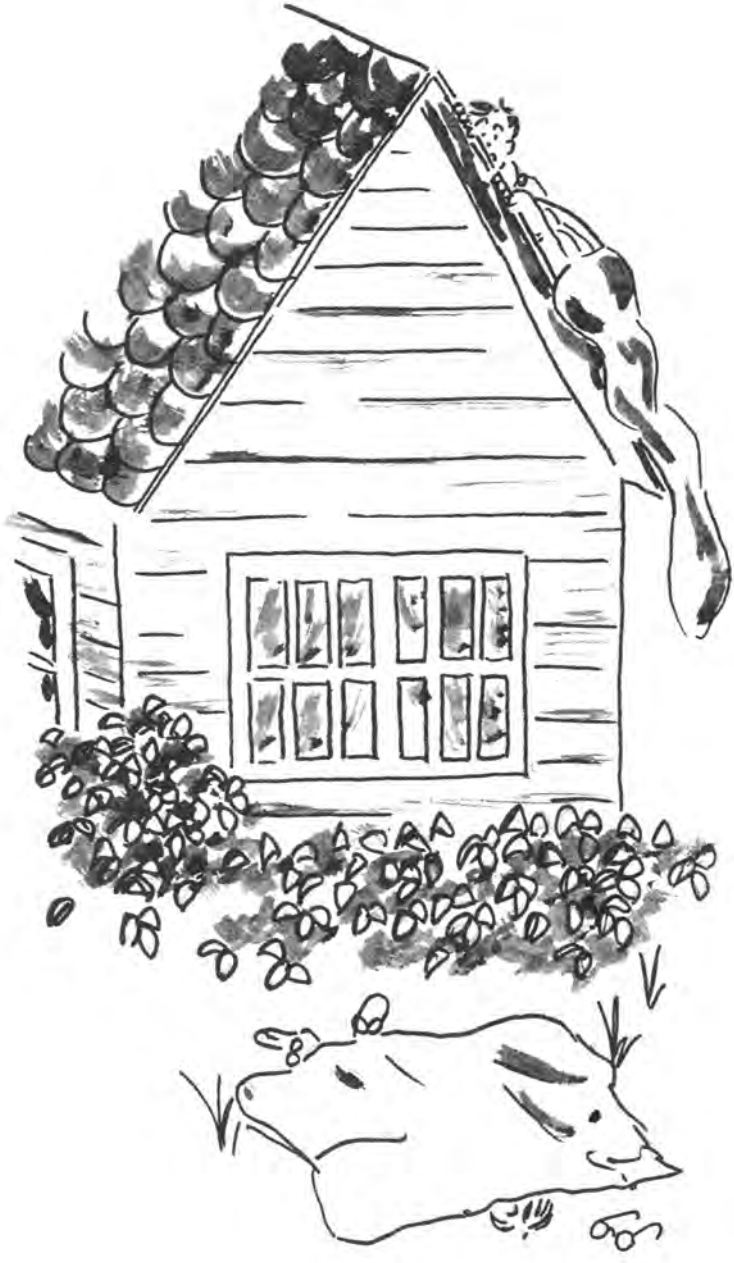
"No," said Lamar, "we've learned something about it and we won't try it that way again."

By this time Mr. and Mrs Appleton had emerged from the house and there was a worrying time of explanations and examinations. It had become a family affair. I said goodbye and I walked my bike home. I did not phrase it as I do now, but I knew then that discovery and ignorance are parts of a whole. The thrill of one may be dissipated by the effects of the other. I learned a lesson. There were areas where I feared to tread.

Lamar's eyebrows and hair grew back, the powder in

his skin disappeared. But his thrust to know, and to try, and to understand were undiminished. His enchantment with explosives remained as strong as ever.

It was shortly after Lamar's discovery of gunpowder that we decided to build a steam cannon. . .



V

Gravity—4; Lamar And Me—0

I was sick in bed, a victim of my semiannual flare-up of tonsillitis. My sister Julia, who usually scheduled tonsillitis at the same time, and whose companionship made a violently sore throat and high fever easier to bear, had chosen to remain healthy. Everyone had gone to school and I was left alone in my bed. Sunlight streamed through the windows underlining my isolation from the rest of the world.

I reminded myself that at that very moment my friends were sitting in class. I tried to imagine what was going on, I tried to recreate a ritual that I knew by heart. But it was a false effort. The world outside my room had lost the substance of reality through my inability to join it.

Tonsillitis was never welcome, and this time it was particularly undesirable. It had interrupted a project that had already moved from plans to the eve of action.

Lamar and I had been immensely impressed with the German invasion of Crete, and sitting on the floor in Lamar's room we had pondered its meaning to the future of warfare.

"There's no question about it," said Lamar. "The use of parachute troops is the coming thing. You can drop

whole armies anywhere you want and the surprise is going to be terrific."

"I don't know," I said. "It looks like the Germans lost a lot of men in Crete. I guess they did have surprise, but if the British had reacted a little quicker they might have held their own a little better."

"No," said Lamar, "I don't think it would have helped. Parachute troops are going to be used everywhere before the war is over. It's going to be a revolution in war."

"Maybe so," I said, with lingering doubts. "I wonder what it feels like to come down with a parachute?"

"It must be great," said Lamar, "to slowly float down, hanging in the air and looking out miles in all directions."

"Yes," I said, "it would be great to make a jump with a parachute."

"You know," said Lamar, "I think we could make parachutes and try them out. We could take them up on something high and jump off. It wouldn't be like jumping from an airplane and we wouldn't be in the air very long but we would know what it felt like."

"Yes," I said, "I think it can be done. We can make parachutes out of old sheets. We won't be able to fold them up and let them open because we won't have that much time. If we have them spread out they should catch the air immediately and we'll float down."

"Terrific," said Lamar. "Let's see if our Mothers have some old sheets, and we'll need some rope to make the shroud lines."

We had called upon our respective Mothers and each had furnished an old sheet that otherwise would have been used for dust cloths or torn into strips to bandage our cuts and abrasions. I now realize how much more comforting a sheet bandage is than one made of gauze.

They lacked neatness and soon trailed yards of thread as they frayed away, but you knew that positive aid had been rendered. There may still be a market for antiseptic sheets.

We had constructed our parachutes and eyeing likely possibilities we had decided to make our first jump from the roof of the Appleton's house. Even at the ridge this was no more than twenty-five feet so the risk seemed minimal. But at this point, with the jump scheduled for the following day, I was betrayed by my tonsils.

So I lay in my bed and wondered if Lamar would wait for me. He might go on and try the jump himself and I would be excluded from the operation. I fell asleep with heavy heart, and I slept the afternoon away.

I awoke at dusk and listened to my Mother and my sisters talking in the dining room. My throat felt much better and the high fever that always raged with tonsillitis seemed to have receded. In brighter spirits I ate my supper of milk-toast—my Mother's standard fare for the sick. Julia and Evelyn came in to inquire about my status and were assured that I was on the proper side of survival. But I was not prepared for my next visitor.

My oldest sister entered the room and sat down on the bed.

"Well," she said, "I hear that you're feeling a lot better now. I thought that you might like to hear a Washrag Kitty Cat Story."

The origins of Washrag Kitty Cat are lost forever in the mists of my memory. He was the sole property of my oldest sister who had invented him, and she was the sole repository of the stories that dealt with his adventures. Only in rare moments, when the intricate workings of the universe fell into precise order, was one privileged to hear another Washrag Kitty Cat Story. I

don't suppose that I ever heard more than four or five, but each was a supreme moment, the producer of soaring joy and exultation.

"Yes, yes," I said. "I want to hear one. What is Washrag Kitty Cat doing now?"

"Now you understand," said my oldest sister, "that you can only hear one story. You'll have to decide which one you want to hear."

