

# 1

**I**t was the snowiest day I had ever seen when Poetry came over to my house pulling his sled after him. He was wading along in his boots down our road. Snowflakes as big as pullets' eggs were falling all around him. As soon as I saw him, I knew that he had something important to tell me. I stepped out onto our back porch with my head bare, and Mom called and told me to come in and get my cap on or I'd catch my death of cold.

Poetry waved his arm and yelled, "Hey! Bill!"

"What?" I yelled back out across the snow to him.

"Wait just a minute!" He came puffing up to our front gate, lifted the latch, and shoved the gate open, pushing hard against the snow that had drifted there. Then he came on through, pulling his sled after him.

While he was wading up to our back porch, I went into the house to get my fur-lined cap. I pulled on my boots and all the different clothes Mom said I had to wear or I'd catch my death of cold. Then I opened the door and went out into the snowflakes, which were still as big as pullets' eggs and were coming down like goose feathers. It was as if a big airplane full of

feathers had burst up there in the sky somewhere.

The first thing I did was to scoop up a handful of nice fresh, clean, soft snow and make it into a ball the size of a baseball and throw it *whizzety-sizzle* out across the barnyard at our old black-and-white cat. She'd been sitting and mewling like everything on the side of the barn where there wasn't so much snow, acting as if she was disgusted with the weather, even though it wasn't very cold.

I didn't have the least idea what the snowball was going to do. In fact, I'd have been shocked if I had known it was going to fly so high—or that, the very minute it got to the corner of the barn, the boy who had just moved into our neighborhood was going to come dashing around in time to get socked *kersquash* on the top of his brand-new bright red cap.

Certainly I didn't know that brand-new boy had a temper as fiery as mine or that he was a fierce fighter and was bigger than I was, and older, and was a bully—because I'd never seen him.

But the minute I saw what was going to happen, I felt a funny tingling sensation go zippering up my spine to the roots of my red hair, and I knew there was going to be trouble.

Dad had told me there was a new family moving into the house down beyond the mouth of the branch and that they had a boy who might want to join the Sugar Creek Gang. I hadn't liked the idea very well. Any new boy

in our neighborhood nearly always meant that *somebody* in our gang wouldn't like him, and there was bound to be some kind of an interesting fight before we found out whether he was going to run the gang or was just going to try to.

But there he was—running head-on into my innocent snowball! Well, when you don't do a thing on purpose, you don't feel very guilty for having done it.

I don't think I ever saw a snowball fly faster than that one did—and I don't think I ever missed my mark so far in my life. Anyway, the thing happened. The next thing I knew, that snowball, which I'd made as hard almost as a baseball, crashed *wham-thud* right on the top of that new boy's head, and the snowball and the red cap landed in a snowdrift, which the wind had piled high at the corner of the barn.

And that's how the Sugar Creek Gang came to find out right away whether the new guy was going to be friendly or not—and he wasn't.

There he was, standing, looking astonished and funny and mad and surprised and everything else. He let out a yell and six or seven swear words, which made me angry right away because Dad had taught me not to swear. That new guy's swearing made me so mad I was ready to fight even before I knew I was going to have to.

And I *had* to. I mean I really did or else get the stuffings knocked out of me.

He swung around quick and made a dive

for his cap in the snowdrift. He shook it out like a dog shaking a rat, while our old black-and-white cat made a dive for the barn door at the same time. Then that guy made a snowball quicker than you can say “Jack Robinson Crusoe and his man Friday.” He swung back his right arm and threw that snowball straight at my head. Before I could duck, I’d been hit *ker-squash-wham-thud* myself and was seeing stars. I was also feeling the cold air on my head as my cap flew off. I made a dive for it, shook it out, and had it back on in half a jiffy.

Well, that cold snowball was too hot for me, so I yelled back, “You big lummoX! I didn’t aim to hit you. I was throwing that snowball at our old cat!”

But he didn’t get it straight! He yelled back at me, “I’m not a big lummoX, and I’m not an old cat!”

And without intending to—being a little mixed up in my mind because of being half angry—I yelled back at him, “You are too!” And the fight was on.

He started on the run toward me, scooping up snow and throwing snowballs at me on the way. And I was doing the same thing to him. He was calling me a redhead, and I was calling him a big lummoX. And pretty soon he threw a snowball that hit me before it left his hand, which means he hit me with his fist! And then I was seeing red stars and fighting like everything and rolling in the snow, and so was he. I didn’t even remember Poetry was there until I

heard him saying, “Atta boy, Bill! Let him have it!”

