1

We were in the middle of the most exciting part of a pretend cowboys' necktie party when we heard the shot.

It was one of the loudest shotgun blasts I had ever heard, and its echoes were like four or five fast thunders bounding through the Sugar Creek hills.

What on earth! I thought.

We all stood still and stared at each other with startled faces. We had been running in one direction and looking back in the opposite direction toward the old scarecrow that we had used for our bad man in our game of cowboys' necktie party.

We had strung up the scarecrow by his neck, hanging him from the branch of a river birch about twenty yards from the sandy beach of our swimming hole.

The ridiculous-looking old dummy we had named Snatzerpazooka was just where we wanted him now, at the edge of Dragonfly's father's cornfield. Hanging there in plain sight, swaying in the breeze, he would scare away the crows that had been digging up the new corn sprouts. Dragonfly, as you maybe know, was the nickname we had given to the pop-eyed member of the gang, whose actual name was Roy Gilbert.

The very minute Snatzerpazooka was up and swinging, we started on a helter-skelter run along the creek toward the spring. Following what we knew to be the pattern of cowboys in the Old West after a lynching, which they called a "necktie party," we were all galloping away on our imaginary horses, looking back and shooting with our voices, using our plastic and metal and wooden toy guns, yelling, *"Bang . . . bang . . . bang . . . bang-bang-bang!"*

I was seeing Snatzerpazooka over my shoulder, his ragged blue-and-white-striped overalls, his tied-on black hat, his crossbar. At the same time, I was galloping on my imaginary white stallion behind barrel-shaped Poetry, who was riding his own imaginary ordinary-looking roan horse.

The early summer wind was blowing in my hot face, my sleeves were flapping, and it felt good to be alive in a wonderful boys' world.

The rest of the gang were on their own different colored imaginary horses, yelling, *"Bang! Bang! Bang!"* as I was. All of us were emptying our imaginary six-shooters at the grotesque scarecrow dangling by his neck in the afternoon sun.

Right in the middle of our excitement was when we heard the *actual* shot from somebody's actual gun! It was an explosive blast that sent a shower of shivers all over me and scared me half to death.

As I've already told you, we all stopped and stared at each other, but not for long. Big Jim,

our leader, barked, "Quick! Down! Drop flat—all of you!"

By *all* of us, he meant not only mischievous-minded, squawky-voiced Poetry; spindle-legged, pop-eyed Dragonfly; and red-haired, fiery-tempered, freckle-faced me, Bill Collins, son of Theodore Collins; but also Circus, our acrobat, and Little Jim, the littlest one of us and the best Christian.

In case you might be wondering why Little Tom Till wasn't with us on our necktie party, maybe I'd better tell you that all that spring and early summer, he had been chumming around with a new boy who had moved into the neighborhood. That new boy was our enemy—and it wasn't our fault, either. It hadn't felt good to lose Tom out of the gang—even though he wasn't exactly a member but only played with us and got to go with us on different camping trips.

Well, when Big Jim barked that fierce order for us to "drop flat," we obeyed like six boy-shaped lumps of lead—all of us except Poetry, who could only drop *round*.

Who, I wondered, had fired an actual gun? A *shotgun!*

We lay as quiet as six scared mice, straining our eyes to see through the sedge and ragweed and wild rosebushes and other growth, listening for all we were worth, and wondering, and worrying a little.

It certainly was a tense time. I could hear my heart beating, also the rippling riffle in the

creek several feet behind me. Farther up the creek in the direction of our just-hung Snatzerpazooka, a saw-voiced crow was signaling with a rasping *"Caw! Caw!"* to his crow friends to stay away from the cornfield because there was a man around with a shotgun.

The smell of sweet clover from across the creek mingled with the odor of gun smoke.

Just then Dragonfly said wheezily, "*Look!* Snatzerpazooka's gone! He's down! His rope's broke!"

"He can't be!" I answered. "That was a leftover piece of Mom's clothesline, and that old scarecrow wasn't heavy enough to break it!"

A second later, though, my straining eyes told me Dragonfly was right. Even as far away as we were, I could see about five feet of rope dangling from the birch branch, and there wasn't any scarecrow hanging by his neck on the end of it.

"Maybe the knot came untied," Circus suggested.

Big Jim, beside and a little behind me, was peering over the top of a pile of drift left early that spring when Sugar Creek had overflowed its banks. He answered Circus, saying, "It couldn't have. I used a bowline knot, and that kind can't slip or jam!"

"It might have slipped off over his head," Circus growled back, maybe not wanting his idea squelched.

