

# The Lost Boot Laces

by Ivy R. Doherty

**Y**ou've got to be faster than greased lightning to catch these grasshoppers!" moaned Don.

He poised his hands on his hips and watched the spot where he thought the grasshopper he'd been chasing had landed in the thick grass. His face, flushed and dewy with the heat of the day, showed signs of the almost hopeless feeling inside him.

Ralph didn't comment. He was too intent on stalking a grasshopper of his own. He took one cautious step, and the dry grass crackled under his shoe. The grasshopper didn't move. Good. Now another step. The dry grass crackled again. The grasshopper didn't move. Very good. Still another step, and still the insect stayed there. Excellent! Two more steps like that, and that grasshopper would surely be in his jar with the others.

But just then Sponge, a neighborhood dog, came bounding toward him and pounced exactly two steps in front of him. The grasshopper fluttered up with a noisy, grinding sound.

"How is it that these hoppers are so lively on such a hot day?" Don complained. "If we have to work as hard as this for bait, how hard do you suppose we'll have to work for the fish?"

Ralph shook his jar and tried to count the catch inside, but there were so many legs and wings mingled together that he gave up. "Tell you what," he said, brightening. "Let's start off with these, and if we need more bait we can catch it later."

"Good idea!" Don agreed.

As they raced for Don's house, where they'd left their fishing poles, Don announced, "Guess what Bud said I could have."

"Not his summer's savings?"

"Ha! Try again."

"No idea," Ralph croaked, trying to catch his breath.

"He said I could borrow his rubber fishing boots."

"Good for Bud! But why is he suddenly being generous?"

Don laughed. "Oh, he's not a bad brother."

"Yeah. Maybe I'm just a little jealous."

"We could take turns wearing them," offered Don. "I'll get the boots and the lunches, and we'll head out."

Ten minutes passed. Ralph looked at his watch impatiently. He couldn't help thinking about the hour or so they'd spent catching those grasshoppers. Finally he yelled out, "What's taking you so long, Don? Get lost in those boots!"

Don sounded impatient too as he explained that he'd found the boots, but the laces were missing. Where could they be? And who would want to take those long laces out of those long boots, just to have to put them back again?

"Come on, Don. Let's fish without the boots," Ralph whined.

“I don’t think so,” Don argued. “I’ll wear these boots if it’s the last thing I do.” He searched drawers and shelves and closets until his own patience gave way. Finally he helped Ralph gather up the gear, and the two boys took off along the trail at the back of the house.

Don had on the boots. True, they were an awful nuisance without the laces. They bulged open and flopped about. But he was getting to his destination despite the obstacle. And from a distance no one could tell they had only one short piece of string right in the top holes, and that’s all. To the onlooker he was now a full-fledged fisherman.

Wagging his tail, Sponge tramped beside the boys. He got his name because he never hunted his food but always expected a handout from someone, just like a sponge.

Soon the boys entered the woods, feeling instant relief from the sun and smelling the pungent earth. Then the steady roar of plunging water met their ears.

“Let’s take the first trail that leads toward the falls,” Don suggested.

Ferns and sweet-smelling shrubs brushed their legs. Then they spotted their destination through a break in the trees.

Upstream, the river stretched in a long reach of dark, shining water. A fleck of white here and there revealed where a rock hid.

Below were rapids. That accounted for the thundery sound they had heard while still in the woods. Across the river rose a tall mountain, purple and filmy with haze.

The boys looked at each other. Both had the same thought: *This is no place for boys to fish alone.* There were other places, below the rapids, where they could be safe and enjoy all the pleasures of the mountain stream.

Don looked at his boots, then at the green sheet of water that mirrored the mountain.

"They're not going to be a speck of good to you, old pal," Ralph said. "That water will be over your head the very first step you take off the bank."

Don nodded. He knew Ralph was right. Just the same, he wanted to keep them on. They made him feel important, as though he were on official business.

"We'd better go down below the rapids," warned Ralph.

"Look, you're twelve, and so am I," Don replied. "Can't we look after ourselves and not get into any trouble?"

So they took out their gear and the hard-earned bait and cast their fishing poles. They cast again and again, but there was not even the faintest nibble.

Finally Ralph said in disgust, "Let's walk down the riverbank to the quiet place beyond the rapids. Maybe the fish are biting there today."