I knew I was approaching one of life's pivotal decisions. You always got your choice of the story from among the alternatives offered by my oldest sister. But they were never the same alternatives. If you passed up "Washrag Kitty Cat Explores the Amazon River" in favor of "Washrag Kitty Cat and the Labyrinth Adventure" his derring-do on the Amazon was lost forever. I wanted to hear *all* of the stories and I never considered the fact that titles were never repeated because my oldest sister didn't remember her earlier inventions. In her own way she understood that it is the measured dose of pleasure, with the knowledge of greater pleasure denied, that makes the offering beyond price.

"What are the choices?," I asked, knowing that I was inviting pain but in a frenzy to see the treasures spread around me.

"Well," said my oldest sister, "you can hear any of these that you want:

Washrag Kitty Cat and the Pharaoh's Tomb
Washrag Kitty Cat and the Mongolian Mystery
Washrag Kitty Cat and the Mechanical Man,
or
Washrag Kitty Cat and the Strange Airplane."

There was silence as I desperately weighed alternatives and considered possibilities. The Pharaoh's Tomb and the Mongolian Mystery had the overwhelming lure of the exotic. On the other hand,

who had built the mechanical man and how did Washrag Kitty Cat cope with this challenge? What was strange about the airplane and what peril did it pose for Washrag?

Dooming all others to eternal obscurity I made my choice.

"I want to hear about Washrag Kitty Cat and the Pharoah's Tomb," I said.

"Very well," said my oldest sister. "It all started when Washrag Kitty Cat was on a secret mission to Turkey and stopped off in Egypt for a few weeks. . . ."

It was the perfect end for an illness. I went to sleep that night knowing I could go to school the next day, and when school was out Lamar and I would try out the parachutes. Hopefully Lamar had waited.

The next morning, as soon as I got to school, I looked for Lamar. I found him busily engaged in the endless process of carrying out the square root of 2 to 30 places. I knew that when he finished he would begin the task of multiplying to check his answer.

"Well," said Lamar, looking up from his computations, "I hear that you were sick yesterday."

"Yes," I said, "I had tonsillitis again but I'm well now. Did you try out the parachute?"

Lamar looked at me with dismay. "Of course not," he said. "I waited until we could try them out together. I wouldn't have done it by myself."

His tone of reproof was my punishment for having doubted.

"Great," I said, "let's make our jump after school."

"Fine," said Lamar, "I'll see you then."

When school was out I ran home to do my usual chores of splitting kindling and bringing in the buckets of coal. In order to speed up the process I indulged in my discovery that it was possible to carry four buckets at one time by letting the first two bails rest on the

forearms and grasping the other two with the hands. Although four buckets of coal weighed at least as much as I did, it was just possible to stagger to the house. Transit time was cut in half.

With work accomplished I ran to Lamar's. He was already standing in his front yard, carefully spreading out our parachutes and arranging the ropes tied to their corners.

"I think everything is ready," said Lamar. "I've got the ladder in the back and we can climb onto the roof with it."

"Let's go," I said, picking up my parachute.

From the ladder we stepped onto the roof of Lamar's room and carefully made our way up the sloping roof to the ridge.

"You know," said Lamar, "it's a lot higher here than we thought."

Looking over the edge I saw exactly what he meant.

"Yes," I said, "it is high. Maybe this will be high enough to give our chutes time to work."

"I hope so," said Lamar, and clutching his ropes with both hands he stepped off the roof.

It was over in an instant. Lamar landed on the soft ground (it was the side where the old septic tank was buried) before his parachute had time to even flutter out behind him.

Looking up at me he issued the necessary corrective orders.

"Hold the ropes with one hand," he said, "and use your other hand to hold the chute open."

The instructions were rational and I followed them. With one hand on the ropes, the other trying to hold the sheet above me, I jumped. I hit the ground, my knees buckled slightly, the sheet settled down around my head.

The parachutes were a failure. They did not work.

We sat on the ground and analyzed the problem.

"It's perfectly obvious what the trouble is," said Lamar. "First of all we simply aren't up high enough. The chute doesn't have enough time to billow out and catch the air. Second, we've got to be sure that air can get *inside* the chute."

"Yes," I said, "I think that covers it. The first chute can be held up by the second to go, but there'll be no one left to hold the second chute. I think the second man should put it over his head with the ropes around him. When he jumps he'll fall out from under it, it will catch the air and he'll float down. I guess we could go off the water tank. You know how high that is."

"Hmmmmm," said Lamar. "The idea of how to handle the chutes is good. But the water tank *is* high. What we need is something higher than my house but lower than the water tank. You know, your house is a lot higher than mine. Let's try it off your roof."

You could always count on Lamar to come through when solutions were needed. The peak of my house was about forty-five to fifty feet. It would double our chances of success.

With parachutes tucked under our arms we walked to my house and surveyed the situation. On one side a jump from the peak of the roof would land us in a large bush that had been singularly ill-sited for parachuting. On the other side, assuming we leaped out far enough, we were in the clear.

We climbed onto the roof where it was low in the back, and on hands and knees we worked our way up the steep slope until we straddled the ridge. We did not discuss the issue of who would go first. It was my responsibility to go first off of my house.

I stood up and carefully worked my way to the edge. Lamar followed me, prepared to tend my chute when I jumped. I looked down, I had to look down, and I

realized that I had discovered for all my life the thing I least wished to do. I knew that with any further delay I would never jump at all.

I turned to Lamar and he nodded his understanding.

I jumped.

For what seemed an endless duration of time I fell through the air. I *knew* the parachute was not working and I was aware of my calm acceptance of the situation.

Then I hit the ground. Feet first I smashed to earth. The shock was tremendous. My legs felt as if they had been driven up through my body, my brain, overwhelmed with sensation, mercifully broke its circuits and delivered me to semi-consciousness.

Lying spread-eagled on the ground, my sheet wrapped around me, I faintly heard Lamar calling to me. I had to tell him not to jump, I had to warn him. But my will was locked fast in an unresponding body. I could not move and I was beyond speech.

"I'm coming," I heard Lamar shout. And come he did. He hit the ground two yards away with a mighty Ummmmmmph. We lay there, side by side, trying to return to the world that had betrayed us.

My youngest sisters, leaving the house, spied us lying on the ground.

"Look at those silly boys," said my sister Julia. "I think that they're playing like they're camping and they've gone to sleep for the night."

"No," said my sister Evelyn, "I think that they've been playing army and now they're acting like they're dead."

They walked on, laughing at our foibles, unaware of the accuracy of their observations.

Slowly, very slowly, Lamar and I rose to a kneeling position. Nothing seemed to be broken. We had

survived. Unknown at that moment was the pain we would endure in the coming week as our sore bodies and stiff legs refused to move when ordered.

"I've thought it over," said Lamar, "and I believe that I was wrong. I'm not at all sure that parachute troops are going to revolutionize warfare."

"Yes," I said, "but at least we know why paratroopers wear those heavy boots."

"Right," said Lamar, "it's to kick each other out of the plane."

We laughed together and it was a good time.


DAVIS
FALLS

VI

The Camp At Davis Falls

Is there a kind word that can be said for the Boy Scouts? It has eluded me through the years. During the period of my membership I constantly cast about in the area of rationale and justification, convinced and supported by that innocent urge to believe that untold benefits must be coming my way. I sat through endless meetings, tied knots from time to time, saw an endless succession of scoutmasters come and go, and made no progress whatsoever toward becoming a Boy Scout, Second Class. Perhaps the whole psychology of the thing was wrong. Do we seek to struggle and achieve only to end up in second class status? Tying knots did not seem to improve my character, and failing to learn the Morse Code deeply eroded any possibility of my becoming brave, trustworthy or even loyal.

I have never blamed the Boy Scouts for my lack of progress into rarified levels of achievement. They could only work with what they had. But I have never ceased to blame them for our camping trip.

