He sucked in his breath, almost sobbing, shocked at himself and yet glad. Mrs. Swanson had an unhappy look. The Swansons were a happy family; but these days a strange restlessness had come into it.

“No,” she admitted. “I don’t think Paul is good for you. I don’t like your associating with him.”

Jimmy said, all his heart and soul in his words, “I like Paul. He’s my best friend.”

“His father is a drunkard,” said Mrs. Swanson quietly. “And Paul came out of reform school, didn’t he? He stole from a candy store—”

“He’s nice!” cried Jimmy, pain in his voice. “And he isn’t a crook. He made a mistake. He told me what happened. He was showing off. And now nobody will be friends—”

“But he’s formed a gang already, hasn’t he? I’ve heard about it.”

“It’s just a club, that’s all,” said Jimmy. “And—and I’m a member. The club is running the hike.”

“We won’t discuss it further.” Mrs. Swanson’s voice was suddenly like steel. She stood up. She hesitated, pitying him, and tried to soften it with logic.

“Remember, Jimmy, every time we’ve disagreed, it turned out I knew what I was talking about.”

But he didn’t listen further. Jimmy turned and blindly ran off the porch across the lawn toward the meeting place at Briggs’ Drugstore.

After three blocks he slowed down, panting, his face set with fury. The habit of thinking, encouraged by his parents at every opportunity, began to function.

“I know what’s best for you. I know what’s best for you.” That’s all I ever hear!” muttered Jimmy.

To his reluctant mind sprang memories. The time he insisted he could swim to the raft. Mr. Swanson had curtly said no, he couldn’t risk it. Jimmy had raged, with his father quietly letting him run down. This his father had told him to go ahead, but that he’d swim next to him.

Jimmy’s throat strangled suddenly at the memory: the water was constricting his windpipe dreadfully, his eyes were bulging, his legs and arms numb with exhaustion from the too-long swim. And then the wonderful, strong, blessed arms of his father turning him on his back, pulling him back to shore—

It was confusing. Jimmy shook his head in bewilderment. Suddenly he felt uncertain, the rebellion drained out of him.

Paul was waiting for him at the drugstore with a stillness upon his face as he leaned against the glass front. He was about fourteen, with dark hair and bright dark eyes. He wore dungarees. Jimmy saw, when he came closer, traces of tears on Paul’s cheeks.

“Well,” said Paul fiercely. “Let’s go.”

Jimmy started. “Where’s everybody?”

“They changed their minds,” said Paul, hate in his voice.

The two boys looked at each other, and Jimmy understood. It made fury grow in him, it made him want to hit somebody. All those parents had stopped the gang from going with Paul because he was once in a reform school.