

GENE WOLFE

THE WAIF

One of the modern masters of fantastic literature, Gene Wolfe has been challenging and rewarding readers for thirty-odd years with his well-crafted, subtle tales. His last such gift to us was "In Glory Like Their Star" in our October issue; now he brings us a poignant gem of a story.

THE SOFT SIGH OF BREATH might have come from a puppy, and Bin hoped it did. Quietly, hoping that it was a sleeping puppy and not a piglet (though he would very willingly have petted a piglet), he went to see, the heavy stick forgotten in his hands.

It was a boy, sound asleep on straw, and covered with more straw and feed sacks. The boy's face was white, and so delicate it might almost have been a girl's; his hair was as black as a crow's wing. Bin stood watching him for a long time, feeling something he could put no name to. He had never had a friend. Fil and Gid were not really his friends, but he had not known that. At length he turned over a bucket and sat on it. That was the way you got the rats to come out, you just waited, real still, not hardly breathing, till they thought you had gone; but the other boy's breath made faint plumes of steam, and Bin's big, greasy coat with the wool on the inside did not keep him warm enough. He found an old shingle and a bent nail, and printed: IF YOU HUNGRY COME MY HOUSE LATE WHISTLE BY WINDOW. On the other side: LITTLE ONE WEST NO ROAD.

Propping up the shingle near the sleeping boy, where he would be sure to see it, Bin tiptoed to the door. Niman Corin was nowhere in sight, and that was good. Niman Joel's punishments for trespassing had been light; but they had burned Niman Joel, and who could say what Niman Corin might do? It was better not to be whacked at all.

Supper had been bread and soup, as it nearly always was. Bin lay in bed listening to Gam's wheezing inhalations and speculating on the difficulties of giving the other boy soup. The bowl and spoon would have to be returned. There could be no getting around that. Could he trust the other boy to do it? Everyone had trusted Niman Joel, even the grownups.

He should have gone to see the reverend, after, like Gam said. He had not, had lied about it. Gam had put his finger on the stove, not for lying but just so he would know how burning felt. He had been punished for the lie, even if Gain had believed him. That was something to remember.

To remember always.

Outside a saw-whet called, probably from the big pine at the edge of the woods.

It would have been better to have gone to the reverend. The reverend would have said what Fil had said, that Niman Joel had been punished on Earth and was in heaven now and all that. But it would have been better to have gone. One lie, and you have to watch everything you say forever.

But Gid had not been lying when he said he had killed that rat. He had showed it, almost as big as a cat. Or he had been, because somebody else had killed it, maybe. It had been poisoned or something.

The saw-whet cried again, a little nearer this time, like on a fence post. The mice would not

come out in this cold, they had already come into Gam's house to keep warm. As he had.

Gam had caught two in her trap, and one had drowned trying to drink out of the scrub bucket. Cats were no good, Gam said. When an old lady like her had a cat, folks said she talked to the Flying People. Maybe helped them like Niman Joel.

The saw-whet was perched on the chimney, probably. Its shrill whistle came again, and Bin sat up, threw off quilt and blanket, and sprang from his bed.

A shadowy figure waiting outside in the snow beyond the window.

Bin pushed his feet into his boots, snatched up his coat and what remained of the bread, and hurried outside.

"Aren't you cold?" he asked the boy waiting in the snow. The moor was bright, and it seemed to him that the other boy was dressed in rags and thin rags at that.

"Very cold." When the other boy took the bread his hand shook "Can't I come inside? Please?"

Bin shook his head.

"I could eat this in front of the fire, and warm myself. Just for moment."

"You'd wake Gain. She'd be mad."

The other boy chewed and swallowed. "I wouldn't, but suppose I did Hasn't she ever been angry before?"

"Sure. Lots."

"Was it worse than my freezing to death?"

In the cabin, the other boy crouched in the ashes and ate the bread while Bin brought him a bowl of soup. There was still a little fire in the stove, banked for breakfast, so the soup was warm. "There isn't an meat," Bin explained, "'cause we don't have any. It's just carrots an potatoes, mostly."

"It smells wonderful."

While the other boy was eating his soup, Bin said, "You'll have to out when that's finished."

The other boy looked up, smiling. "Then I won't eat so fast. It wonderful to be warm."

"You could build a fire in the woods."

The other boy said nothing, eating soup.

"Does Niman Corin know you sleep in his new barn?"

The other boy's shoulders rose and fell. "I suppose. Some of them do

"They let you?"