Don didn't need to be urged. Where there were no fish, there was no fun.

Near the first bend they rounded in the river, they came upon a boat, neat and newly painted, moored close to the bank.

"It must belong to summer people," Don commented. "No one around here owns a boat like that. It really is a beauty, isn't it?"

They dropped their fishing gear and walked all around the vessel. The more the boys talked about and examined the boat, the more they wanted to be in it.

"Wouldn't it be OK if we just got in it and fished a little while?" Ralph asked. "No one would mind if we don't scratch the paint or put bait on the seats."

Don grinned. It would be fun just imagining the boat

belonged to them. In a moment they had stepped in.

As they moved around arranging their tackle, the boat pushed out several feet. That was all the better, they agreed, because now they could cast farther out into the stream than they'd been able to when stuck on shore.

The lines had no sooner hit the water than Ralph gave an excited whoop. He scrambled to land his trout. He pulled and yanked and yelled. But the fish resisted.

Don peered into the water, wanting to catch the first glimpse of the trout's silvery sides. There was a swift shadow and then a flash of silver and finally a terrific splash.

But that splash was no trout. It was Ralph! And Ralph couldn't swim.

"Help!" cried the spluttering form whose head appeared above the water.

"Help!" cried Don, as if he expected a lifeguard to rush to their aid.

Don knew that he was the one who had to help. Quick thoughts flashed through his terrified mind. He'd always boasted about how he could swim, but now Ralph's life depended on him. Could he meet the demand? Overboard he plunged. There was no time to dream about the ifs and buts, for Ralph would soon be carried out of his reach by the current. And what about the rapids ahead?

Don struggled to swim toward Ralph. But what was wrong? His legs wouldn't move. *Ah! The boots!*

He remembered the small string at the top. He ripped wildly at one tie and then at the other. As he kicked furiously, the boots sank to the bottom of the river. He lunged forward, and several sharp, rapid strokes brought him within reach of Ralph.

Ralph grabbed wildly at him, pulling him under the water.

Don came choking to the top. "Don't be stupid!" he gasped. "If you want either or both of us to live, leave me alone—or I'll leave you alone!"

The desperate Ralph clung to Don even harder. Don punched him with his clenched fist. Maybe Ralph could understand that language. He did.

Don wasn't sure how far ahead the rapids were, or whether he was strong enough to pull Ralph to shore before the current swept them farther from shore. While he fought the current, dragging Ralph's heavy body, he prayed for strength. He wouldn't ever tell anybody he could swim well again. This was the real thing, and it was no picnic. His breath came harder and harder.

He tried to remember what to do if the rapids should come before the shore. He would let himself go, trying to keep his arm crooked before his head to protect it from the blows of the rocks. And he would keep the other arm thrust straight ahead so that he could fend himself off from the rocks. This would be all right except for one thing: He had someone else to take care of beside himself, and he just had to get Ralph back home.

His strength was waning. Then his arm touched something rough and cruel. It hurt, but anything hard and substantial to touch was pure joy.

Rock! More rock! Holding Ralph's arm in one hand, Don managed to drag himself onto the rock with the other. He stumbled, exhausted, and then the hammers in his head seemed to pound out a message that he simply could not afford to be exhausted. There was still Ralph to be saved! He pulled and dragged. At last his friend lay limp

on the rock. Don dragged him up to a smooth place and set to work, pumping Ralph's back. How he wished Ralph would say something, anything!

Ralph didn't respond. Don realized that he'd have to leave Ralph to get help.

When he raced into his house a few minutes later, his dripping clothes and exhausted look told his mother a great deal—but not enough. "Where's Ralph?" she cried.

"I think he'll be all right. I got him out of the water," he told her.

She grabbed a blanket and hurried to the river with Don.

Ralph opened his eyes as they bent over him. "My head hurts," he moaned. "Why did you hit me, and why am I all wet? Did you knock me into the water?"

"Isn't that what you'd call gratitude?" Don mused to his mother. But he felt so relieved to hear Ralph talk.

Later, just at sunset, Don went back to the boat to find what was left of their gear. There would be no boots to take back to Bud. But what if they had been securely laced? He hated to think what would have happened if they had been. He felt relieved that the laces had been lost. Somehow he felt that maybe God had let them be lost, just to save Ralph's life—and his.