Sketch

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Archer Pilgrim

Don Jackson*

*Iowa State College

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TODAY when they reached the hilltop the horizon was a dim and indefinite line in the afternoon haze. The land, dipping and rising as it stretched out to the blue, showed the first suggestion of the patchwork that would come in summer, when the corn was rich green, the wheat soft amber and orange, and the oats a yellowish white.

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“I can see my little bantam hen in the chicken yard,” he said.

Grover flopped back into the grass and squinted at the sky.

“No, you cannot,” he chuckled.

“Well, I bet she’s there anyway.”

“She’s probably in the hen house laying an egg,” Grover said.

“No sir, she doesn’t lay eggs.”

“What good is she then?”

Arch chewed the foxtail and blew it out of his mouth. “She’s kinda pretty,” he said.

“Ahen pretty? Heck!” Grover said.

Picking another foxtail stem, Arch leaned back on his elbows and was quiet. Over in the cornfield his father was driving King and Sue back and forth from fence to fence, and from where Arch sat the mules seemed to creep along like the minute hand on a clock. A car chugged on the highway with motor roaring. The boy felt far away from everything.

“When I get big I’m going to buy all the land down there and have a great big farm,” he said to Grover.
Grover sat up and stared down toward the land. "I'll build me a great big old bridge down there somewhere," he said, "and a great big old highway. When I'm a civil engineer."

Arch smiled. "If you want to you can build a bridge right across my farm," he said.

Grover sank back into the rustling grass a moment, then sat up and said, "Let's go down to the creek and build a mud bridge right now."

"What for? It'll just wash away."

"Sure, but not for quite a while, and besides—I got to practice up for when I'm an engineer."

"I kinda wanted to hunt arrowheads," Arch complained.

"Them old rocks can wait. You can look for 'em after we build a bridge," Grover said.

"I know what," Arch said. "We can go down to the creek, and you can build a bridge and I can look for the arrowheads."

"Golly, it takes two guys to make a mud bridge." Grover jumped up and started down the hill, disappearing behind the tree trunks. "Come on, Arch," he yelled. Arch started after him.

In the creek they found a place where the water flowed over a floor of yellow clay. Grover found a rotted board and laid it across the stream.

"Now we'll get some stakes and drive on both sides of this plank, then put mud on top," he directed.

They found a few stout sticks and drove them into the clay, taking turns at standing on the board to keep from wetting their shoes.

The supply of sticks gone, Arch went downstream a few yards to find others. He walked near the bank, as far away from the water as possible, stepping where the wet soil looked most solid. Then, finding a fallen branch which was firm and straight, he broke off the twigs and loose bark and started back to Grover with it.

A scratching, scrambling noise nearby made him stop. The noise stopped, too. Then he saw, not ten feet away, a motionless, alert little squirrel. It sat on its haunches, holding a black walnut between its forepaws, watching Arch suspiciously. Arch stood still and drew a quick breath. He had never seen a squirrel so close. It held the walnut as a person would; as if it had real hands; as if it were a boy like himself, playing in the creek bed. And the ears! delicate, tiny, like the young oak leaves.
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Grover must see it, too. But Arch was afraid to call out, because the squirrel might run away. He waited for Grover to look toward him, hardly breathing, hardly even blinking his eyes. The squirrel seemed undisturbed at Arch's presence, but not confident enough to try scampering away.

Finally Grover saw Arch standing there with the stick in his hand.

"What's holding you up?" he yelled. Arch winced. Yelling like that would surely scare the squirrel.

Then Grover saw the squirrel. "Golly," he said; then he whispered to Arch: "Hit him! Bang him with the stick, Arch. Quick!"

The boy did not move. Grover continued: "Darn it, Arch, hit him with your stick. Hurry!"

Arch took a step toward the squirrel, and it sprang away. Holding the stick overhead, Arch ran after it. He plunged through the mud close behind the terrified animal and began to strike at it. The banks of the creek were steep, giving the squirrel no chance to climb out of reach. It floundered out into the shallow water, and a blow from Arch's stick landed on its back. Dragging its hind legs, it crawled on—crying hoarsely. Then it stopped and lay panting in the mud, and a crack on the head closed its eyes and forced blood from its mouth and nostrils. Arch hit it once more, with all his strength, and felt the small body soften under the stick.

He stood staring at the wet, broken carcass as Grover ran up to him.

"Gee, he's a big one," Grover said. "You sure popped him off all right." He took the stick from Arch and prodded the squirrel. Arch turned away and walked back toward the unfinished mud bridge.

"Hey, where you going?" Grover called. He picked up the animal by the tail and hurried after Arch.

"Aren't you going to take him home?" he asked.

"What good is he now?" Arch said.

"Well, you can show him to your dad."

They found a path leading out of the creek, and climbed up on the bank. They sat down on a log and Grover tossed the dead squirrel out in front of them. Arch's quietness made him uneasy.

"Nothing to get excited about, just killing a squirrel," he began. "Shucks, they can't feel nothing."
Arch looked at him. "Can't feel anything?"

"Naw, they're just like a fishworm that you put on a book. Doesn't hurt 'em a bit."

"Well, I don't know—" The squirrel had screamed, he remembered.

"Besides, you broke his back right away, and that paralyzes them. Nope, he didn't feel nothing at all."

Arch's face brightened a little.

"And boy, did you run fast, Arch," Grover said, slapping him on the back. "You'll be good in the track meet last day of school!"

"... did I?" Arch said, smiling just a bit.

"Boy, you bet. And wait till you tell the guys at school you killed a squirrel. Without a gun, even. Just running him down!"

Arch rubbed his heel in the soft sod, and eyed the squirrel. The body was twisted, and the fur was streaked and sodden with creek water. The last blow of the stick had flattened the head, and now the swollen tongue, blue and blood-clotted, bulged from the crushed jaws.

Taking the stick from Grover, Arch turned the animal on its back. It was growing stiff. The legs stuck out from the body, and did not bend when Arch poked at them.

Grover didn't think it was bad to kill the squirrel, Arch told himself. He didn't think so at all, and maybe he thought it was silly for other people to think so. Maybe a person shouldn't feel sorry about just killing a little old squirrel. They didn't feel anything, anyway.

"I got to be home to get the cows in," he said.

"My dad said for me to get home early, too," Grover said, looking at the sun. "Must be four o'clock."

The boys stood up, and Arch bent down and picked up the squirrel by a stiff hind leg. The leg felt slick and cold. He had killed the animal all alone, without even a gun. Who ever heard of running down a squirrel? It must be able to run awful fast. He swung the body back and forth several times, then heaved it far out into the thicket. It went end over end and thudded down out of sight in the bushes. Arch turned to Grover and grinned, and the two started home.

"Sure was a big one," he said.