At our regular weekly troop meeting Mr. Kesselbach, our scoutmaster, announced that on the following Friday afternoon we would have a major camping trip to Davis Falls. There was an announcement to stir the

blood! I had only been on one camp in my life, a brief overnight stay at the creek with Babe Mitchell. On that occasion I had managed to be run over by a rabbit. Looking back I now see that the fates were speaking and I would not hear.

Mr. Kesselbach gave us instructions to bring tents and blankets and food, assuming of course that parental consent was obtained. Lamar and I walked home together and we discussed the possibilities of the camp. Davis Falls was a fine place, perhaps three or four miles from Montevallo, where a stream dropped down over huge rounded rocks to a pool of water below. We were excited and full of anticipation, working ourselves up to deliver a superior performance of explanation and request when we broached the matter to our parents.

"Of course," said Lamar, "there is one problem."

"What's that?" I said, unwilling to bid farewell to promise and elation.

"Well," said Lamar, "the problem is that we don't have a tent."

There spoke the orderly mind. The truth was that we had never owned a tent and it seemed a matter of certitude that we never would. Mr. Kesselbach had not said that it was mandatory to have a tent. It was worse than that. He had taken it for granted that we all had tents.

"We've got to have a tent," I said, "or we just can't go. We can't show up without a tent even if we don't want to sleep in one."

"That's true," said Lamar, "and I never have slept in a tent and I want to."

"Well," I admitted, "I've never slept in one either."

"I know," said Lamar.

We walked on and we were silent for awhile, each of us examining the consequences of being tentless.

"Of course," said Lamar, "we can always borrow a tent."

"That's great," I said, my spirits soaring, "who has one we can borrow?"

"I have no earthly idea," said Lamar shortly, and I realized that he was peeved with my implication that he was supposed to supply both the form and the substance of our salvation. We parted on that note.

That night at supper I gave a sad rendition of our plight. Cheated out of going on the camp I was determined to at least wring dramatic value from our predicament. I spelled out the joyous thrills of camping with care and great attention. I made the case for camping with such force that if heard widely it would have blighted the housing industry for years. And then I presented two poor little boys, their noses pressed against the window pane of Nature, gazing sadly at the marvels and the mysteries now denied them. A tent! Closed out by the lack of a tent!

I was pleased with my presentation and thought I had done particularly well with the imagery. My youngest sister smiled to show appreciation for my efforts. My middle sister looked appropriately sad. My oldest sister gave me one withering look of dismissal.

"My goodness, David," said my Mother, "I never heard anybody take on so. I don't see any problem at all. You can borrow Bob Anderson's tent."

On occasion my Mother would surprise me like this. She did it when I was very small and crying because I didn't have a tree house like my sisters did. And my Mother got some boards and hauled them into the oak tree and built a little platform for me. Now she had done it again!

Bob Anderson lived around the corner. He was at least as old as my oldest sister. He was big and sophisticated and there was simply no way that I could

ask him to loan me his tent. It violated all the rules of place and position, it would have been an act of crass presumption.

"I'll call Mrs. Anderson," said my Mother, "and see if we can get the tent."

That "we" was worth a thousand fortunes. My debt can never be repaid.

So my Mother called Mrs. Anderson, and Mrs. Anderson said why yes of course we could borrow the tent and that Bob hadn't used it for years. I could come by and pick it up the following afternoon.

The next morning I ran to school to get the word to Lamar. Even though the Depression had waned and we had a telephone again I almost never called Lamar. If big news had arrived it was always better to bring it to him face to face. There is nothing sweeter than directly shared enthusiasm. That morning Lamar was overjoyed to hear of the sudden reversal of our fortunes, and immensely impressed that we would be using Bob Anderson's tent. It was agreed that I would pick up the tent after school and bring it immediately to Lamar's house for inspection.

I did just that. Mrs. Anderson, who made the first congealed salad I ever saw, took me out to the garage and there, sticks wrapped up in canvas, was the tent.

It took us a long time to figure it out. I worked at my end according to one image, Lamar labored away at the other bent on his favorite design. Finally we discovered that we were both wrong. It was a third type of tent and not a bad one. There on Lamar's front yard we drove our pegs and tightened ropes and sat inside in the mellow light and the overpowering smell of old canvas. It was terrific. I would freeze that moment for awhile.

The days passed with the slowness they only have when things are young. But Friday came, and loaded

down with tent and blankets and cooking pots and food our troop turned its face toward Davis Falls.

For at least an hour we kept arriving as slower scouts finally caught up with faster ones. A broad path wound up to the right of the falls and it was here that we pitched our tent, close by one occupied by Grady Hicks and Gene Baldwin. There was in fact little choice of site since there was really no flat ground in the area. It took some time to find cracks in the rock or a little dirt that would hold our tent pegs. We were versed in the procedure of trenching around a tent to keep water out but it would have taken dynamite to dig a trench on that hillside. A bright and sunny sky was effective rebuttal to trenches and ditches and rain.

It was a fine afternoon. We waded in the sparkling clear water above the falls, slid down the rocks into the water below, and explored the area of mountains and rocks and valleys. As dusk settled upon us we built our cooking fires, got out our food and pans and cooked an awful looking but immensely satisfying supper. Individual cooking was the rule for supper and breakfast the following morning. But each of us had contributed some hamburger to the common cause and our lunch the next day would be a communal affair. Mr. Kesselbach, in charge of at least fifteen pounds of hamburger, had thoughtfully immersed it in the cold water above the falls.

As darkness fell there was a brief period of roaming around among the tents and trying to slip up on the unsuspecting. But slowly the yelling and shouting died down and Lamar and I spread out our blankets and lay down. It had been a long and exciting day, the sound of the falls was in our ears and we quickly went to sleep.

At that moment there was no weather front within one thousand miles of Davis Falls. The sky was clear,

the moon and stars shone bright and undiminished. But the higher law that governs these matters now swung into action. At perhaps 11:30 or 12:00 Lamar and I were awakened by vicious flashes of lightning and booming rolls of thunder that reverberated through the hills. Grabbing our flashlights we crawled out of the tent to join our tousled colleagues of the camp. Mr. Kesselbach, who was sleeping under a small rock ledge above the falls—we had noticed that *he* didn't have a tent—came stumbling down the trail in the dark muttering what we took to be German, but which we later learned was pure and pithy Anglo-Saxon.

"Boys," said Mr. Kesselbach, "if it starts to rain you'll be all right in your tents. But if they give you any trouble we can all go down and sleep under the big rock ledge beside the falls. No water ever gets in there."

Duty done, Mr. Kesselbach turned and felt his way back up the path, practicing his German as his foot slipped or when he cracked his knee against a rock.

It took some time for things to settle down. Finally, as the thunder boomed, we were all quiet again in our tents. And then the rain hit. In one tremendous crashing downpour a gigantic amount of water fell upon us. We had been smashed by a tidal wave in central Alabama! There were yells and shouts from all around and Lamar and I cautiously opened our tent flaps and pointed our flashlights into the darkness. We saw a world of driving water and we saw all the tents around us knocked flat by the deluge. Scouts were dragging themselves out from under wet canvas and standing in the downpour, milling about in sodden confusion.

Down the path that now ran like a stream in flood came Mr. Kesselbach. His clothes were plastered to him and water ran in heavy streams down his face. Even in

the dark and the rain we sensed that his spirit of civic duty might be wearing thin. But he contained himself.

"All right, boys," said Mr. Kesselbach, "let's all go down and get under the big rock. We'll sleep there the rest of the night."

"Do you want to go?" I asked Lamar.

"No," said Lamar, "I don't. *Our* tent didn't blow down and not much water is coming in. Let's stay with the tent."

"David, Lamar, let's go," said Mr. Kesselbach, as a string of bobbing flashlights moved off down the trail.