"If it had," Big Jim said deep in his throat, "the noose would still be there on the end of

the rope"—which made good sense, because there was only the five feet of rope dangling in the breeze and no noose at the end.

Who, I worried, *had shot the shot and why? And where was our scarecrow?*

How long we all lay there whispering and wondering and trying to imagine who had shot the shot and why and what at, I don't know, but it seemed too long before Big Jim would let us get up and follow him back to the river birch to look around.

While you are imagining us crouching and half crawling our way along the edge of the cornfield that bordered the creek, like scouts scouting an enemy camp, wondering with us who had shot the shot and why and what or who at, I'd better also explain what a cowboys' necktie party is and why we had given our scarecrow such a name.

It was Dragonfly himself who had named him. Why he named him that was because of the strangest story you ever heard, the *oddest* thing that ever happened around Sugar Creek or maybe anyplace in the whole world.

You see, when Dragonfly was just a little guy, only about three-and-a-half years old—before there *was* any Sugar Creek Gang—he had no sisters or brothers and was lonesome most of the time. So he created a playmate out of his own imagination.

I never will forget the first time I heard the name *Snatzerpazooka* and how excited little Dragonfly was, how he yelled and cried, in fact

actually *screamed,* when he thought his imaginary playmate wasn't going to get to go along with him and his folks when they went to town. It happened like this:

Dragonfly's parents with their little spindle-legged pop-eyed son, had stopped their car in front of our house beside the mailbox that has "Theodore Collins," my father's name, on it. While Mom and Dad stood in the shade of the walnut tree and visited with them through the car window, Dragonfly and I monkeyed around the iron pitcher pump, which is not far from our back door.

Feeling mischievous at the time, I thrust my hand into the stream of water Dragonfly was pumping into the iron kettle there, and, just as quick, flicked some of the water into his face.

A second later, he started to gasp and to wrinkle up his nose and the rest of his face. He looked toward the sun and let out a long-tailed sneeze, then said, "Snatzerpazooka!"

"Stop that! Don't sneeze like that!" he cried.

"I didn't sneeze," I answered him. "You did!"

"I did not!" he argued back. "*He* did!"

"He *who* did?" I asked.

That's when he used the word in his normal voice, saying, "Snatzerpazooka did!"

I looked at his dragonflylike eyes, which had a strange expression in them. "Who in the world is Snatzerpazooka?" I exclaimed. I was pumping a tin of water at the time. I tossed the water over the iron kettle into the puddle on the ground there, scaring a flock of yellow and

white butterflies out of their butterfly wits and scattering them in about seventeen different directions.

Dragonfly started to answer, got a mussed-up expression on his face, and let out another noisy, explosive sneeze with Snatzerpazooka mixed up in it.

His father called then from the car, saying, "Hurry up, Roy! We have to get there before two o'clock!"

"Just a minute!" Dragonfly yelled toward his father. Then he did the weirdest thing. He looked around in a circle and swung into a fast run out across the grassy yard, dodging this way and that like a boy trying to catch a young rooster his folks are going to have for dinner.

"Stop, you little rascal!" Dragonfly kept yelling. "Stop, or I'll leave you here!"

Then Dragonfly's father's deep voice thundered over Mom and Dad's heads toward his zigzagging son, now near the plum tree. "Roy! Stop running around like a chicken with its head off, or we'll drive on without you!"

Dragonfly stopped, and a minute later he was on his way to the gate. He was a little slow getting through it—*over* it, rather, because he was trying to do what Dad had ordered me never to do. He was climbing up the gate's cross wires to climb *over* the gate, when all he would have had to do would have been to lift the latch and walk through.

The minute Dragonfly was on the ground, he reached back and up with both arms, as if

he was reaching for something or somebody, and I heard him say scoldingly, "Come on! Jump! I'll catch you!"

"Roy Gilbert!" Dragonfly's father growled again gruffly. "Hurry up!"

"I can't," Dragonfly whined back. "I can't get him to get off the gate! He's stubborn and won't do what I tell him!" Dragonfly kept on not hurrying and not getting into the car's open backdoor, which I could see his impatient father was wanting him to hurry up and do.

A second later Mr. Gilbert's temper came to life, and he was out of the front seat in a hurry. He scooped up his son in his strong arms, carried him struggling to the car, half-tossed him into the backseat, slammed the door after him, and quickly got into the front seat again beside Dragonfly's worried-faced mother.

The car engine ground itself into noisy life. In a minute the Gilbert family would go speeding down the road, stirring up a cloud of white dust that would ride on the afternoon breeze across the field toward Strawberry Hill.

That's when Dragonfly let out a yell with tears in it, crying, "Wait! Don't go yet! He's still back there on the gate!"

