

ME AND SAMUEL P. MCGILLICUDDY

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I squeezed through the gap and fell smack on my left eyeball. Old Lop Ear was snorting where I'd leaped up on the sandstone ledge. I was safe for now.

I stretched both hands and counted my bony fingers. I lost count about halfway through, but I didn't run across any stubs. I pried open my ailing eyeball and wiped out the sand. So far, mighty fine.

Then, calamity. I wiggled both feet, or at least I tried. One worked dandy, but I got no answer from the other. I thought for sure I'd dropped a leg and old Lop Ear was chomping it up right then.

It eased my mind considerable when I saw my foot stuck fast between the rocks. A quick calculation showed it was my right leg, but that made two right legs. Whichever, I pulled it loose and untangled as best I could. Somehow I wound up with one left and one right, just like I'd started out the day.

I crawled atop that smooth sandstone and lay there in the sun looking down at old Lop Ear. He was the meanest hog in the west half of Arkansas. And ugly. A rotten tomato full of sow bugs and slugs was prettier than that hog.

He was rooting under the ledge now. I reckoned he was trying to dig under the rocks to get to me. I commenced picking cockleburs off my pants leg and flinging them down on him. He whuffed the dirt out of his snout and glared at me.

I scrunched back a little. I didn't know how long it would take that dumb hog to figure out he could just run down to where the ledge petered out and come right up on top with me. I looked over the pasture to where the path crossed the creek. There was my grubbing hoe, right where I'd flung it at old Lop Ear when he'd jumped me.

Well, there was nothing to do but wait for Pa. He'd be coming down that path in a little while, whistling and swinging his grubbing hoe like it was a walking stick. I always took off early, being somewhat lazy, but Pa didn't mind. He could grub the whole cornfield in half the time if he didn't have to worry about squashing me. Pa's pretty big.

One thing definite, Pa's not afraid of old Lop Ear. Once I saw that hog pounce on Pa from the stand of sumac over yonder behind the orchard. Old Lop Ear thought he

was going to feast on Pa for sure. Pa just grinned and doubled up his fist. When that hog got right on him, Pa whopped him in the side of the head so hard I thought sure there was going to be ham for supper.

Howsomever, Old Lop Ear got up and sort of wobbled off towards the creek. He's been afraid of Pa ever since.

So all I had to do was stay out of reach till Pa came. I bounced another cocklebur off Old Lop Ear's snout and settled down to wait.

Then's when I thought my young life was at its end. Right behind me there was a sudden buzz that rattled my brains near out of my skull. I'd heard it before, but never so loud. I forgot about Old Lop Ear and peeked back over my left shoulder.

It was the biggest rattlesnake in all of Arkansas and most of Missouri. It was every bit of eleven feet long, and a foot thick in the middle. It had a jillion rattles sticking up through its coils. Its snubbed-nose was reared up, weaving back and forth, slow-like. Its black tongue was forking out at me.

I swallowed so hard I liked to choked on my tongue. I couldn't see any gain in getting flustered, so I said, most politely, "Afternoon, Mr. Snake. Awful warm isn't it?"

"It's quite pleasant, unless a gentleman is rudely awakened from his nap," answered the snake.

I could tell he was put out. Any second I expected him to clamp down on my leg.

"Honest, Mr. Snake. I didn't know you were there."

"I carefully chose this spot to be well out of anyone's path." He hissed like a teakettle in a hurry.

I was getting a little impatient now. Waiting to die made me thirsty.

"Well, bite into me if you're a mind to, Mr. Snake," I said. "Put enough poison in me to kill Old Lop Ear if he chews on me."

"I don't wish to bite you unless it is absolutely necessary," he hissed. "And please don't call me Mr. Snake. My name is Samuel P. McGillicuddy."

At that I began to think I'd make it home to supper after all. But I still didn't have any spit, and my legs didn't want to move. That rattler kept waving his head to and fro.

"You can't mesmerize me," I said. "I won't look at you. I'm not your ordinary, everyday fool."

I'll swear he chuckled. He really did.

"I can't hypnotize anyone," he said. "Rattlesnakes don't do that. It's only an old folks' tale."

"Pa told me that. It doesn't have anything to do with old folks."

"Well, it isn't true." Now he really was laughing at me.

I still couldn't move. Maybe I was just scared. I decided to turn the conversation to something a little more friendly. "Please stop rattling, Mr. McGillicuddy. I'd like to count your rattles."

He laughed again, but he held his rattles still. I was up to twenty-three and counting when he interrupted me.

"I suppose you're going to tell me how old I am from the number of my rattles."

"Well, yes."

"Did you know that I get a new rattle every time I shed my skin?"

I nodded.

"And that last year I shed my skin five times? I was growing quite rapidly."

I'd lost my count completely now, so I just stared and listened.

"What's more," continued Mr. McGillicuddy, "This spring I got my tail snagged in a honeysuckle vine and lost fourteen rattles pulling it loose. It wasn't the first time I'd lost rattles."

I saw his point. You don't have to hit me with a hickory limb.

"There's no way to tell how old you are?" I asked.

"You could ask me. I'm thirty-seven."

"Sassafras!" I exclaimed. "I never knew rattlesnakes lived so long."

"We don't. That is, most of us don't. I've been very fortunate. Sometimes I believe killing rattlesnakes is the national pastime."

He sounded sad. It made me feel almost safe. "Who kills rattlers, Mr. McGillicuddy?" I asked, trying to show concern.