"We'll stay here," I said.

"We're dry in our tent," said Lamar.

Mr. Kesselbach looked at us, and the rain fell on him, and there was a look of infinite pain on his face, and his shoulders slumped in defeat and he shook his head and disappeared in the rain and the darkness.

It was the most dramatic night we ever spent. The wind howled, the rain whipped down in solid sheets of water. For the briefest time we stayed dry. Insidiously the water dripped through the seams of the tent and ran in increasing rivulets under the sides. Placing my frying pan on the ground above my head I could catch most of the water that ran in from the top. But it had to be emptied every ten minutes and if I dozed off it overflowed and ran in icy streams under my blankets. We were miserable but we felt that honor was now at stake. To give in now, to surrender and fly for refuge with the others was unthinkable.

That night went on forever. We slept in desperate snatches and came awake more exhausted with each slowly passing hour. We retreated into our individual shells of suffering, wrapped in soggy blankets, wearing soggy clothes, lying in a muddy hole. I thought of my room at home and my bed and my pillow and I was

struck by the fact that it had never rained in my bedroom. And I thought evil thoughts and called down plagues on Troop 58 and the Boy Scouts of America and I wondered how, just how in the world, anyone could "Be Prepared" for a rain like that.

Dawn came and the rain stopped and we left the tent and stood up. Every movement caused our wet clothes to stick to us like cold and clammy glue.

"I feel horrible," I said. "I think I drowned back there during the night."

"Yes," said Lamar, "we've proved that humans are not waterproof. I think I've absorbed gallons of water and if the sun doesn't come out soon mold will start growing on me."

"Well," I said, "I guess we were pretty stupid. We should have gone with the others. Let's go down now and let them laugh at us and get it out of their system."

We walked down the trail in the mud and ducked our heads and stepped under the overhanging rock. It was as dry as the Sahara at midday. Not one drop of water had penetrated. Our fellow scouts were waking up and stretching, refreshed from a good night's sleep. And they saw us and they laughed and asked us where we had gotten such a good tent and how long we could hold our breath under water and other sallies and witticisms of the dry and the virtuous.

And then, one by one, our tormentors ceased their laughter and began to stir uneasily and tentatively scratch themselves. Then they scratched more vigorously and then they scratched with both hands. There was an orgy of scratching. Off came shirts and down came pants in fearful investigation. And the wages and consequences of staying dry were painfully revealed. Each was covered by hundreds of red bug bites that swelled and turned red and itched the more for every

scratch. Mr. Kesselbach, perhaps because he had a greater surface area, had suffered the most.

Although the scales of justice had swung in our direction we restrained our laughter for the sake of our health. We soberly suggested that perhaps if they all sat in the pool of water under the falls it would ease their suffering. They rushed to take the cure and we were treated to the sight of Mr. Kesselbach, surrounded by itching scouts, all hunkered down in the water with their heads out and their faces slowly taking on more benign expressions as the cold water cooled the red bug's ardor. It was a priceless moment.

With rain and red bugs we all knew that our camping trip was a failure. When Mr. Kesselbach suggested that we move up our schedule, eat our hamburgers and go home we were agreeable. The hamburger was retrieved from the water above the falls and we scouted, we really did, for dry wood to build a fire. There was wood more wet and less wet; there was no dry wood anywhere. Matches were almost exhausted before a faint and flickering flame held its own against the forces of anti-combustion. I have never seen a fire so cold. We smoked our mushy hamburgers for a time and put the meat between soggy pieces of bread and ate it. It was very bad. The taste was strange and foreign to the tongue.

With sagging spirits we rolled up our wet blankets and our wet tent. We gathered up our utensils and packed them away and picked up our loads and began the march for home. We moved out of the narrow path that ran through the woods and gained the road to Montevallo. We were a beaten and retreating army. Wet and muddy, Lamar and I stumbled along half-asleep. The others, in itching torment, would throw down their packs and scratch and take them up and walk again. No one spoke. When we reached our city

streets and separated to our homes a wave of the hand sufficed as symbol of the end of group activity.

Lamar and I dragged our equipment behind us as we walked across the college campus to Highland Street. A strange listlessness overwhelmed us.

"I feel horrible," said Lamar as we finally neared his house.

"Yes," I said, "I feel awful too."

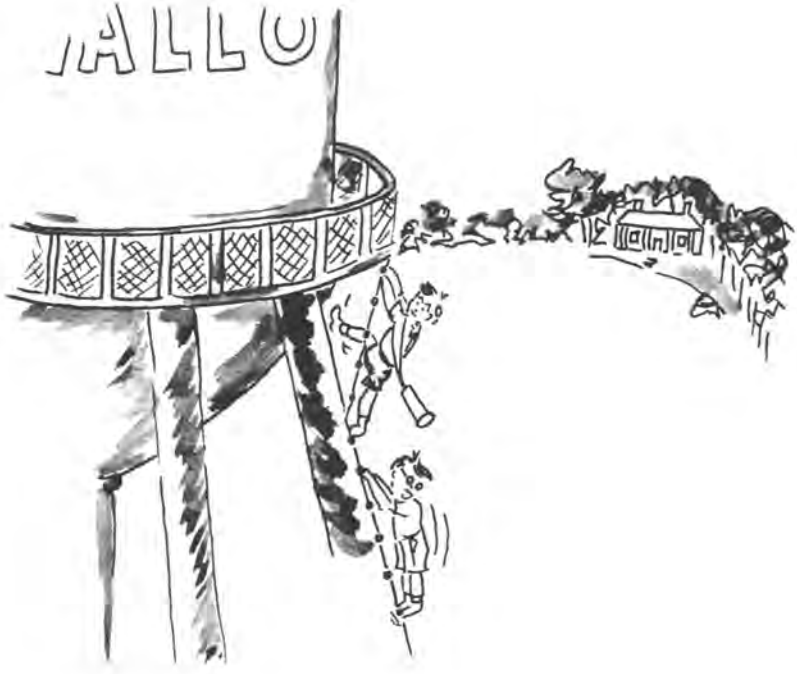
"No," said Lamar, "I mean I feel horrible, I feel like I'm going to be sick."

"Oh," I said, and I looked at him and he was green and his jaw was clenched and he dropped his pack and he ran into his house.

Somehow I made it those last two blocks. I dragged myself up our steps and entered the house. Unresponsive to the feminine alarms around me I headed for the bathroom and I gave myself up to illness.

It was three days before pale and shaken members of Troop 58 returned to school. We had been cut down to a man, and Mr. Kesselbach, we noticed, did not eat lunch for the rest of the week. The scouting movement in Montevallo had suffered a body blow. Months went by before we looked back and laughed, before the camp at Davis Falls became a part of our legends.

And the day came when my son wanted to join the scouts and I told the story of Lamar and Me and the Camp at Davis Falls. He joined anyway.


ALLO

VII

Light Travels Faster Than Sound And Fear Travels Faster Than Either

"I know what the book says," said Lamar, "but I think it would be better and a lot more fun if we proved it for ourselves."

"Yes," I said, "it would certainly be more fun but we'd have to be very scientific about it. We need to set it up very carefully so that our results are valid."

"Absolutely," said Lamar, "we'll have to plan the whole thing out so that we don't have any mistakes."

Lamar and I were sitting around a small fire in the field behind his house, feeling extremely mature as we smoked pieces of cross-vine. Although our usual adult rituals were based on smoking coffee, which had to be used in a pipe, or rabbit tobacco rolled up in newspaper, cross-vine provided the greatest illusion of cosmopolitan urbanity. It grew in profusion in our part of Alabama, a climbing vine about the diameter of a cigarette. You cut out a piece between its joints and being porous it smoked beautifully, providing a nice gray ash that could be flipped off in emphasis at some telling point in conversation. But even urbanity had its price. Smoke from cross-vine seared the mouth and throat as if a blow-torch and acid had been applied, and

mature conversation had to be carried on as tears streamed from the eyes, and, manhood at stake, you chokingly said "Yes, this is good, really good." It would be interesting to know what the Surgeon General would have to say about cross-vine.