Next, that little rascal shoved open the car door, swung himself out, scooted to the fence, helped his imaginary playmate off onto the ground, shoved him into the backseat, and climbed in after him.

What, I thought, *on earth!*

As soon as the Gilberts' car was gone and

the lazy cloud of dust was already on its way across the field, I heard Mom say to Dad, "At least our boy isn't as bad as *that!* Whatever is wrong with Roy, anyway?"

"Nothing's wrong with him," Dad answered. "He's just a normal boy who needs a little brother or sister to play with. Not having any, he has created one out of his own lively imagination."

Hearing Mom and Dad say that to each other while they were still on the other side of the gate, I broke in with a mischievous grin in my voice, saying, "*I* don't have any brothers or sisters, either."

That was before my little sister, Charlotte Ann, was born, which you know all about if you've read the very first Sugar Creek Gang story there ever was—the one that is called *The Swamp Robber.*

I had my right foot on one of the cross wires of the gate as if I was going to climb up and over.

Dad gave me a half-savage stare through the woven wire and, with a set jaw, exclaimed an order to me, which was, "Don't you *dare!* And we have enough trouble keeping *you* out of mischief! What would we do with *another* one of you?"

For some reason my foot slipped off the cross wire, and I was quickly off to the big rope swing under the walnut tree to pump myself into a high back-and-forth swing. I was wishing at the same time that I *did* have a little brother to play with. I was also wondering what if I

made for myself an imaginary playmate? What would he look like, and what would I name him? What a crazy name—Snatzerpazooka!

And what a lot of crazy experiences we had that summer with Dragonfly himself.

Dragonfly's parents worried about their boy for a while—what with his all the time talking to his ridiculous playmate, acting all the time as if there were two of him, having fights and arguments with a person nobody except Dragonfly could see or hear. That boy certainly had a "vivid imagination," Mom said one day.

In fact, his parents got to worrying about him so much that they took him to a doctor in the city, a special kind of doctor who understood children's minds. They found out it was almost the same as what Dad had already told Mom.

"There's nothing wrong with him that having a pet or a real-life playmate won't cure. Snatzerpazooka will just fade out of the picture after your boy starts to school or when he begins normal boy-life activities," the doctor told them.

But Snatzerpazooka didn't fade out. Dragonfly was so used to him and had so much fun playing with his imaginary playmate that even after he began going to school, and after the Sugar Creek Gang was started, he still hung onto him.

Many a time when we were down along the creek somewhere or up at the abandoned cemetery having a gang meeting and some-

thing important was brought to a vote, Dragonfly would make us let Snatzerpazooka vote, too.

Poetry worked harder than the rest of us trying to help Dragonfly forget his imaginary playmate. He refused to call him Snatzerpazooka but gave him the name Shadow instead. The two had an honest-to-goodness fight about it one day down at the spring. We had all finished getting down on our knees and drinking out of the reservoir the way cows do—that is, all of us had our drink except Dragonfly.

He stood back near the board fence, waiting till we were through. Poetry, being in a mischievous mood, and still on his hands and knees at the reservoir, looked back toward Dragonfly and said, "Here, Shadow, come get your drink!" He then went through the motions of helping Dragonfly's imaginary playmate onto *his* hands and knees, bent his head forward and down to the surface of the water, saying, "You're a pretty dumb little bunny. Don't you know how to drink like a cow? You *look* like one! Get your head *down!*"

Then Poetry gave Shadow's imaginary head a shove clear down under the water, his own right hand going under with it.

In seconds, Dragonfly was like a young tiger. He leaped forward and down onto Poetry's back and started whamming him with both fists, demanding, "You stop dunking him!"

Poetry stopped all right. He was bowled over by Dragonfly's flying attack and a split second later was on his stomach in the almost icy

water. He came up sputtering and spitting water. Reaching behind him, he caught Snatzerpazooka's *live* playmate by both his slender arms and ducked *his* head under as far as he had Snatzerpazooka's imaginary head.

Big Jim came to the rescue of both of them by stopping the fight and saying, "Come on, Snatzerpazooka! You come on up into the sunlight with me and get dried out. You'll catch your death of cold." With that he went through the motions of picking up the imaginary little boy and carrying him up the incline. Dragonfly himself hurried along after them.

By the time I got there, our spindle-legged pal was as far as the stump we later named the Black Widow Stump and on his way toward home. He had his right hand out behind him as though he was leading somebody, and I heard him say, "Come on, pal! Those roughnecks don't know how to treat a gentleman!"