The other boy dipped what was left of his bread into his soup and a it. "Not exactly, but they know I'm there sometimes."

"What's your name?"

"They call me the Cold Lad." The other boy smiled. "But that's not really my name. My name is Ariael."

"Mine's Bin."

Bin had smiled too when he spoke, but the other boy's smile faded. "What are you going to do when I leave, Bin?"

"I guess go back to bed."

"I'm tired, too. Probably more tired than you are." The other boy spooned up the last of his soup and drank it. "I want you to let me hide in here, where it's warm. Gam won't find me. Will you do that?"

"You don't have no boots?" Bin was looking at the other boy's bare feet; one had been bleeding, and the blood was caked with ashes now.

"No. None."

"Gam bought me these." Bin indicated his own boots, sheepskin boots with thick wooden soles. "They're big so I can wear 'em next year too."

The other boy said nothing.

"I guess I could give you one."

The other boy grinned and hugged him, which surprised him very much indeed. "I won't take it," he whispered. He let Bin go.

"But, Bin, think how Gam would feel if you gave me a boot. You'd have to say you lost it, and she'd be terribly hurt."

"I guess."

"So instead of giving me one of your boots, I want you to do something much easier. I want you to let me hide in bed with you. I won't take up much room, and I'll get down under the covers so Gam won't see me. Watch."

Handing Bin his bowl and spoon, the other boy ran soundlessly to Bin's bed and slipped beneath the old quilt. The quilt rose -- or so it seemed to Bin, watching it by firelight. For a moment or two it twitched and settled itself.

After that it seemed clear that the other boy had gone. Thinking about it, Bin decided that the other boy had slipped over to the side of the bed and slid over the edge, and was hiding under it. He took off his coat and hung it on the peg, pulled off his boots, stood them at the foot of his bed the way Gam liked, and got under the covers. The other boy was in there, too, small and thin and very cold. He huddled against Bin for warmth, and Bin found that he was no longer little, as he had been all his life. He was someone large and warm, someone strong, generous, and protecting. It felt good, but it felt serious too.

The other boy was still there when he got out of bed in the morning. He washed the way he always did, trying not to look, got dressed, and went outside to cut a twig to clean his teeth the way you were supposed to.

When he came back in, Gam said, "Cold out?"

"Pretty cold."

"There was bread left last night. It was going to be our breakfast."

"I'll be late for school," Bin told her.

"You ate it, didn't you, Bin? You got up in the night and ate it."

"Yes'm."

"Don't cry. It wasn't no sin."

Gam held him for a minute. She was warm and smelled bad and he loved her.

"There's soup left for me, and I'll bake more bread, if I can get salt. It be spring real soon now, Bin, and things will be easier."

Gam had been right, Bin decided as he walked to school. Yes, it was still cold. Yes, there was still snow on the ground, a lot of it. But there w something new in the air, something that made him think of the other boy, a promise not in words. He had straightened up his bed because Gam had made him, and it had seemed like there was nothing in that bed, nothing at all. Or only the promise.

The other boy could whistle like a saw-whet. He himself could whistle like a wren, and he did as he walked to school, then fell silent as he clattered up the rickety wooden steps and shuffled into the long gloomy room with sheets of scarred wood for walls.

When the schoolmaster arrived, Bin rose with the others to greet him. "Good morning, Niman Pryderi!"

"Good morning, class. I trust you had a good holiday?"

Several nodded.

"You did not go to see Niman Joel burned?"

Bin, who had, said nothing.

"What about you, Shula?"

Shula had been toying nervously with one of her skinny braids; she let it fall as she spoke. "I didn't go, Niman Pryderi. I didn't want to."

"That is well. Fil?"

Fil sat up straight. "Yes, sir. I went. I felt like I ought to see it."

"That is well, too." The schoolmaster rose, selected a stick from the woodbox, opened the door of the stove, poked the fire with it, and tossed it in to bum. The sky around the hole in the weathered aluminum roof was bright blue. As he had often before, Bin stared at it, sick for the freedom temporarily denied him.

"Do you understand why I said that, class? I said it was good that Shula didn't want to watch Niman Joel burned, and good that Fil felt he should. Who will explain that? Bin?"

He rose as slowly as he could, his mind racing. "'Cause boys 'n girls are different?"

"They are, of course, but that's not the reason." Hands were up. The schoolmaster said, "Dionne?"

She stood, taller and wider than anyone else in the class, and ever-defiant. "You said it was good that Fil watched, because we ought to know about it -- about what happens to people that get mixed up with the Flying People. But we shouldn't want to watch it, because it was horrible. Nobody ought to want to see somebody else burned to death. That's sick."