"Who doesn't? All the birds of prey do—eagles, owls, hawks, even wild turkeys. Worst of all are the roadrunners. They are to a rattlesnake what a robin is to an earthworm."

I had to think about that one. He sure talked fancy. When I caught up again he was telling how even the deer killed his kids for no reason at all.

I felt sorry for him. "It can't be all that bad, Mr. McGillicuddy."

"Call me Sam; all my friends do."

Now I was safe. I sat up and tucked my knees under my chin. "You can call me Rooster," I said. "That's what Pa calls me."

"Rooster," he said. "A nice name. It reminds me of some very fine meals I've had over at your place."

Well, so much for feeling safe. But I thought I'd keep up my end. "We didn't know you then, Sam. I'm sorry about the horsehair rope Pa put around the chicken coop. I hope you didn't feel slighted being kept out like that."

Sam smiled. "Another myth. I can crawl over a dozen horsehair ropes. It doesn't even tickle. I had my fill and headed back up the mountain. Really, I prefer rats or mice or rabbits. Anyway, I only eat twice a month."

"I hope you've been eating well," I said.

"Oh, yes. This morning I found a quail's nest and had seventeen delicious eggs. I'm quite content."

That was good to hear. Still, I thought it was safer talking about Sam's troubles than about his food. "Tell me about your family, Sam."

"It's good of you to ask, Rooster. Though I'm afraid I don't have much family left. Even your horses and dogs are very efficient at killing us."

"You get your licks in, too," I said. "Pa lost a good plowhorse three years ago from a rattlesnake bite." Right away I clapped both hands over my mouth. I never knew when to keep still. But Sam didn't seem riled.

"I remember," said Sam. "That horse stepped on my tail while I was sound asleep. I bit before I thought."

"You must have some good things happen to your family, Sam." I wanted to steer our talk away from biting.

"Of course," said Sam proudly. "Some of the family have been quite successful. A cousin went out West and became famous as a bullwhip. But then one day he lost his wife and all the children to a family of coyotes."

"How did you hear about it?"

"He sent a telegram. My Uncle Leander was with the telegraph company. Fastest Morse coder in the business. He met a tragic end. He was estivating in the midst of the great drouth and a stranger found him and turned him into rattlesnake steaks."

"Estivating?"

"A marvelous way to beat the heat. You simply suspend all activity and drop into a deep sleep. A summertime version of hibernation. You should try it. "

"Thanks. I believe I'd rather go swimming, Sam."

"Don't remind me. Poor old Leander lost most of his family in the flood of '42."

"Your family's had a heap of troubles, Sam."

"Even the other snakes have it in for us. My grandmother was eaten by a king snake. I barely escaped a bull snake when I was young. My brother wasn't so lucky. But the most tragic end came to my Aunt Clarice. She was married to Uncle Parshall. That's what the P. in my name is for.

"What happened?" I asked politely.

"She was swallowing a squirrel from one end. Uncle Parshall unwittingly started on the other end. They met in the middle and, being much larger, he swallowed Aunt Clarice, too. Uncle Parshall was heartbroken."

“That’s sad, Sam.”

“It’s nothing compared to what happened to J. P.’s family. He’s the musical one, lives near Sweetwater. He plays Sousa’s Marches with his rattles. Taught all his family. They’d gather in the moonlight and play “Stars and Stripes Forever.”

“What happened?”

“One night in the middle of the concert, just before intermission, a badger found them. He killed all but J. P. and two of the children. Badgers will do that. They’ll eat rattlesnakes until they’re full, then kill the rest for fun. It’s terrible.”

I nodded. Old Sam was wound up now.

“Do you have any children living nearby, Sam?” I asked, thinking to cheer him up.

“You don’t understand, Rooster. I’m all alone. It wasn’t any of the things I’ve told about that brought me to this. No, it’s a far worse enemy that’s wiped out the rattlesnakes here.”

I leaned forward. I was afraid he meant Pa. I’d seen Pa whap the head off more than one rattler. “What is it, Sam?”

“It’s those pigs of yours. There’s nothing like a pig to clear a place of rattlesnakes. Now all my family’s gone.”

“What about you, Sam?”

“I’m too big for most of the pigs. But there’s one old hog I’m afraid of. We’re going to have a fight to the death one day soon.”

That reminded me of how I’d come to meet Sam. I looked over the ledge for Old Lop Ear. He wasn’t in sight.

“Does that hog have a crumpled ear, and is he ugly as a rusted bucket?”

“The very one,” said Sam.

“He chased me here across the pasture. He was under this ledge when I roused you from your nap.”

I’ll swear Sam turned pale. He slithered back into the rocks and called over what would have been his shoulder, “Goodbye, Rooster. It’s been a pleasure, but I’d better depart. Perhaps we’ll meet again another pleasant day.”

I stood up and surveyed the pasture. Sure enough, here came Old Lop Ear sneaking along the top of the ledge.

Then I heard Pa whistling. He crossed the creek in a step, happy as a possum in a cornfield.

I leaped off the ledge and lit running. Pa knew what had happened when he saw me coming. He swung me atop his shoulders with one hand, then scooped up my grubbing hoe. He was laughing so hard I thought he’d drop me. When he caught his breath he promised to whop Old Lop Ear for me.

He marched towards home, me bouncing on top. I looked back at the ledge. I couldn't see anything, but I could hear that ornery hog snorting and whuffing.

Old Lop Ear was gone for about a week, and when he came home he looked like a coon dog that's been out too many nights.

I never did see my friend again. And, 'til today, I didn't tell anyone about me and Samuel P. McGillicuddy.