No sooner had Dragonfly and his just-dunked imaginary playmate disappeared over the rim of the hill than Poetry started quoting one of the many poems he had memorized. It was one most of us knew by heart ourselves. It was by Robert Louis Stevenson, and in Poetry's squawky, ducklike voice it sounded almost funny:

"I have a little shadow that goes in and
out with me,
And what can be the use of him is
more than I can see.

He is so very, very like me from the
heels up to the head,
And I see him jump before me, when I
jump into my bed."

Poetry was yelling the poem as loud as he could, so that Dragonfly could hear it. He started on the second verse but got interrupted by Dragonfly sneezing in a long-tailed, extraloud voice and exclaiming, "Snatzerpazooka!"

Poetry yelled back a mimicking sneeze and cried, "Snatzerpa*shadow!*"

Because we all liked Dragonfly a lot, we decided at a special meeting to pretend along with him, letting him take Snatzerpazooka along with us whenever he wanted to, waiting for the imaginary little rascal when we had to, helping him over the fences, even carrying him when Dragonfly said he was too tired to walk.

Dragonfly didn't cause us much trouble that first summer. The only thing was, Snatzerpazooka began to change a little. From being a helpless, innocent little fellow that had to be carried or helped over fences, he began to get ornery. Sometimes we'd hear Dragonfly quarreling with him and calling him names.

One summer day when I was down along the bayou not far from the Black Widow Stump, I felt a sneeze coming on. I twisted my face into a Dragonflylike tailspin and burst out with an explosive "Snatzerpazooka!" loud enough to be heard all the way to the clump of evergreens at the edge of the bayou.

Poetry was with me at the time, and being in a mischievous mood he mimicked me with a sneeze just like mine, which in his squawky voice sounded like a guinea hen with a bad cold. His sneeze, in the middle of which he cried, "Snatzerpashadow!" instead of "Snatzerpazooka!" hadn't any sooner exploded out across the bayou than there was a saucy yell from behind the evergreens crying, "You stop that! There isn't any Snatzerpazooka!"

Then, from behind those evergreens shot a spindle-legged, pop-eyed boy. A brown-and-tan puppy with a crank-handle tail leaped along beside him.

That was when we found out there wasn't any Snatzerpazooka anymore—or wasn't supposed to be, anyway.

Dragonfly was both mad and glad: mad at us for sneezing the way we had, and happy all over because his parents had gotten him a dog playmate. He told us how much the dog cost and what a good trailer he was.

"Looks like a bloodhound," Poetry said. "Here, Red, come here and let me cheer you up a little!"

He was one of the saddest-faced dogs I'd ever seen. His hair was smooth but seemed very loose, as if he had three times as much as he needed, or as if his mother had made him a hair coat that was a lot too big for him. His skin was extrawrinkled on the forehead, and his ears were long and floppy.

"He *is* a bloodhound," Dragonfly boasted.

"He's half bloodhound and half beagle. That's how come it was so easy to find you guys. I put him on your trail, and he led me straight to you. See here?"

Dragonfly held out to me my old straw hat, which that very morning I'd been wearing around the house and barn and had left on the ground under the plum tree.

"How come he didn't bawl on the trail?" Poetry asked.

We'd all hunted at night with Circus's dad's hounds, and when they were trailing, there was plenty of dog noise.

Dragonfly's proud answer was "He's going to be a *still* trailer."

That was hard to believe, yet there was my old straw hat, and here was Dragonfly with his hound pup, which right that minute was sniffing at me and wagging his crank-handle tail as much as to say, "Here's your criminal! He smells just like his hat! Now what do you want me to do?"

You never saw such a happy little guy as Dragonfly over his droopy-faced hound. The doctor had been right. Dragonfly needed a real-life playmate—a human being or a pet, he had said.

"How do you like that?" Poetry said to me one day a little later. "Having us for playmates wasn't enough. He had to have a floppy-eared, droopy-faced, crank-tailed, loose-skinned half bloodhound!"

Dad explained it this way: "He could be with you boys only part of the time. He needed a playmate *all* the time for a while—at home as well as at school and at play. He'll be all right from now on. You just wait and see."

We *did* wait and see. But Dad was wrong, as wrong as he had ever been in his life. Just *how* wrong, I'll tell you in the next chapter.

2

For quite a while we didn't hear any more of Snatzerpazooka, Dragonfly's ornery little shadow, except for when one of us would sneeze. Now and then we'd cry out the way Dragonfly used to do, exclaiming, "Snatzerpazooka!" just for fun.

We stopped doing even that when we woke up to the fact that it really hurt the little guy to be teased about what a dumb bunny he used to be.