It had all started that day in school when Lamar and I, bored by an endless discussion of whether the class should assume the project of having our town declared a bird sanctuary, had turned to reading a physics book he had checked out of the library. I had already advanced the argument that our town was a bird sanctuary in fact and that reality would be less than affected by official declarations. Our teacher had tenaciously combated this argument, since, as we all knew, she had already spent considerable time in planning the project (and collecting materials) and now had to convince us that we had thought of it. If she failed to achieve at least the semblance of group consensus she would have to come up with a new project.

Lamar, when the discussion had started, had rolled his eyes in dismay and had retreated to his physics book. To the great relief of our teacher I soon joined him.

The physics book, our only refuge from the group projects that we hated, took on an importance and interest it might otherwise not have had. Before the class finally came to an end with the adoption of the bird sanctuary project (with two abstentions), Lamar and I, book between us, had read several chapters.

That afternoon, seated around our council fire, we considered our reading in physics. We had been greatly intrigued by the experiments that had been conducted to determine the speed of light, and we had taken note of the fact, already known to us, that light traveled faster than sound. This had spurred Lamar into

advocacy of conducting our own experiment to corroborate the differential. Satisfying myself that the strict canons of science would be observed, I gave my approval to the project.

"The major problem," said Lamar, "is to find a proper place for the experiment. If we flash a light and make a sound at the same time we need our observer far enough away so that any difference in speed can be seen and heard."

"That's true," I said, taking a puff on my cross-vine and instantly regretting it, "and there's the further problem of what kind of light we'll use and how we'll make the sound."

"Right," said Lamar, throwing another stick on our fire. "I think I know a place that will work. If we could climb up the city water tower and start our signals from there they could be observed from that open place on the campus between Comer Hall and the President's Home. They must be at least a mile apart."

"That sounds good," I said, innocent of accidental puns. "The water tower must be at least 150 feet high and it has that platform around the top. The sound is easy to handle. We can take a hammer with us and really give a bang on the tank. but what about a light?"

"Well," said Lamar, "I thought about doing the experiment at night and using a flashlight, but climbing that tower in the dark might be bad. Couldn't we use a mirror in the daytime and flash sunlight at the observer?"

"Yes," I said, "I think that would work fine. But we need some precision in the measurement. If we could get a stop watch the observer could start it when he saw the light and stop it when he heard the sound and we'd know exactly what the difference was."

"That's very good," said Lamar, "I like that. If we knew exactly what the distance was we might even be

able to calculate the speed of the sound. We know we need a mirror, a hammer, and a stopwatch, and we need to decide which one of us will be on the tower and which one will act as observer."

"Well," I said, "climbing that tower with a hammer and a mirror might be difficult. I think it might be a good idea if both of us went up the tower. You could flash the light and I could bang the hammer."

"That suits me," said Lamar, "but it means we need a third person to act as observer. What about Melvin?"

"Melvin could do it," I said. "If you'll get a mirror, I'll get a hammer. The only person I know who has a stopwatch is the Coach. We can see him at school tomorrow and see if he'll loan it to us."

"Fine," said Lamar, "I'll check with Melvin and if we can get the watch we can run the experiment after school tomorrow."

Our fire had burned low and twilight was upon us. It had been a profitable afternoon, solid therapy for the frustrations of the school day. We covered the embers of our fire with dirt and went our ways toward home.

The next day at school Lamar and I went to see the Coach. We had decided that it would be best not to explain our real need for the stopwatch. We had no fear that the Coach would refuse the loan because he disapproved the project. But we had a very real fear that it would be impossible to explain it to him. The Coach's general proficiency was adequately summarized by the fact that while other high school football teams were converting to the new T-formation from the single-wing, ours was deeply involved with the prehistoric Notre Dame Box.

"Coach," said Lamar, as we walked into his office, "we need to borrow your stop watch to do some timing."

"Sure," said the Coach, "I think that thing is around here somewhere, And you'll need a whistle too."

"No," I said, "I don't think we need a whistle, but we would appreciate the stop watch."

"Hmmmm," said the Coach, troubled by my challenge to the eternal truth that athletic events could not be conducted without a whistle. "You'll need a whistle. Blow it to start the race and when the winner comes across the finish line and you won't have any trouble."

"That will be great," I said, paying deference to expertise, and Lamar nodded to show his awakening comprehension of the inner mysteries.

Stopwatch and unwanted whistle in hand we left the Coach's office.

"That man," said Lamar, "is the dumbest man in the whole world."

"True," I said, "but he had the stop watch."

As we returned to class and the opening round of activities on bird sanctuaries, Lamar reported that Melvin had agreed to serve as official observer for the experiment. We would meet at Lamar's after school and proceed to the test site.

As a mental exercise I participated in class discussion by raising the question of whether we intended to protect all birds or only some of them. Awakened to the complexity of the issue, the farming interests in class took a firm stand against the inclusion of crows. Having bogged down the project for the day I returned to my reading on Stonewall Jackson and no longer followed the desperate efforts of our teacher to put down the Crow rebels.

It was sad, I thought, how tedious and boring education was, in contrast to the exhilaration of learning. It was to be some years before I realized they could be identical.

Armed with a hammer and the stop watch for Melvin, I rode my bike to Lamar's. The team was ready.

Lamar had his Mother's mirror under his arm and Melvin was suffused with excitement. Mounting our bikes we rode to the campus.

It was our first on-the-spot survey of the test site and we were pleased to see that we had chosen wisely. Far away on the next ridge stood the water tower, looking small and squatty in the distance. The stop watch and pencil and paper were handed over to Melvin and he was thoroughly briefed on the necessity for accuracy and precision. Leaving Melvin sitting on the grass, Lamar and I remounted our bikes for the ride to the water tower.

We rode down the brick streets of the campus, past the swimming pool with the green fence around it, past the power plant and laundry. We left the campus and turned right on the road that ran to Almont, Aldrich and Boothton. The first part was down hill and peddling was easy, but then we started to mount the hill. We left our bikes halfway up, climbed a fence and slowly walked up hill through a pecan orchard. It struck us that while the water tower was a permanent part of our horizon, this was the first time we had actually visited the site.

Leaving the orchard we entered the woods and the climb became even steeper. Then, through the trees, we saw a metal leg of the tower and we stepped into the clearing. Completely filling the opening, looming above us, soaring to the sky, there was the water tower.

"Great Scott," said Lamar, "I never knew it was *this* big."

I looked at the tower in dismay. "Are we going to climb this?" I said.

"Yes," said Lamar, "I think we're committed. Here's the ladder on this side and it runs all the way to the top."

I thought, but I did not say, that commitment might be in order.

"Well," said Lamar, realizing that a crisis was at hand, "I'll go first."

Stuffing the mirror in the back of his pants he grabbed the metal rungs and slowly started up. Leadership by example is hard to argue with. I stuck the hammer in my pants, grabbed the first rung and the climb was on.

The ladder was bolted to the leg of the tower which slanted inward. The angle made it impossible not to see the ground below as you gripped the rungs. I concentrated on watching Lamar's feet. As they left a rung my hands followed. We climbed and climbed. Surely we were near the top. And then Lamar stopped.

"What's the matter," I said, assuming he had stopped for a rest.

"There's trouble here," said Lamar, and his voice had an edge of strain and urgency. "The ladder starts going out. It's going to be bad."

With my body pressed against the ladder like lichen on a rock I looked up past Lamar. Unnoticed from the ground, the ladder for its last ten feet left the leg and slanted outward in order to clear the platform. I was overwhelmed with fear.