"Excellent, Dionne."

Bin, who never raised his hand, had raised it now. For a moment the schoolmaster looked at it in surprise. Then he said, "Yes, Bin. What is it?"

He rose again, as slowly as ever. "I -- I "

The schoolmaster thought he understood, and said, "You were there, too. With Fil, I imagine."

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir, I was. I seen it. Only -- only if we don't want to see it, we could just not do it. Folks do it, Niman Pryderi. It don't just happen."

There was laughter. Some light object struck the back of his head, and he sat down.

"We have lost a world," the schoolmaster explained almost gently, "and it was the only world we had. All our nations collapsed as our raw materials were exhausted, Bin, and no sooner had we begun to rebuild than the Flying People arrived."

The class was satisfied and seemed ready to move on, but the schoolmaster was not. He went to his desk, sat down, and regarded them, his soft, dark eyes traveling from face to face. "Their presence prevents us from rebuilding it. How can we bring back the science we lost, when we know that human beings not much different from ourselves are watching all we do, and our lost science is child's play to them?"

He paused. "That was a rhetorical question. Do you know what rhetorical question is?"

About half the class nodded.

"It's a question we ask because it cannot be answered, or because the answer is so obvious that no one needs to say it. In this case, the answer is that we can't. You may say that our shame, embarrassment, and humiliation ought not to prevent us from doing what we should. If you won't say it, I will. I do. But the fact is that we are so prevented. It's why so many of you have only one pair of shoes, and less than enough to eat. That's why you have to go to school in an old truck. Burning our neighbors is horrible, very horrible indeed. But having neighbors who would side with the Flying People is intolerable -- which means that we do not tolerate it."

Dionne approached Bin at recess; and Bin, who was terrified of her, tried to back away.

She smiled. "I just wanted to say I never knew what a good little kid you are. They pick on you sometimes, don't they?"

He shrugged. "They make fun. Gam 'n toe's poor."

"Yeah. Let me tell you a secret." She bent, her mouth at his ear. " all are."

Bin had not yet recovered his emotional balance when Fil took him aside. "Look, Bin, somebody's gotta tell you this, so I guess it's me. What you said in class? You know what I mean?" He nodded.

"There's a dozen kids that will tell their folks, all right? What happened to Niman Joel could happen to you. It don't take much. You keep your mouth shut from now on. Or you say he got what he had comin'. You say, show me another one and I'll bring the wood. Understand?"

"It was dumb," Bin said. "I know that."

"It was dumb, and if you keep on like that I won't know you anymore understand? You're going to be too risky to know, so you shut up."

Bin joined the kickball game, and scored. Fil slapped his back, but none of the others said anything. As soon as the game had resumed, a big hand grasped his shoulder. "Come in," the schoolmaster said. "I must speak with you."

Docilely, Bin followed him back into the school.

"Sit down. You can pull up that stool. We're not going to stand on formality until your classmates return." The schoolmaster's smile was touched with bitterness.

Bin did as he was told. "I guess I know what this is about, Niman Pryderi. I'm sorry."

"I doubt that you do, Bin -- though I've no doubt that you're sorry. Do you know why I'm called Niman, Bin? Or why Niman Joel was, or any other man?"

Bin shook his head.

"When the Flying People came, we started calling each other Neighbor. Neighbor meant that a man was one of us, and not one of them. Then we wanted to bum our neighbors." The bitter smile returned. "Which our religion -- some people's religion, at least -- teaches us we should not do. So we changed it to Near-man, then to Niman. It wasn't all that long ago. About the time I was born."

Bin nodded again.

"Have I ever used my switch on you, Bin?"

"Last year." Bin gulped. "For talkin' in class."

"I'm going to do it again, when class resumes. I am going to make the dust fly. Did you cry, last year?" "A little, Niman Pryderi."

"Are you going to cry this time ?"

Bin shook his head. "I'm bigger."

"You will cry, this time," the schoolmaster told him. "You'll scream. When class resumes, I'm going to ask you questions, and they will be questions you can't answer. I'll see to that. Then I'll bend you over my desk and whale away. It will hurt and you'll cry, but the boys who are ready to league against you will like you after that. And the girls will talk about how you were beaten when they go home this afternoon, not about what you said. Do you understand?"

"I think so, Niman Pryderi."

The schoolmaster's voice softened. "Guilt is the worst part, Bin. Knowing that we were on the devil's side, and that what we got was less than we deserved. I want to spare you that. You've done nothing wrong. Have you ever raked something out of the fire with a stick?"