"Snatzerpazooka's dead!" he told Poetry and me one day. "He died yesterday, and Redskin and I buried him down by the mouth of the cave." Redskin was the name Dragonfly had finally settled on for his hound.

Poetry looked at me and I at him, and he said under his breath, "He's still imagining things!"

"I am not!" Dragonfly, who heard him, exclaimed. "Come on, and I'll show you!"

He did show us. Under the hollow sycamore tree just off the path that leads into the swamp, there was a small oblong mound of new earth, the kind you see in cemeteries after somebody has just been buried. Erected at one end was a slab of wood and on it some crudely lettered words:

SNATZERPAZOOKA GILBERT
Horse Thief. Died by Hanging.

There wasn't room on the slab for any other words. I stood looking down at the grave and at the marker, and there was the strangest feeling in my heart. It almost seemed maybe a real person was buried there. A lump came into my throat and almost choked me. I could hardly see the grave or the marker for the tears that all of a sudden were in my eyes.

I looked into Dragonfly's own red-rimmed eyes, and there were tears there too. He swallowed hard a few times and sniffled a little. Also, I saw his face start into its usual tailspin and look as wrinkled on the forehead as his dog's, and I knew he was going to sneeze.

That was when I learned for sure that in Dragonfly's mind his imaginary playmate was really dead, because his long-tailed sneeze came out like anybody's ordinary *"Ker-choo!"*

That summer passed, and the mound of earth settled until it was level with the other soil around it. Autumn leaves fell on it, and winter snow covered it. The only thing left was the wooden marker. Then one day when the gang was trying to start a fire at the mouth of the cave, Dragonfly brought the marker from the grave and, with his Scout hatchet, split it into kindling wood, and we burned it.

And that was the end of Snatzerpazooka until the summer this story started.

A lot of other things started that summer,

too. One of them was a lot of new trouble the gang had with a boy who had moved into the neighborhood. You've probably read about him in some of the other Sugar Creek stories. But just in case you haven't, his name was Shorty Long. I'd had my very first rough-and-tumble fight with him on a snowy day in the book called *Palm Tree Manhunt* and the last one in the summer in *The Blue Cow.*

Shorty Long was one of the fiercest fighters I had ever had to lick. He was also the worst one that had ever licked me a few times.

Shorty was the kind of boy who liked to have a playmate he could boss around, or he wasn't happy. Dragonfly had been his first choice, and he had ruled that allergic-nosed little guy like a wicked king ruling a slave. For a while we almost lost Dragonfly in the blue cow story, because at first Dragonfly *liked* Shorty Long and enjoyed being ordered around by him.

Dragonfly was the kind of boy that had to have a close friend, too. Maybe that was the reason he had used his imagination to create his make-believe playmate, Snatzerpazooka.

As soon as Dragonfly was free from the bully, though, he had come back to us, and the gang was happy again. All of us got together as often as we could.

Shorty Long's folks went away nearly every winter to Florida or to some other warm place, so it was mostly in the summer that he was our biggest problem.

The only other boys that had caused the gang trouble were Bob and Tom Till, who lived across the creek. Bob was also the bully type of boy and was always lording it over his red-haired, freckle-faced little brother.

Tom, as you may remember, was *almost* a member of the gang and played with us a lot. Their father, old hook-nosed John Till, was one of the worst men in the county and spent about half his time in jail and the other half out. He never took the boys to Sunday school or to church, which was maybe one reason his boys were like ragweed instead of sweet clover.

Well, the summer this story started, Shorty Long was just back with his folks from Arizona where they'd spent the winter. Right away Shorty picked out a boy in the neighborhood to chum around with. Not being able to rule any of the gang, he managed to get Tom Till instead.

Tom was a poor boy and did not have much money to spend, and Shorty's folks were rich enough to go to a warm climate every winter, so Shorty bribed Tom by giving him spending money for things Tom couldn't afford—things such as a new Scout knife, a pair of field glasses, even a cook kit with aluminum utensils. All the parts of the cook kit nested and locked together and didn't rattle when you carried them in their khaki carrying case.

Also, they pitched Shorty's tent on the other side of the creek, down below the Sugar Creek bridge under the tall cottonwood. It was

straight across from the mouth of the branch on our side.

It didn't feel good to see the two of them chumming around together along the creek and the bayou, playing they were pirates, building their campfires, and cooking their dinner over the open fire the same as we did. After we'd given each other a licking in the Battle of Bumblebee Hill, Tom had been one of my best friends and had been coming to Sunday school with us once in a while. It hurt me to realize that he was being a pal with a boy who was as ornery to the gang as he could be.