Let it be said unequivocably. Lamar had guts. He was scared but he started to climb again and I climbed just behind. The sensation was horrible. We were climbing out into the air, fighting to keep our feet on rungs as gravity sought to leave us hanging by hands alone.

"Thank God," said Lamar, and I realized he had reached the platform.

I pulled myself over the edge and lay on the narrow walkway beside Lamar.

"Do you think," said Lamar, "do you really think that all scientific work is as bad as this?"

"It's can't be," I said. "No scientist in his right mind would climb this stupid tower."

There are often compensations for adversity overcome and we received ours immediately. The view from the tower was magnificent. The college and town were laid out for our inspection. Although Lamar's house was hidden by trees, we could see mine, a tiny spot in the distance.

We were recalled to our duties as we discerned a tiny figure on the next hill. It was Melvin and we thought he was waving to us.

"All right," said Lamar, "we better run the experiment before the sun gets any lower."

Extracting the mirror from the back of his pants, Lamar made practice alignments to beam a flash of light at Melvin. With hammer in hand I waited to produce the sound.

"I think I've got it," said Lamar. "When I say 'Now', hit the tank as hard as you can and I'll flash the light at the same time."

"NOW," yelled Lamar. I swung in a full arc and hit the tank. There was a deafening KABOOOOOM that penetrated the very insides of our brains. There was an overwhelming vibration in the platform and guard rail. We shook like leaves, we oscillated to the rhythm of some primeval frequency.

"My God," said Lamar, "don't hit that thing again."

"What?," I said. I saw his lips moving but I could not hear a word.

"What?," said Lamar.

I pointed to my ears and shook my head. There was an awful ringing in my head. Lamar grinned and repeated the gesture. We had discovered a cure for hearing.

We sat for a few minutes on the platform, holding our heads in our hands. Then Lamar stirred and pointed down, and I realized that yet one more travail still faced us. There was no alternative. All of our choices were bad. We had to climb down.

I crawled to the gap in the guard rail and dropped the hammer over the side. It fell forever. Very slowly I backed off the platform, holding with my hands until my feet finally found a rung. Very slowly, my hands gripping the steel rungs like biological epoxy, I climbed down. Lamar followed.

I reached the ground and sat down. My head was still ringing, my hands and arms ached. None of that mattered. The Ground, the good earth was all around me and I was on it. Lamar joined me and we sat for awhile, silent in the growing dusk.

In our individual prisons of silence we walked down the hill and reclaimed our bikes. Back we peddled to the campus and there was the loyal but perturbed Melvin still waiting at his station. His mouth was moving and his arms were waving. We pointed to our ears and shook our heads. Melvin grinned at our discomfiture. He was even for the long wait he had endured. He turned his records over to Lamar, and late for supper we hurried home.

Our hearing was only partially restored when we went to school the next day. We left the stop watch on the Coach's desk, being spared by his absence from conversation on how the race had gone.

In class we were defenseless against the juggernaut of group action. Assuming that our silence gave consent, our teacher put us down for reports on the tufted titmouse and the chickadee. It was the most cooperative day we ever spent in school.

VIII

The Chain of Circumstance Or How One Thing Leads To Another

"The Ziolkowski's are going to build a house right behind us," said Lamar, as we sat on the floor of his room and discussed matters of current import.

We knew that Mr. Ziolkowski taught music at the college, and we had seen Mrs. Ziolkowski, with two small and very blond little boys, on the steps of the house near the post office.

We considered the pros and cons of the Ziolkowski's decision and on balance found it meritorious. It would, of course, interrupt our untrammeled use of the hitherto vacant lot behind Lamar's house, and it would force locale changes when we held army maneuvers or simply walked through the weeds and brush as we went on safari in Africa or cautiously scouted the area to see if the Indians still menaced the fort. These were major losses.

On the other hand we were excited over a new family moving into the neighborhood, and two boys, no matter how small, offered critical manpower reinforcements. Moreover—and a major element throwing the decision in the Ziolkowski's favor—there was the undeniable fascination of impending house construction. There would be something to watch and learn about,

something happening, some focal point for curiosity.

And indeed it was only a matter of weeks before we were startled by the first signs of action. I walked home with Lamar as I always did.

"Want to come in?," asked Lamar, as he always did.

"Yes," I answered, as I nearly always did.

We held our post-mortem of the day at school as Lamar, piece by piece, ate his afternoon loaf of bread. Later, when I got home, I would eat some mustard sandwiches.

"Well," said Lamar, "except for almost drowning in the democratic process I can't think of anything we accomplished today."

"That's right," I said, "I'm sick of projects. Why can't you study something directly without wrapping it up as a project?"

"It must violate the democratic process," said Lamar.

"Well," I said, "I think that one more committee will finish me off. Why did anyone ever think that you could learn anything from a group in which no one knows anything? Why don't all our teachers do it like Mrs. Hardy? She already knows the subject and she comes straight out and tells us about it. Can you imagine Mrs. Hardy setting up a committee to investigate Caesar?"

"Or a committee to decide if algebraic theorems are true," said Lamar.

"Yeah," I said, "we can take a vote on how to conjugate *amo*."

We considered the anachronism of Mrs. Hardy teaching algebra, geometry and Latin in a school where grades had been discontinued and the new equivalent of failure was the ominous written report that "David does not cooperate with the group."

"Mrs. Hardy is great," said Lamar, "she's really hard and you really have to study."

"That's true," I said, and we sat in silence, baffled by a world that made so little sense.

There is a time for contemplation and a time for action, and Lamar made the necessary transition.

"Let's take a walk around," he said, and we went into the kitchen and out the back door.

We saw it immediately. It was as if elves had struck in the night and done their work as we slept. While sitting out our time in school, it was plain that workmen had arrived and that the first steps in Ziolkowski house construction had taken place.

We ran to the field and surveyed the results. There were ditches cut in a huge rectangle, there was dirt piled everywhere, and at the corners there were curious wooden fences—or so they seemed to us.

"They look like army trenches," said Lamar.

"Yes," I agreed, "they'd be great to play army in."

We walked around, we ran up and stood on top of the piles of dirt, we ran through the narrow trenches. There are no legal rights of ownership that come even close to possession through play.

While thus engaged, company appeared on the scene. Melvin and Gene Baldwin came walking up, and as knowledgeable caretakers we gave them a tour of the area.

"They look like army trenches," said Melvin.

"They look just like army trenches," said Gene Baldwin, who was always called Gene Baldwin.

"That's what we thought," said Lamar, and in that instant a game was set in motion.

"Melvin, you and Gene Baldwin will defend the trenches. David and I will attack," said Lamar, ever the instant organizer.

From there one thing led to another.

At first Lamar and I attacked by throwing dirt clods which burst with satisfying violence. Melvin and Gene

Baldwin defended themselves with determination, throwing clods back at us which caused dodging, laughter and loud accusations of deficient abilities.

But it is in the nature of violence that it germinates the seeds for its own growth. So it was in our case.

In the field, more behind Mr. Tidwell's house than Lamar's, there was a fine stand of spear plants. These were smaller than the huge ones that grew near the creek, and we used these constantly for spears and arrows.

And, as the interest in dirt clods waned, we turned to spears. Although regular spear throwing entailed pulling up the plant and sharpening the hard root to a point, some residual good sense saved us from this dangerous ploy.

We pulled up spear plants, and, with dirt still on their roots, we charged the trenches as Melvin and Gene Baldwin prudently ducked out of sight. Our spears came flying back at us in counter-attack and we ran back for resupply.

Pulling up spears as fast as I could, caught up in the enthusiasm of the attack, I hardly felt it. It was the tiniest pressure on the leg, a finger thump just below the knee. In necessary reflex, I looked down.

