It 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 mewing 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 zipping 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!”