Many a time that early summer, we'd stand on the bridge and look downstream to the khaki tent under the cottonwood and see the smoke rising from their campfire, hear their laughing, and feel hurt in our hearts that we'd lost Tom. He was avoiding us now, even when he was by himself and Shorty Long was nowhere around.

I never will forget the time Mom sent me over to the Tills' house to take a cake she had baked for Tom's mother's birthday and to invite Tom to go to Sunday school with our family the next morning. That was the day I got insulted. Also it was a very important day for another reason.

Tom stood on their back porch and looked at me as if I was just so much dirt. With a sneer in his voice he said, "Sissies go to Sunday school!"

Well, *that* fired me up. If his mother hadn't

been just inside the kitchen door talking to my mom on the phone to thank her for the cake, I'd have let my two hard-knuckled fists and my muscled arms prove to him that there was one boy who went to Sunday school who wasn't a sissy.

I didn't sock him with my fists, though. But I did with my thoughts and also with several words from my mind, a piece of which I hurled at him as hard as I did a fastball when I was pitching in a baseball game. Maybe I'd better tell you what I said, though I shouldn't have, because it was like a boomerang that the native people of Australia use, which comes back when they throw it and sometimes hits them on the head if they don't dodge.

What I yelled to Little Tom Till that day, as he stood on the porch of his house glaring sullenly at me, was, "The very next time I catch you alone somewhere without Shorty or your brother along, I'm going to whale the living daylights out of you!"

Just saying it stirred my temper up that much worse, and I was almost blind with anger. I could even see the place on his jaw where I wished I could land a fierce fast fist.

Instead, though, I gritted my teeth, felt the muscles of my jaw tighten, and just glared back at him.

To make me madder, he swung around to the long-handled, wooden pump behind him and said, "Maybe a little water will cool you

off!" With that he took several fast strokes, pumped a tin full, and slammed it into my face.

Now what do you do at a time like that?

You probably *feel* just like I did. First, you feel the shock of the cold water striking you in your hot face, because you are already extra-hot from having pedaled all the way over on your bicycle. Then you feel a surge of temper racing in your veins. Everything sort of whirls in your mind like a windmill in a storm. Then you go blind with rage, and you're not a sissy anymore but a mad bull ready to charge headfirst into the cause of your trouble.

That was what I felt like, and what I'd started to do, when from behind me I heard somebody's gruff voice saying grimly, "I wouldn't do it, Bill. You *are* all wet, you know. He was just trying to help you realize it."

I whirled—and it was Shorty Long himself, standing just outside the Tills' picket gate, his jaw set, his squinting eyes focused on me, his lips pursed, and in his hands a baseball bat.

Then I knew why Tom had been so brave and so ornery with me. Shorty Long, with whom he'd been palling around and for whom he was like Robinson Crusoe's man Friday, had poisoned his mind against us and against any boy who was trying to live up to what he learned in Sunday school and church.

I stood and stared—maybe *glared*—at Shorty a minute, trying to hold myself back from charging headfirst into a baseball bat.

The sermon I'd heard several weeks before

seemed to be standing between me and a bashed nose. Even as I stood with my back to Tom Till, wiping the water off my face and facing my enemy, the Bible verse that had been our minister's text went galloping around in my mind. It was as if Somebody with a very kind, strong voice was saying, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city."

That had been one of the best sermons I'd ever heard. I had been sitting by the open east window in our church at the time, listening to the sermon and also to the birds outside in the trees. It seemed maybe our minister had picked out that special Bible verse because it fit me like a new pair of jeans.

"Every Christian has two natures," he said and explained that it was up to us to decide which nature was the boss—the good or the bad.

It seemed that Dragonfly wasn't the only one who had a playmate. I, too, had one, and he wasn't imaginary, either. And mine certainly wasn't dead and buried in a hole in the ground beside the sycamore tree but was alive and lived inside me.

One other thing our minister had said, and which I would probably never forget, was, "If you're having trouble ruling your spirit, try praying about it."

Those words came back to me right that minute while I was standing inside Tom Till's picket fence, frowning at Shorty Long and his savage-looking baseball bat.

Shorty kept on scowling at me. His brows were down and his lips pursed, his hands gripping the bat handle.

I kept on standing, fighting the Snatzerpazooka that was inside me, which was trying to make me make a fighting fool out of myself.

Shorty Long's sarcastic voice broke into my stormy thoughts right then, saying, "Your bike is right here, if you're scared and want to run away." He stepped back and swung the gate open for me to get through.

