

Eleven-year-old Timothy Collins lives in an invalid's chair until an escaped slave brings a message from his missing father that changes everything. Tim then starts his journey to the Tree at the Top of the Hill and a new life.

The Tree at the Top of the Hill

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By

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Chapter Six

A Quick Dip in the Creek

Something Mr. Freeman had said the day before gave Tim the idea. Once again he enlisted the help of his little sisters. For the second time they searched the woods looking for strong branches.

Although Tim now had chores of his own to do each morning like putting the new wire on the chicken coup door or hoeing the weeds one row a day in the kitchen garden, he spent each afternoon working on his plan. With the girls sitting at his feet doing their mending or working their samplers he would tell them stories while he whittled away at his long sticks. He made a sharp point at one end and smoothed away the rough edges of the other end. After a week he had a pile of twenty staves.

One afternoon leaning on Max, Tim made his way to the far side of the garden where Mr. Freeman was pounding in the fence posts with a huge mallet. In the meadow beyond, the Witherall's cows grazed contentedly. Tim watched Mr. Freeman for a while and then

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asked if he might give it a try. The man grinned and handed over the mallet.

Tim was astonished when he discovered how heavy it was. He managed to raise it into the air but came down wildly and nowhere near the post. To make things worse he lost his balance and landed in a pile of fresh mud. At least he thought it was mud until he landed in it.

Mr. Freeman was laughing and whooping as he offered a hand to pull him up off the ground.

“You need to learn just what size of a job to tackle and which tool will work best for you. A man’s tool is a personal thing. Your Pa has a good selection of mallets in the barn. You go take a look, and try them all until you find one that has the right heft for you.”

Tim turned to leave and Mr. Freeman tapped him on the arm. “By the way, son, I’d go on down to the creek and clean up a bit before I reported home to your ma. It’s a warm day and I think she’d skin the heels off both of us if she saw you and smelled you just now.”

Mrs. Collins looked a little anxious at supper that evening when her son, freshly scrubbed in the creek behind the cabin sat down to eat his cornbread and gravy.

“Where were you all afternoon, Tim? I was looking everywhere for you. And why is your hair wet?”

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“Oh I decided to go for a swim in the creek. It was such a warm day and I worked up a sweat and got a little dirty helping Mr. Freeman.”

“Helping Mr.... You went in the creek? By yourself!”

“Sure, Ma. Can’t a man take a bath by himself these days?”

The girls started giggling, and his mother simply stared. Mr. Freeman however, added “Trust me, Ma’am, this young man worked up quite a ripe odor pounding in that fence post. You wouldn’t have wanted him around without that soak in the creek.”

With that he and Tim looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Tim’s mother looked from one to the other in bewilderment and then just smiled. “Well, I never. Tim you sound just like your Pa when you laugh out loud like that. You should do it more often.”

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