And there, in confirmation of sensation, was a black spot on the inside of my leg, a pencil width in size. I brushed it with my hand, a spot of dirt or leaf to knock away. It did not brush off and I felt a burning sensation in my leg. Now I sat down and pulled up my leg for closer study. Something was stuck in my leg! The skin was pushed in, the black object below skin level. There was nothing to hold, no way to pull it out.

"Lamar," I called, "I've stuck something in my leg."

The game stopped. Lamar came and knelt beside me. Melvin and Gene Baldwin, realizing a state of truce, came and stood silently, absorbed by the drama of

injury and at first uncertain whether they would be blamed for it.

"I think it's a piece of spear plant," said Lamar, and he tried to pull it out.

"Ohhhhhhhh," I yelled as Lamar failed to get a grip. I held my leg and I felt a sharp protrusion on the outside of my leg.

"It goes all the way through," I said with growing concern, "there's a stick all the way through my leg!"

"My father's at home by now," said Lamar, "he can get it out with no trouble."

Mr. Appleton was at home.

"David stuck a stick in his leg," said Lamar, and I was overcome with awe and a degree of pride at having done something important enough to merit Mr. Appleton's attention.

"It's just a splinter," said Mr. Appleton. "I'll pull it out."

And he tried to pull it out. Then he tried to pull it out with tweezers. It did not come out.

It seemed presumptious, it was beyond debate that Mr. Appleton was wise in all such matters, but I was moved to explanation.

"It goes all the way through," I said.

"Good Lord," said Mr. Appleton, and he blinked and shook his head. I was sure that I had offended him.

"I think," said Mr. Appleton, "that I'll take you to the doctor. Who do you go to?"

I hesitated. Who did I go to? When I had tonsillitis, when I had the flu, Mother called Dr. Reid to come to our house with his little black bag, dispensing not simply medicine but the sure confidence that it would work. Dr. Reid could have given me the ultimate placebo for leprosy and I would have been cured immediately by faith alone. On the other hand, when I had the awful athlete's foot, when we took the vile

throat spray that was supposed to prevent polio, when I was covered with blood from my bicycle wreck, it was the College Infirmary that Mother sent me to and it was Dr. Peck who treated me and made me well.

At that age I lacked the knowledge and perception that produces understanding. I could not imagine the patience and determination that had carried Willena Peck through medical school in the face of insuperable obstacles. I could not fathom the spirit and the character that made its peace with circumstance—a woman doctor at a women's college.

What I did know was that Dr. Peck was a very special person. I remember her as small and grey haired, with trembly hands, increasingly hunched over against the passing years. I liked the way she talked. I liked the way her mind worked. I liked her calm assurance and her kindness. I think that she liked me.

"I guess you'd better take me to Dr. Peck," I said to Mr. Appleton, and with Lamar we got into the Dodge and drove the few short blocks to the college.

The College Infirmary was somewhat peculiar and utterly fascinating. Its rear, with a narrow passage leading in, was the functional front. In a formless world it never hurts to seek for meaning, and the fact that institutions of higher learning seem to have more than their share of errors of building placement and orientation may be significant. I am reminded of the one-way glass incorrectly installed in the outside walls of the showers in a women's dorm at Auburn—an error not discovered until huge crowds of aficionados thronged the streets outside. Or the dormitory at Chapel Hill, its formal front, columns and all, facing a sheer vertical cliff at a distance of two feet.

But if the College Infirmary was built backwards, it was built exactly right for every child who ever saw it.

It smelled of exotic medicines and antiseptics, its walls were lined with metal cases with glass doors, their shelves full of fascinating and unknown instruments. The waiting room was the narrow entrance hall where we sat on wicker furniture to see Dr. Peck. I liked the little treatment room on the left, although it was the two rooms on the right that marked the inner sanctum of diagnosis and treatment.

Even that afternoon under the duress of my injured leg, I cast a fascinated glance at the water cooler—just inside the door where you entered. How did they get the water inside the huge inverted glass bowl, and who did it? It was worth going to the infirmary just to get a drink of water. My sisters deemed it bad form for me to make endless trips to the water cooler, but one short walk and one drink was acceptable.

The paper cups were flat little pockets of paper that you opened with your finger. And as your cup filled with water your spirit overflowed with the joy of seeing a monstrous air bubble rise majestically up through the water and erupt into the air at the top with a satisfying and fulfilling GLUP. The modern water cooler may indeed produce cold water, but who would want to sit and watch one?

At that time, without asides and circumlocutions, Mr. Appleton, Lamar and I entered the infirmary. And this time, as always, Nurse Ollie Tillman sensed the arrival of a patient. It was my belief, based on considerable experience, that it was impossible even to get near the infirmary without Nurse Ollie knowing about it. There was always the hope that the approaching patient might have a sore throat that she could treat. No sore throat had a chance against the ruthless efficiency of Nurse Ollie. With a foot long swab dipped in iodine she mopped out the throat far below

the gag-line leaving a stunned and stricken patient far removed from remonstrance or complaint and deep into mute numbness. She also cured sore throats.

I sat on the little operating table surrounded by Dr. Peck, Nurse Ollie, Mr. Appleton and Lamar.

"Forceps," said Dr. Peck to Nurse Ollie.

It was futile. Push down as hard as possible there was no way to grasp the head of the stick.

"Scalpel," said Dr. Peck to Nurse Ollie. "I'll make an incision, we retract and get the forceps on."

"Uh," said Mr. Appleton, "Lamar and I will wait outside."

Nurse Ollie held my leg while the scalpel in Dr. Peck's hand made trembling circles above the wound. The raw edge of a major misgiving began to appear in my mind. They were going to cut a slice into my leg while I watched from very close range. How badly would it hurt? It was unthinkable that I would embarrass myself by crying, but my resources for silence were untested by anything this direct.

The circles narrowed. For the briefest moment the scalpel rested on the edge of the puncture. And then with one deft stroke Dr. Peck sliced a gash an inch deep and an inch and a half long. It was so swiftly done that pain was secondary, and I was enormously interested to see how much blood poured from the cut.

As Nurse Ollie mopped up blood with one hand she pulled the cut open with the other. Dr. Peck pushed the forceps in and I could feel them close and lock around the stick. and out it came, and came and came—four inches long, looking like a giant thorn.

A clip went into the cut, a bandage went around my leg, and an enormous shot of tetanus anti-toxin went into me.

"Don't go to school tomorrow," said Dr. Peck, and I

thanked her and hobbled out on the very sore leg to join Mr. Appleton and Lamar.

"Oh, David," said my Mother, as we sat around the supper table that night, "how do you do these things?"

The next day, alone at home, my leg sore and feeling sick from the tetanus shot, I mused on my Mother's question.

Why *do* things happen as they do? If Melvin and Gene Baldwin had not appeared we wouldn't have had the fight in the trenches. Lamar and I would not have pulled up spear plants and I would not have stuck the stick in my leg. If Lamar had eaten two loaves of bread instead of one we would have been delayed, Melvin and Gene Baldwin might have come and gone before we appeared and nothing would have happened as it did.

It was clear that things were vastly complicated and perhaps beyond our control. We could deliberately decide to eat the second loaf of bread, but that freedom brought us no closer to knowing what we had escaped or what would now happen.

As I went to sleep that afternoon I enjoyed the thought that in some cosmic scheme of things, perhaps even beyond the context of Montevallo, it was all a part of a giant plan. The Ziolkowski's decision to build a house had led directly to a stick in my leg and missing a day of school. Did that also mean that missing that day of school would alter the other events of my life? And would I know it if it did?

I would discuss these matters with Lamar.