Tom's mother came out then with the empty cake pan, and, because it seemed there wasn't anything else that I ought to do, I thanked her for the pan. I told her I hoped she had a happy birthday and a little later, with gritted teeth, was on my bike pedaling down the narrow, dusty footpath through their orchard to their other gate by the barn.

I certainly felt strange inside. I hadn't gotten into any actual fight, but I hadn't ruled my spirit, either. Shorty Long's baseball bat had ruled it for me.

I was still boiling inside as I pedaled furiously along the gravel road toward the bridge on my way home. The faster I pumped, the worse I felt and the more angry I was at Shorty Long for doing what he was doing to Tom Till.

When I reached the bridge, I slowed down, then stopped and looked downstream toward the tall cottonwood and caught a glimpse of the roof of the brown tent.

That is when my spirit started to rule *me*.

It told me to leave my bike leaning against the bridge railing, run back, pick up some stones from the gravel road, and see if I could throw as straight and as far with them as I could with a baseball; see if, maybe, I could hit the slanting canvas roof of Shorty Long's tent.

It took only a few minutes to get back to my bike with several stones.

I decided to look first toward Tom Till's house to see if a big boy with a baseball bat in his hands was looking this way. Of course, I knew Shorty Long couldn't run fast enough to get to me for at least five minutes, but . . . well, what I was about to do . . . if I did it . . . which it seemed like I shouldn't . . . ought to be kept secret.

Just that second I heard a red-winged blackbird let loose with his very juicy-noted melody, which is one of the most cheerful songs a boy ever hears. In fact, it seemed there were two or three scarlet-shouldered singers singing several songs the same second, making it seem a wonderful world to live in. If there was anybody who was feeling disgusted with life, he ought to cheer up.

My arm was back, ready for the toss. I took a quick glance to the right where there was a marshy place with willows bordering it, and saw old Redwing himself perched on one of the top branches, swaying and letting out his whistling *"Oucher-la-ree-e!"* followed a few seconds later with another. Then, from the other

side of the narrow, marshy place, another red-wing whistled the same thing.

That's when I heard the frogs piping, too—one of the other almost-most-beautiful sounds a boy ever hears.

That's also when I took my stubborn, angry spirit by the scruff of its neck and shook it the way one of Circus's dad's hounds shakes a rat. Then, with a whirl around in the opposite direction, I threw the stone as far upstream as I could, where it landed with a big splash right in the center of the creek.

I let out a heavy sigh and started to swing onto my bike to pedal across the bridge toward home, then took another look downstream toward the tent.

That is when I noticed a curl of smoke rising not far from the cottonwood.

Their campfire, I thought. *They'll maybe cook supper there and stay all night.*

It wasn't much of a fire, judging by the amount of smoke. Still, a boy ought not to go away and leave an open fire burning—*ever.* Our camp director, Barry Boyland, who had taken us on a few trips, had always made us put out our fires before we left camp. Always.

It had been a pretty dry spring too. There could be a bad brushfire if the blaze should begin to spread.

Enemy or no enemy, it seemed I ought to race down to the fire and put it out.

It took only a few minutes for me to get to the end of the bridge and down the embank-

ment on the well-worn path made by barefoot boys' feet, running along the zigzagging trail that skirted the creek bank on my way to the fire.

"That's an awful lot of smoke now for a campfire," I said to myself as smoke got in my eyes, making it hard to see and making me cough. Even little Tom Till should have known better than to leave a live campfire. Tom had been with us on one of our trips into the wilds of the North, and he'd known all the camp rules for safety.

As I ran, my mind made up to put out the fire, I was seeing the scowling face of Shorty Long and the baseball bat in his hands. I was hearing him say, "Your bike is right here, if you're scared and want to run away!"

My footpath led all of a sudden into the opening where their tent was pitched. I let out a gasp when I saw what I saw—not a small patch of burned ground with a ring of ashes and a little campfire in the center, but a circle of fire about fifteen feet wide with leaping, excited flames all around the outside edges. The nervous, yellow fire-tongues were eating into the dried marsh grass left from last year's growth, and the fire was within only a few yards of the tent itself.

How, I asked myself, was I to put out such a fierce, fast flame? What with?

My eyes took in the whole area around the camp, and there wasn't a thing a boy could use to smother a fire.

Faster than a flock of pigeons zooming over

our barn, my thoughts flew back to the time the gang had once put out a fire that was running wild through an Indian cemetery in the North woods when we'd been on a camping trip up there. We'd done it by yanking off our shirts, dashing down a steep incline to the lake, getting our shirts soaking wet, and using them to flail the flames. We'd worked like a fire department to save the dozens of little Indian wooden grave markers, which actually were small houses, each one about the size of a Sugar Creek doghouse.