Bin nodded.

"That's what I'll be doing, with my switch. Remember that."

GAM SAW the tracks the tears had left down a face no particularly clean and said, "What happened?" and hugged him, and he ate his supper standing up. There was fresh bread for supper, and to divert him from his sufferings she told him about the salt some kind neighbor had surely left for them, a nice big sack of clean white salt just sitting there on the doorstep when she had gone to the well. "Spring was in the air, Bin. I guess you noticed, too, when you children went outside to play? I was thinking about it, it felt so nice, and I turned around and carry my bucket back in, and there it was, sitting on the step."

By a great effort of will, Bin succeeded in not looking at his bed; it seemed likely the other boy would not have gone to bed so early anyway. He would want some of the new bread after Gam had gone to sleep, Bin decided, and he had earned it, too.

"You want to study your **book** now?"

He shook his head. "I'm goin' out to play. It'll be dark soon. I'll study then."

"You got switched for not knowing the answers, Bin. You know them now?"

"That's why I'd like you to help me study when I come back."

Once outside, he found his stick and made straight for the barn that had been Niman Joel's. There was still snow on the ground here and there, and ice that cracked beneath the hard wooden soles of his boots; but there was water, as well, puddles to splash in, and cold drippings that fell from the eaves of the barn onto his head and down the back of his neck, finding their way inside the greasy wool and the old gray shirt.

Most of all, there was the new-year feeling in the air, as Gam had said It would be kite-flying time before long, and the first kite-flying time which he was not youngest flier. Emlyn and Cu and Sid would look to him for help with their kites, just as

Footsteps. He froze.

It was Gid; Bin relaxed a little.

Gid looked around. "Bin? Bin, I know you're in here. Where are you?"

Bin stepped forward. "Here I am. I thought maybe I could kill a big rat, Gid, like you did. So I stayed real quiet."

"This's our barn now."

Bin nodded.

"We don't want nobody thinkin' it don't belong to nobody. It's ours."

Bin nodded again.

"Niman Joel's dead, and his wife's run out. So we took his place for what he owed. Who you got with you?"

"Nobody." The question had taken Bin by surprise.

"Yes, you do. I seen you comin' across our new field."

"I did," Bin admitted, "only there wasn't nobody with me."

"I seen him." Gid stepped nearer -- larger, older, and stronger. "You better tell me, an' I mean now."

Bin resorted to logic. "If there was anybody, he'd be in here."

Gid's fist struck him under the left eye, and he yelped with pain, backing away.

"Don't you yell when I hit you!" Gid waded in, fists flying, and Bin fell. The kicks were worse -- much worse -- than the blows of Gid's fists.

And then the heavy stick Bin had brought to kill rats was above Gid's head. It came down hard with a noise like a sack of feed dropped from high up, catching Gid where his neck joined his shoulder. Gid swung around, and it hit his forehead with the sound of a hammer pounding a board, and he fell.

The stick fell too; for an instant, Bin caught sight of the other boy in the dimness of the barn. Then he was gone.

So was Bin, taking his stick with him, as soon as he could get to his feet. The wood was not a comfortable place in weather like this, full of ice and water, with snow-water dripping from every tree; but it was a familiar place, and he remembered the saw-whet. If the other boy had come here one time, he might come here again.

"Hello, Bin."

Bin whirled, and found the other boy behind him. "That was good," Bin said with solemn sincerity, "what you done for me. I owe you."

The other boy smiled. "Owe me what? A pair of boots like yours?"

"Sure! Lemme find a place to set, 'n I'll take 'em off."

The other boy shook his head. "I don't want them, Bin. They're too heavy for me. I was testing you, and I shouldn't do that. I won't, ever again."

"Then I won't test you, neither."

"Good. Why did you go into that barn? Were you looking for me?"

Bin nodded. "About school. The salt, too. It was right of you, 'n I wanted to say I'd give some a' the bread tonight. You goin' to be in my bed again?"

"If you don't object."

"Then I could a' said there, only I didn't know."

"You wanted to tell me something about your school, too."

"Yeah." Bin ran his fingers through his unruly hair, spat, and ran his fingers through his hair again. "'Bout school 'n Niman Joel. All that. They said how bad it was to burn him. It didn't seem so bad to me when they was doin' it. Everybody was yellin' 'n carryin' on. I was, too."

"I understand, Bin, and I don't blame you."

"Course I couldn't see much. I said I did, after, only it was a lie. I seen a little, but they was crowdin' around the fire too close."

