

SUMMER SOUP

By Marguerite Davol

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“**A** flibbertijibbet!” That’s what Lulie called Fletcher, the fourth Leatherby. “A perpetual motion machine.” If Fletcher wasn’t climbing up a tree, he was running down a hill. If he wasn’t hopping circles around the kitchen table, he was climbing the ladder to the hayloft.

The only time Fletcher stood still was when he shot arrows from an old bow that once belonged to Papa’s Great-uncle Quimby. Fletcher shot arrows at everything—dahlias and dragonflies, frogs and fiddle-head ferns. Even Winnie’s piglets. Fortunately, Fletcher’s flying missiles always missed.

But one hot summer day, even nine-year-old Fletcher sat very still. “Whip-de-doc, it’s too hot to spit!” he complained. “And too hot to move a muscle.”

All the Leatherby younguns, stretched out every which way on the grass, stared into the maple tree overhead. Not one wisp of wind twiggled the leaves.

Suddenly, Fletcher leaped to his feet. “Hey—the ice house!” he yelled. “I bet the ice blocks Papa Alonzo cut and stored last winter haven’t all melted. Ice would cool us off!”

Eight voices called out, “Go look, Fletcher.”

Lulie, sitting on the doorstep shelling peas, echoed, “Go look, Fletcher.”

Fletcher ran down the path to the ice house. In a few seconds he was back, holding a smallish lump of knobby ice, dripping, in his hot hands. As the ice thawed and evaporated, to everyone’s amazement, words began to drift in the hazy air and settle into sentences. Another of Papa Alonzo’s frozen stories! All about how hot it was when Papa was a boy.

Nowadays, the whole world seems to be cooling off—winters getting colder and summers nowhere near as hot as when I was a youngun. No, sirree. Well, now, as I recollect ... the summer I turned seven and stood about as tall as a bear’s belly button was a real dingdonger! Still, that summer had started out just like always, with June flowers and showers, rows of asparagus, wild strawberries tucked among the field grasses.

My Daddy planted his cornfields right on schedule and by July the stalks were higher than a cow’s horn. In the vegetable garden, peas, beans, tomatoes all stretched right up toward the sun. But then, mid-July or so, things began to go green-gopher

wrong. One morning the sun rose as usual, round and red, arching up until it was hanging right overhead—a hot, sticky, July noon.

Yep, but that day the sun must have melted onto the roof of the sky, or something. It got stuck! Two o'clock, three o'clock came and we didn't much notice. But long about five-thirty, when the sun should have been tipping over the western hills, we knew something was wrong. Instead of setting, bringing a cool evening breeze, the sun just beat down hotter and hotter.

Why, it was so hot that when my Mama sent me out to pick raspberries for supper, I discovered they'd cooked down into raspberry jam. And the apples in the orchard had stewed themselves into apple sauce—would you believe it?

But that wasn't all, not by a berry basket! The sun never did set—just glared down all night long, making it mighty hard to sleep. Then along about midnight a loud bang-bang, rat-a-tat-tat knocked us spang out of bed. Fireworks? But the Fourth of July was last week, and hunting season wouldn't begin for months. We ran to the windows. There in the west field, the corn Daddy planted was popping—exploding right off the stalks!

We ate and ate until we felt *we'd* pop, but the corn still was piled head high. Daddy had to do something. He hitched up our old mule, Maggoty, to the plow, trying to clear that field. But no use—those white kernels just bounced up and popped right back down on the field. Daddy had to give up. Of course, those huge popcorn drifts didn't melt, so we had a long white winter—from July on! It wasn't until February, right after Valentine's Day, in fact, that winter winds blew away the last kernels.

But back in July, day after day was just the same—hours of sun stuck overhead. The hens lay in the shade instead of laying eggs and I had to search hard to find any. Mama meant to scramble eggs for breakfast, but when she cracked them, every single egg was hard-boiled. So we ate egg salad.

The whole garden stewed under that blazing sun. Why for lunch we ate hot tomato soup, squeezed into our bowls right from the vine, along with new potatoes roasted in the ground and peas boiled in their pods. And Mama didn't have to fire up the stove to bake a pie. She just rolled out a pie crust, stood under the peach tree, and shook the branches a little. Peaches plopped down, soft and hot, and her pie was ready for dessert!