Maybe there would be a gunnysack inside the tent, I thought. I could use that and save the new plaid shirt I had on—in fact, had put on specially for the trip to take the cake to Tom Till's mother.

But the smoke was blowing toward the tent, and I couldn't see inside.

A wild idea came to me then. Quick untie the tent ropes and move the whole tent out of the way of the fire. But that'd be too hard a job for so little time.

There wasn't even an old shirt or pair of trousers hanging on any tree or bush as there sometimes is around a camp.

In my excitement, I kept thinking of that fierce, fast fire we'd fought up North and how easily we had put it out with our soaking-wet shirts. The red-and-green plaid I had on was one I liked better than any my folks had ever bought me. My oldish, well-worn blue jeans might be better for fighting fire, I thought.

But there wasn't any time to be lost if I wanted to save the tent and also stop what could quickly become a bad brushfire. There hadn't been any rain around Sugar Creek for quite a while, and everything was as dry as tinder.

It had to be pants or shirt, one or the other.

I started on the run for the creek and on the way decided it had to be the shirt. It would come off easier. Quicker than anything, I had it off and in another jiffy was racing with it, soaking wet, to the fire.

Save the tent, first! my very common sense told me.

Wham! Wham! Wham! . . . Squish! Squish! Squish! . . . Puff! Puff! Puff! . . . Pant! Pant! Pant! . . . Cough! Cough! Cough!

My blood raced in my veins, the wind blew smoke in my face, the heat was smothering.

In maybe seven minutes, which seemed like an hour, I had the whole fire out. I'd saved Shorty Long's tent and everything in it.

I didn't even take time to look and be proud of my work, because what if Shorty and Tom would all of a sudden come down to see what all the smoke had been about and would find me there? They'd think I had been the cause of the fire. They wouldn't even bother to wonder who had put it out, and there might be plenty of trouble. More than plenty.

Up the embankment I went like a shirtless chipmunk. In a few moments I had my sopping-wet, smudged shirt in the wire basket of my

bike on top of the empty cake pan and was pedaling home.

I felt fine. I had ruled my spirit. I was better in the sight of the One who had made me than Julius Caesar when he had captured a city.

Beside the road in Poetry's dad's meadow, a meadowlark let loose with his very piercing song, which sounded like "spring of the year!" The meadowlark, I happened to think, was one of Mom's favorite birds. She liked the cardinal best.

Thinking of Mom reminded me of my wet, smoke-smudged shirt, and for some reason I slowed down a little in my fast pedaling toward home.

When I came to the corner where I would turn east, I stopped and read one or two horse posters tacked to the big sugar tree there. I always enjoyed looking at pictures of horses, liking them almost better than any other tame animal.

Catty-corner across the road in Poetry's dad's woods, which were being used for pasture that spring, was another big sugar tree with low-hanging branches. The ground all around its trunk was stomped free of grass. That was where Mr. Thompson's horses always stood on hot days to be in the shade, and where, when it rained, they went to keep from getting so wet. The overhanging branches reached out as far as fifteen feet all around the trunk.

I noticed their different-colored horses were scattered through the woods, their heads down, munching grass.

Quite a ways from the tree, I saw Poetry's pinto standing by himself, nibbling at the leaves of a red-haw bush. My heart leaped with happiness as I watched him for a minute, wishing I had one like him. He was different from any riding horse I'd ever seen. He was yellow and black and white, and his eyes were like crystal.

"In Texas," Poetry had told me, "they call ponies like Thunderball 'paint ponies.'"

Thunderball was certainly a fine name for him, because when you were riding him, you felt like wild thunder galloping across the sky. Tomorrow, maybe I'd get to take a ride on him all by myself, as Poetry had been letting me do several times a week ever since his folks bought Thunderball for him.

"Ho-hum," I yawned. I was still hot from the hard work of putting out the fire, and the day itself was very sultry for spring.

The sun was still pretty high, but the southeast sky had big yellowish-white clouds in it. They were piled cloud on cloud like a mountain, making the sky look the way it does sometimes in the middle of the summer before a thunderstorm.

Maybe I'd better get on home and help get the chores done, I thought.

There was a happy feeling inside me now as I pedaled up the gravel road between the woods on my left and our orchard on the right. I had ruled my spirit, and I was on my way to give Mom or Dad or both a chance to rule

theirs when they saw what putting out a dangerous brushfire could do to a boy's new red and green plaid shirt.

It seemed, though, that the piles of yellowish-white clouds high in the south and east were talking to me, saying, "There's going to be a storm. There's going to be a storm!"