Then I woke up to the fact that I was having a fight and that Dad had told me I was not to have any more fights—anyway, not to start any. I could fight only if the other guy started it.

Even while I was washing that new boy’s ears with snow and smearing his face with more snow, I couldn’t remember which one of us had started the fight. Then I thought I heard Dad call from the house or from somewhere, and that’s how I happened to lose the fight. The next thing I knew I was plunging headfirst into a drift. Then I was down under that guy and couldn’t breathe and was trying to yell and was choking and smothering, and I couldn’t turn over or anything. For a minute it seemed like a million years before I could get my breath again. I’d been hit right in the stomach just before I went down, and there just wasn’t any wind left in me, and I couldn’t breathe anyway. So I gave up without even knowing I was giving up, and the fight was over for a while.

Just then Mom came out and stood on our back porch and called, “Boys, I’ve just finished baking a blackberry pie. Would you like some?”

Well, Poetry heard that before any of the rest of us did. He yelled back, “Sure!”

## 2

It was really too bad that our perfectly innocent fight had to break up right at that minute. I knew very well that if I could have started over again, I could have licked the stuffings out of that great big guy. But when a fight ends in an invitation to eat blackberry pie, a fellow doesn't feel so bad about it.

I unrolled myself from the snowdrift and up onto my knees and then onto my feet, Poetry helping me a little. I couldn't see too well because of some crazy old tears that got in my eyes along with the snow.

After I was up, I got my cap and shook the snow off it and out of it at the same time. Then I just stood there and panted and glared at that big lummoX, who was as tall as Big Jim, the leader of our gang, and was almost as big around as Poetry. I was still mad, although he had knocked the wind and some of the temper out of me at the same time.

Poetry grunted as he stooped over and picked up his sled rope.

The new guy and I stood there, looking at our caps and panting and knocking snow off ourselves. Every now and then we looked at each other at the same time and kind of walked around a little and looked at each other mad-

like. I was thinking all the time about where I should have hit him and hadn't and where I'd do it next time. I still couldn't see straight, so I yelled at him, with tears in my voice, "You—you great big lummock. You hit me in the stomach!"

That started Poetry, who is always quoting a poem of some kind or other, to quoting one. He said, quoting from the "Night Before Christmas":

"A little round man with a little round belly  
That shook when he laughed like a  
bowlful of jelly."

But it wasn't funny.

"Keep still!" I said to Poetry.

Then the new guy spoke up and said saucily to Poetry, "So *you're* the one they told me was a poet. Well, you remind me of a poem too—

"You're a poet, and you don't know it  
And if you had whiskers you'd be a go-at!"

Just then a snowball came sizzling from behind our barn and crashed against the new guy's cap. It fell off again and into a snowdrift. It was Circus who had thrown the snowball. By the time I could turn around and look to see which one of the gang it was, he had changed from walking on his feet and was on his hands, coming right toward us.

The gang had planned to go to the cave that afternoon and then through the cave up to Old Man Paddler's cabin in the hills. The

other end of the cave was in the basement of his old clapboard-roofed house, which looked like the house Abraham Lincoln was born in.

In another jiffy we heard a yell from near our front gate, and it was a little guy dressed in a mackinaw and a fur hat. He was carrying a stick, and I knew it was Little Jim.

“Hi, Little Jim!” I yelled to him and decided not to even look at the big lummoX again.

“Hi,” Little Jim called back. Then he yelled to the new guy and said, “Hi, Shorty! Mom says you can ride with us tomorrow if you want to.” Little Jim came tumbling up to where we were, stopping every now and then to make rabbit tracks in the snow with his stick.

And then another snowball came sizzling from a different direction, and this time it was little spindle-legged Dragonfly, whose nose turns south at the end and whose eyes are bigger than his head, almost. He came shuffling through the snow from around the other side of the house.

And then all the Sugar Creek Gang was there—Big Jim with his fuzzy mustache; Little Jim with his stick, who was the best Christian in the gang and maybe in the whole world; Dragonfly with his dragonfly-like eyes; barrel-shaped Poetry, who knew 100 poems by heart; Circus, our acrobat, with his monkey face; and last of all, Tom Till, whose hair was as red as mine, whose temper was as hot as mine, and whose freckles were just a little thicker on his face than mine. Counting me, that was all of us.

Well, the question was, what to do with the new boy.

“What’s your name?” I said to the big lum-mox, forgetting I didn’t want to talk to him at all.

He was making a snowball and getting over his temper. And at the same time I was getting partway over mine.

He didn’t answer until after he’d thrown the snowball at Mixy, who was out in the shadow of the barn again. Then he answered just as the snowball left his hands, and the words sounded as if they were being thrown hard straight at me.