He waited for some comment from the other boy, but none came. "So then today in school they said how bad it was, burnin' a neighbor like that, 'n I said why do it if you don't like to? 'N I got warmed for it pretty good. Just for sayin' that. He said it wasn't for that, only it was. So I got to wonderin' what Niman Joel done, you know? The Flyin' People's rich, they say, 'n whatever they say, why that's got to go. Fil said he most likely told on them that talked against 'em, only everybody does, 'n they got to know that. So what'd he do? 'N I remembered you used to sleep in his barn, sometimes anyhow, so maybe you'd know."

"He was very poor," the other boy said.

Bin nodded. "He didn't have but the one mule. I know that." "Hatred is a luxury, Bin. Like whiskey. Do you know about whiskey?"

"Sure."

"People who have good farms make it and drink it, and for the most part it does them little harm. But those who are truly poor must choose between whiskey and food, and if they choose whiskey they die. Hatred is like that. Niman Joel had to devote all his energy to feeding himself and his family. He carved spoons and bowls and pannikins in winter, and sold them, though he got very little for them. From spring until fall he worked from sunrise to sunset, trying to grow enough food, and hay enough to carry his mule through the winter. I tried to help him now and then, and sometimes I succeeded."

"That's good."

"I think myself very rich, Bin. You may not believe me, but I do. This whole, beautiful world of yours lies open before me. I can go wherever I want to, and do whatever I want to. I watch the sun go down, and I watch the moon come up. Its mountains and its seas are all mine. I can see them and play on them anytime I want, and I wish that I could show them to you as well."

"Did you show him?"

Sadly, the other boy shook his head. "I couldn't. But I helped him sometimes, as I said, and as I said, he was too poor to hate. He didn't hate -- he couldn't afford to, and I think that the others must have seen that. I tried -- "

"Wait up!" Bin made an urgent gesture. "You're one?"

"Would you hate me, Bin? If you thought I was?"

"Sure!"

"Then I am not, because I know you can't afford it. I'm cold, and you're cold, too. I can see you are. I think we both ought to go inside and warm ourselves before Gam's fire. You promised her you'd study tonight, and she was going to help you. Remember?"

"You better not let her see you," Bin said as he turned away. "She'll have a fit."

Behind him, the other boy said, "She won't see me, Bin. I promise you." Bin had the feeling that if he turned around he would not see the other boy either.

GAM HAD FINISHED washing up and was waiting for him inside, with Bin's tattered little arithmetic **book** on her lap. They had finished with IF JON HAS FIVE APPLES, JORI HAS FOUR APPLES AND JAK HAS THREE APPLES, HOW MANY APPLES DO THE BOYS HAVE? And were starting on IT IS FOUR O'CLOCK AND OTO WANTS TO SLED when someone knocked. Bin opened the door and Niman Corin came in without asking, with Gid

behind him. "Another boy hit my son with a stick," Niman Corin told Gam. "He was playing with your grandson, and this other boy came up behind him and hit him." He looked around at Gid, who nodded.

"I'm sorry to hear," Gam said politely. "I hope he's not hurt bad."

"He saw that boy go in here with your grandson." Niman Corin did not bother looking around this time. "Didn't you, Gid?"

"Yes, sir," Gid said.

Gam shook her head. "Bin came in to study a bit ago, but there wasn't anybody with him. Were you playing with somebody outside, Bin?"

Bin said, "Yes'm."

"Who with?"

"Him. Gid."

Gam looked severe. "You didn't hit him with any stick, I hope, Bin.

"No, ma'am. I never." Privately Bin considered that it might be nice to hit Gid with a stick in the future.

"Did anybody?"

"Yes, ma'am. This one boy did."

Niman Corin aimed a thick forefinger at Bin. "A boy that was playing with you and Gid?"

"No, sir, Niman Corin. He just come up behind Gid'n whapped him. I never seen he's there till he done it."

Niman Corin looked angrier than ever. "What's his name?"

Bin strove to remember, hoping he could not. "I don't know. He told me once, only I forget."

"Does he live around here?"

"I don't know, Niman Corin. I don't think so."

Gam cleared her throat, the sound of a woman with much of import to say. "It's four o'clock and Oto wants to sled. If it takes half an hour to walk to the hill, and Oto must be home for supper by six, how long will he have to sled?"

"Why, you old bitch!" Niman Corin glared at her.

She looked up from Bin's arithmetic. "You take that back."

Niman Corin's face, red already, grew redder still. "You look at my son's head."