When I went fishing down by the brook, I didn't need to bait my fishhook. Nope, all I had to do was to hold out a fry pan. The brook must have been too hot to swim in, because trout just leaped into my pan, fried crisp and brown and ready to eat.

Of course, it was mighty hard to figure out night from day, and we all hankered for a good night's sleep. The birds never quit singing, for one thing, and after a few days

they sounded plumb worn out. Ever heard a tired robin? Instead of chirping “Cheery-up,” they squawked “Go-to-bed.”

Then, too, none of the night owls ever gave a hoot, just slept. Mice multiplied so fast that our seven cats ran ragged keeping the furry little critters from holing up in the cheese or burrowing into Mama’s bread.

Anyway, every day we felt hotter and tireder and crosser, just aching for dark and a cool breeze. But no, that big red balloon of a sun stayed stuck smack-smack overhead. We began to lose track of what hour or day it was. Everyone grumbled, “We have to do something about that sun!” But what?

Then one day, stretched out under the big maple tree trying to catch a little shade and a snooze, I had an idea. Running into the storage shed, I rummaged through “keep it, we might need it” piles of junk until I found Great-uncle Quimby’s old bow and arrow—the one he’d used to stop the meanest black bear in Carroll County when it was fixing to gobble up his brother, Isaac. I tied a long string to the arrow, figured I’d try aiming for the sun. Maybe I could get a nick, grab the string, and tug that hot ball toward the west.

Fitting the arrow into the huge bow, I pulled back on the bowstring, back, back until my arm quivered like fish eggs in the pond. Whingo! That arrow rose up through the air faster’n a frog snaps up a fly. Praying I wouldn’t get sizzled so close to the sun, I grabbed onto the string and rode it to high heaven. But I’d failed! We didn’t hit the sun. Instead, that arrow arched way over the horizon and just kept going—with me in tow.

After a few seconds—*whomp!* It hit smack into Venus. But Great-uncle Quimby’s arrow didn’t stop there. It pierced through one after another of the planets—Mars, Jupiter, Pluto—skewering the whole bunch together. Then, with a sort of whoo-ooshy sound, it hit the full moon sailing up from the east. Imagine—that arrow had punctured the whole solar system! All this time, I’m hanging on for dear diamonds at the tag-end, feeling moonstruck!

And then the moon itself struck. Trailing the long stringtail of celestial bodies—and me—the moon bumped blang into that big old sun, gave it a shove and ... suffering Saturn! The sun began to move. At last. It slid farther and farther toward the west and finally set in a blast of pinkish-purplish orange. I guess the whole solar system was mighty bored with being stuck in orbit...or maybe miffed at the sun’s laziness.

What about me? Well, that string broke just as we sailed over Laurel Lake. I fell a long fall, but, thank my lucky stars, water made for soft landing. Cooled me off considerably besides. All the planets rolled away, too, like a broken string of pearls, and settled back into their own orbits.

Glad to be back home, I breathed a sigh of relief and headed for bed. The whole world needed a good night's sleep for a change. Around midnight I was awakened by a whippoorwill's call. I looked out my window and there was the moon, round and proud, as if to say, "Look at me—I did it! With a little help from you." Of course I never did find out what happened to that arrow. If anyone ever flies as far as the moon, maybe they'll find it there—Great-uncle Quimby's arrow.

Just before the tale ended, Papa Alonzo appeared from the garden where he'd been trampling tomato worms and squishing squash beetles. Mopping his face with his bandana, he complained, "It's hotter than a horned toad's hang-nail.

"The sun must be stuck again," Fletcher said.

Papa Alonzo chuckled. "I wonder. Of course, up 'til now, from that day to this, the sun has followed its usual routine—always nudged by the moon. Stuck again? Doesn't seem likely.

"You know, younguns, sometimes I like to think back on that summer. Mighty hot and uncomfortable, true, but every now and then I get a hankering for sun-fried trout, tomato soup and boiled peas from the garden. And for dessert—hot peach pie, fresh off the tree."

He looked around. "Now where in the zing-zodiac did Fletcher go?"

The twins pointed. "Over there," they chorused.

Silhouetted against the late afternoon glow, Fletcher was shooting arrow after arrow toward the sun. With a long string tied to each one.