“Shorty Long!” he said.

“Shorty Long!” I exclaimed.

“Sure!” Little Jim piped up. “His name is Shorty Long, and he is going to ride along with all of the Foote family tomorrow to Sunday school and church.”

And that goes to show that Little Jim was about the only one of the Sugar Creek Gang who had the right attitude toward the new boy who had moved into our neighborhood.

Well, it wasn’t any more than half a jiffy later that all of us boys heard Mom call again, “Hurry up, you boys, if you want a piece of blackberry pie!”

I turned around and looked up to the house at Mom, and I saw the most astonished expression on her face. You see, when she had first called us there had been only three of us, and that would have meant only three pieces of

pie for her to spare. But when she called this time, there were eight of us, including Shorty Long, who looked like he could have eaten three pieces himself and still have room for several more. Two whole pies would be gone, and I wouldn't have any for dinner tomorrow, I thought.

It didn't take all of us boys very long to get up to where that pie was waiting for us, and it certainly didn't take any of us very long to get our pieces of pie eaten. Mom brought them out and let us eat them right there in the snow rather than take us all in the house and get snow all over her floor, which she nearly always mopped especially clean on Saturday so it would be that way on Sunday.

Pretty soon the gang, including the new boy, was on its way through the woods, wading through the snow, following the footpath that goes to the spring. There wasn't any path visible, but we knew exactly where it was supposed to be, so we made a new one. Next thing we knew we were up along the edge of Sugar Creek, not far from the old sycamore tree. All of a sudden Poetry, who was walking beside me—both of us were ahead of the rest—said, "I've got a letter for Old Man Paddler. My dad got it at the post office. It's from Palm Tree Island."

"Palm Tree Island!" I said, remembering that Old Man Paddler had a map of Palm Tree Island on the wall of his cabin and that he was especially interested in that caterpillar-shaped

place. None of the gang knew just why he was interested in it, but most of us had been secretly hoping that maybe this old man, who had sent us all on a camping trip to the north woods one summer and also had sent us all to Chicago and had paid for both trips himself, might someday decide to spend some of his money to send us down there to see missionaries at work. The old man was especially interested in missionaries and was always praying for them.

“Sure!” Poetry said as he pulled off one of his gloves with his teeth, reached into a pocket, and pulled out a letter.

“Let me see it,” I said and took it from his hand. I looked at the strange stamp and the strange writing. “What’s *Correo Aereo*?”

“Goose!” Poetry said. “*Correo Aereo* is Spanish for *Airmail*, of course. They wanted it to come in a hurry. It’s an important letter.”

Well, I let out a yell that brought all the gang running. “Look!” I cried. “An airmail letter from Palm Tree Island!”

While the gang was running through the snow to get to where I was, I noticed that the letter was postmarked *Palacia*, which Poetry said was the capital of Palm Tree Island.

Pretty soon the gang had all come and looked at the letter and helped me make a lot of different kinds of noise.

Then we were at the mouth of the cave. Some of us had brought our flashlights along, and we turned them on. The next thing we

knew we were walking Indian fashion, one at a time, through that cave, stooping a little here and squeezing through a tight place there, on our way up toward Old Man Paddler's cabin. It was a whole lot quicker to get to his place by going through the cave than by following the old snowdrift-covered road around through the hills.

Pretty soon we came to the big wooden door that opened into the basement of Old Man Paddler's house.

Big Jim knocked a couple of times, then we heard a voice from upstairs say, "Who—who's there?" We knew it was Old Man Paddler's high-pitched, quavering voice. In my mind's eye I could see his long, white whiskers and his very gray eyes. You couldn't always see his eyes because sometimes they were hidden behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

Pretty soon the basement door opened, and all the gang was in the cellar and climbing up the stairs and going through the trapdoor into his cabin. There was a nice fire crackling in the fireplace, and hot water was sizzling in the teakettle on the stove, making the windows all steamed up. And right there on the table was a panful of broken-up pieces of red saffras roots, which we were going to have made into saffras tea in just a little while.

"A letter for you, Mr. Paddler," Poetry said politely and took out of his pocket the airmail letter, which had been postmarked *Palacia*, and handed it to the old man.

“Thank you, Poetry,” he said. “Sit down, boys.”

Some of us didn't sit. Some just flopped down on the floor in different directions. But some of us sat on chairs, some on the edges of chairs, and some just kind of propped up against the others.

The old man put on his thick-lensed glasses, which were almost as thick as magnifying glasses, and said, “Boys, if you will excuse me a minute—”

“Sure,” some of us said.