IX

Lamar and the Mark IV Tank

It sat in the backyard, and Lamar had taken me to see it as soon as I reached his house. Like everyone in town the Appleton's heated their water with a small coal burning stove. A coil of pipe was wrapped around the stove inside a metal jacket, cold water ran through the coil and was stored for use in a hot water tank. Inevitably, in our area, the coil became choked with lime and had to be replaced. This had just happened to the Appletons and the old coil had been left in the backyard.

"Just look at it," said Lamar. "The minute I saw it I knew there had to be something we could do with it."

"Yes," I said, studying the coil, "it definitely has some use. We could just use it to build fires in to keep them from spreading. But that's not much use. You know, the way the pipe comes out at the top and runs straight makes it look like a rifle barrel."

"It does look like a gun," said Lamar. "I wonder if there's any way to shoot something out of it?"

"Well," I offered, "it's sort of like the fire cracker cannon we built, except that was just a straight piece of pipe."

"Yes," said Lamar, "we've done it that way before. What would happen if we plugged up the lower end, put some water in it and built a fire inside?"

"We'd heat the water," I said.

"And if we boiled it?" Lamar queried.

"We'd produce steam," I said with growing excitement.

"Aha," said Lamar in his best voice of discovery, "and if the steam built up pressure wouldn't it fire something out of the pipe?"

"Of course," I said, "providing it shot the plug out before the pipe burst."

"Very good," said Lamar. "We need to plug up the bottom opening so that nothing can come out. Then we can drive a plug of some sort in the top, tight but not too tight, and we can fire the plug"

"Excellent," I said, "and I think that a broomstick would be a good tight fit in the pipe. We can cut off a long section and drive it completely into the bottom and use shorter lengths for our bullets."

We moved the coil away from the backdoor and out into the yard. Lamar produced a broom and we cut off a length almost a foot long. Using a hammer we drove this plug all the way into the pipe. It was hard driving and we concluded that nothing could blow it out. The rest of the broomstick was cut into two and three inch lengths and we had our bullets.

Lamar produced a pitcher of water, and tilting the coil on its side we poured a pint of water in. A short length of broomstick was tapped into the barrel and we started a fire inside the coil. We were kept busy running into the field to pick up additional fuel and our fire burned high.

And then it went. POW. Our wooden bullet fired at a straight trajectory far across the yard and hit a tree with a solid thunk. A wisp of steam curled out of our barrel.

"Wow," said Lamar, "did you see the force behind

that bullet? Let's try it again and elevate the barrel and see how far it will shoot."

The coil was charged with more water and another plug was tapped in the barrel. Once again we tended the fire and this time we heard the water boiling inside. POW went the cannon. With unbelievable velocity the plug arced through the air across the field and clattered into the street beyond.

"This is sensational," said Lamar. "It's the most powerful gun we've ever invented. You know, I bet it would shoot those short steel rods my Daddy has under the house."

"It could shoot them," I said, "but I think they're too small to wedge in the barrel. We'll have to wrap them to get a tight fit."

"Fine," said Lamar, and he ran to get the rods.

They were indeed smaller than our barrel, solid rods of steel about one foot long. They were immensely heavy.

"Now," said Lamar, "this is more like it. These should smash through anything."

"Yes," I said as I wrapped a piece of cloth around the rod, "this is our anti-tank gun."

"Great," said Lamar. "Play like the garage is a German Mark IV tank. It's broken through our lines and we're the last anti-tank gun that can stop it."

"Right," I said, "we've volunteered to stay behind and try to stop the tank."

With practiced ease we assumed our new roles. An aura of threat lay over the Appleton's backyard as we loaded our cannon and waited for the Mark IV to appear. With grim faces and keen eyes we stood by our weapon, aware that the fate of the division hung on our courage and prowess.

"We'll get it," said Lamar. "Hold your fire until we

have it clear in our sights. We won't get but one shot. Make it count."

"Yes, Sir," I said.

Using sticks to move the hot coil we swung it around and took aim at the garage. We had put a great deal of water in the coil and tapped our steel bullet firmly in.

"It's the waiting that's the hard part," I said, for we liked not only drama but a degree of character development in our imaginary games.

"Steady, son," said Lamar, the hardened veteran of countless campaigns. "We'll get that devil. I hear his engines now, it won't be long."

What Lamar heard was the water boiling madly in the coil, and it was vital to time our story to the shot of our cannon.

"There he is," I said, "he's just come over the rise and he's heading for the gap."

"Easy now, easy," said Lamar, one eye on our gun. "FIRE."

He timed it beautifully. The cannon roared, the coil was kicked backward scattering hot coals around us. There was a crushing, ripping sound from the garage and we could see that our steel rod had smashed a board and left a hole in the side.

"Good shooting, son," said Lamar. "You hit him dead center. Now get on the radio and let's get those troops back into the line fast."

Holding my hand to my ear to simulate the walkie-talkie I needed, I relayed the orders.

"Division HQ this is Corporal Ward. We've stopped the tank and Sergeant Appleton wants men in here in a hurry. Over."

"Lamar, James Lamar," said Division HQ in reply. It was Mrs. Appleton, and the use of the full name warned us that Lamar was wanted on a priority matter.

"Here we are," said Lamar, although we were in

plain sight. "We're playing army and we've just stopped a German tank."

"What was that noise I heard," said Mrs. Appleton, "and do you know where my broom is. I left it right here on the back porch."

"That was our steam cannon," said Lamar. "The tank was coming at us right over the ridge but we got it with one shot. There's nothing to worry about now."

"Well I'm glad of that," said Mrs. Appleton, uncertain whether she had received an explanation but rightly glad to be spared a panzer invasion of her kitchen. "Now, do you have my broom?"

I looked at Lamar, and I looked around us at the remains of the broom.

"No," said Lamar, "we don't have it now."

Mrs. Appleton went back into the house.

Lamar and I inspected the damage to the garage.

"Do you think anyone will notice the smashed board?," I asked.

"Maybe they won't," said Lamar. "But really it was a small price to pay. For the loss of a broom and a board on the garage we stopped a major German attack."

"Can you explain that to your parents?" I asked.

"No," said Lamar, "I can't. Parents don't do things like we do and they don't understand how things happen."

"That's certainly true," I said, and we sat around our fire in the steam cannon and mused with some sadness on that narrow and confined world so thickly populated with parents.

"It's when you get older," said Lamar, "you just don't want to go on learning things and trying out new ideas."

"I guess that's true," I said, "but I hope it won't ever happen to us."

"It never will," said Lamar.


WEST
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X

The End of Childhood

There is no way it could have lasted. The naivete that fuels the quest to know, the excitement that drives us on to know it all, shrivel and die when finally confronted with the size and shape of life.

As we grew older new concerns and ambitions appeared to lead us on our separate ways. By the time we were in high school the wedges of divergence were operating. We had discovered the bittersweet pain of attraction and romance, and we were testing ourselves in the rituals of athletics and competition.

Friends we remained, but less and less frequently did we muse and wonder and explore together. We were conscious of the change and disoriented by it but we were powerless to stop its inexorable progress. For Lamar and me time and circumstance moved with a gathering momentum. At sixteen, prepared for our junior year in high school, we were placed instead in the senior class. The future had intruded with goodbyes unsaid to yesterday.

I went on to college. Lamar, pursuing a growing ambition, gained admission to West Point. At the end of a summer, home for vacation, I saw Lamar for the last time. Walking to town one afternoon I met Lamar and one of his new classmates. They wore khaki pants and West Point tee shirts and we stopped and talked for

a minute. They shared a world that closed me out. There was little to talk about. The old common denominators and experience had been displaced.

And as we waved and said so long and went our ways I felt an overwhelming sadness for that marvelous and infinitely challenging world that I had left. It was the end of a personal sequence; it was the beginning of a new momentum in the avalanche of time that marks our lives.

At any age and any place there is an antidote for the bored and jaded, there is always challenge if we wish to seek it.

"Mother," we can say, "I'm going down to see Lamar."