"I've seen it," Gain declared. "Now I want you to look at Bin's bottom. Take off your trousers, Bin."

Bin did not.

"He was switched for not getting his lessons," Gam explained, "beat harder than a lot would

beat a mule. I'm sure Niman Pryderi had reason, but I don't like it. I'm going to see to it he's never switched so bad again. Now you take back what you said or you clear out of my house."

Gid said, "He's hidin' in here, Pa. I seen him come in." He lay down to look under Gam's bed.

Bin had been thinking about the other boy, and not about Oto. He said, "Two hours?"

Gain stood up and closed the arithmetic. "You listen here," she told Niman Corin. "I don't give a rap for what your Gid thinks he seen. I was sitting right there when Bin came in, and there wasn't nobody with him. You've come in my house and called me a name that will stand between us when these boys are grown men. You get out."

"I've been a friend to you," Niman Corin told her.

"Not so I've noticed. Get out!"

He left, and Gid left with him after looking under Bin's bed, and after that Gain began to cry.

Shula's mother stopped Bin on the way to school. "I see you've got a new boy living in your house, Bin. What's his name?"

"There isn't none," Bin told her, and knew he lied.

"I saw your grandma going to market yesterday," Shula's mother insisted, "and there was a little boy with her. It wasn't you."

Bin shrugged.

"I come up to talk, and he wasn't there anymore. It was like he'd just flown away."

After recess, Shula herself told the schoolmaster, "Bin was talkin' to some boy that don't go to our school. I seen them way over by the trees." Nor was that the only such report.

They found Bin in the woods one day when the first bold trees had donned their spring green. Niman Adken caught him by one arm and, when he tried to pull away, Niman Corm by the other; and they walked him back to town, saying hardly a word between them. The stake was being driven in as they got there, Niman Torn with a sledge and Niman Rasmus with a maul, so the sounds of the blows they struck (standing in a wagon and pounding down the stake until it stood no taller than a man) differed: Bang! Bam! Bang! Bam! Bang! Bam! On and on.

They kept Bin there while the wood was unloaded from another wagon, and when Niman Smit and Niman Kruk brought a bottle of kero. There were other boys watching by then, shouting to each other just as he had shouted when Niman Joel had burned, and helping unload wood. But Bin did not shout, and could not have helped unload, because Niman Adken had his left arm, and Niman Corin his right. And when the grownups chased the boys and crowded them out so they themselves could see better, Bin was not chased and not crowded at all. He stood way up front instead, where he could see everything that was being done, and they would not let him go.

He thought then of the game in the wood, and how he would hide in the hollow log next time where the other boy would never be able to find him; but he knew that there were never be a next time, not really, and the other boy had flown into the leaves up above, and through the leaves, and up into the sky when Niman Adken and Niman Corin had come, working hard to

do it even if he had no wings that you could see. They would never play together in the woods anymore, or sit in front of the fire hearing stories, or huddle together under the old quilt and the blanket on cold nights. No, never.

Then Niman Adken bent down and sort of whispered, "Maybe it'd be better if you shut your eyes," and some men brought Gam with her hands tied and a rope around her neck like a dog would have; and they took it off and tied her to the stake with it, and everybody threw wood and some of it hit her, and Niman Smit and Niman Kruk poured their kero on it.

Niman Lipa puffed his cigar hard after that, and when it was going good he lit a rag tied on a stick from it; and the reverend came and went right up to Gam like he was going to cut her loose and talked to her, and she talked back, and he nodded a lot and gave her a tract to hold. But he never cut her loose, and when he went away he walked like he was never coming back, fight through everybody that was watching, and on out. Niman Lipa puffed again and lit another rag on another stick (or maybe the same one, if he had put the first one out) and threw it. And the kero caught pretty slow, but it caught, the fire jumping up and dying down, and fire got into the wood too, just little flames here and there, only it was wood burning and you could smell it through the smell of kero, bright little tongues of yellow flame climbing up the pile closer to Gam all the time.

Bin yelled for somebody to help her, and Niman Adken and Niman Corin held him tighter, and he saw Fil between a couple grownups, and Fil was not yelling and did not look happy or sad or anything, just watching. He wiggled out of his coat then and ran up onto the wood and stamped the little flames. And it was funny, but nobody came to catch him. Nobody.

The fire got bigger anyway, and Bin stamped as fast as he could and yelled, "They're nicer 'n we are! They really are nicer! You don't know!"

Slowly at first -- a few big drops -- then harder and harder, it began to rain.