

Panther Boys

Christopher Morley

'Good grief, what happened to you?'

My mother looked alarmed. There was no way that I would tell her what really happened.

'Fell off me bike.'

She put the tea towel down on the draining board and came over to inspect the damage.

'You've got a bruise on your forehead and your cheek's all grazed. Are you hurt anywhere else?'

I held my right hand out. My knuckles were skinned and the little finger was red and tender.

'Right let's get you patched up. Was there something wrong with your bike?'

When I was five I had a new red bike for my birthday to replace a three-wheeler. I grew out of the birthday bike even though the saddle and handlebars were raised to the maximum. My Father came home with a second-hand adult bicycle. I wasn't delighted with the black paintwork but it had dropped handlebars. To my great disappointment my Father changed the handlebars for straights.

'We'll keep these 'drops' for when you're older.'

Over the following week he checked and adjusted the bike. I was allowed to wind white plastic tape the length of the handlebars and fit a bell. Later I acquired a saddle bag and a pump. This machine was then ready to take me train spotting or fielding errands.

That fatal Saturday morning I had pedalled the short distance to Aunty Nellie's. Sometimes she would want errands doing. I would earn some pocket money. The sixpence reward was in my pocket and I was cycling home down the gentle slope of Baslow Drive. I spotted the boys ahead on the pavement my side. I recognised them. They were three of the Panther Boys. Strangely they were not on their awful track bikes. They were laughing and brandishing bamboo sticks. The sticks lashed out at any flowers daring to peep above the privet hedges.

I decided to spurt past them quickly. It was best to avoid the Panther Boys. As I attempted to flash past I came to a sudden halt. My bike stopped abruptly, but I didn't. I continued over the handlebars, and face first onto the gritty road surface. The Panther Boys were convulsed with laughter. When the sky was back in the right place I looked at my bike. A bamboo pole was jammed through the back wheel. It was pulled free and the villains continued on their way. I started to feel the stinging pain and the acute embarrassment of being so easily unhorsed.

The Panther Boys were so called because of the American style casual jackets emblazoned with the head of a panther and the words *Team Panther*. I coveted the jacket, but was not allowed. How they came by them was a mystery. The boys were not a team. They were a gang of Council estate boys who had banded together because nobody wanted to play with them. They were considered rough and dangerous.

The Tate's lived next door to the Mitchell's. The Stokes lived across the road on Olton Avenue. Ralph Tate was the eldest. He was in the first year of secondary school. His next brother Dennis was the leader though. He was in the top juniors. Their youngest Ronald, was in the same year as me but he was in the 'B' class. They were all 'B' streamers. The Mitchell's had Melvin in the same class as Dennis Tate, and Eric in my year group. Leonard 'Lenny' and Daniel 'Danny' Stokes were twins, also in my year group. They were twins but not identical.

In school they could be more or less ignored. Out of school they wore the Panther Jackets and scruffy jeans. Boys usually had their hair well-trimmed and short at the sides and back. The Panther Boys always looked like they needed a haircut. They greased their hair into weird styles. All three sets of parents worked long hours and spent their money and free time in *The Red Lion* in Beeston. It was the sort of pub my parents wouldn't dream of entering.

The Panther Boys usually rode together on customised bikes. These bikes were probably stolen and stripped of anything deemed inessential. The bikes had tall cow-horn handlebars.

'Leave your bike here for your Dad to check and you pop down and get a *Wonderloaf* from Woffingtons.'

I limped off to the shop on the corner of our street. My grazed cheek stung but what really bothered me was the incident. I went over and over it thinking how it could have been avoided. I was feeling angry and frustrated.

'Hey up, Chrissier.' Richard and Terry were sucking sherbert fountains outside the shop. 'What happened to you? Did you try summat with that ginger lump, what's her name?

'Julia Billington,' suggested Terry.

'No. Came off me bike this morning.'

'What? Fought you could ride proper.'

I shrugged, 'I can. I was knocked off.'

'Knocked off?' He looked at me shrewdly.

I didn't tell my Mother the truth because my Father would wade in and get out of his depths. On the other hand Richard was bound to find out. He always did find out. So I told him. I expected him to snigger and say that he wished he'd seen it. He looked aghast. We didn't always see eye to eye. This was an outrage to have a street pal attacked by hooligans from another street. Revenge was necessary.

'Which ones was it?'

'It was three of them. The two Mitchell's and Ronnie Tate.'

'Who did the bamboo stick?'

'I think it was Ronnie. He pulled it out anyway.'

'Right, don't you worry, Chrissier. Monday, I'll do that Ronnie at school.'

Richard Church was a street fighter.

Monday morning break we *three caballeros* followed Ronald Tate into the outside toilets. Richard paused to let Ronald begin peeing in the channel, then, he shoved him against the wall. Other boys disappeared quickly.

'You knocked my mate off 'is bike on Sat'day, Nah it's your turn.'

Richard pushed the back of Ronald's head so that his face collided with the gloss painted brick work. Ronald squealed. He squealed again when Richard punched his lower back.

'Leave my mates alone you lickle shit.'

The retribution did not come from the teaching staff. It came from Dennis Tate aided by the Mitchell's and Ronald. They jumped Richard on the way home. I saw the aftermath. Richard was sitting on the curb nursing a split lip and a darkening eye. Terry looked terrified.

'Bastards. I'll frigging do 'em.'

'I cou'n't do nuffing', said Terry, 'They was dead quick, an' the twins shoved me away.'

'Sallright, Tez. Not your fault. Too many on 'em.' He licked the blood on his lip.

'This is war. You wiv us, Chrissier?'

Richard had no need to ask. I was in. I was in from the beginning. I realised, though, that we were out-gunned and that the Panther Boys were ruthless.

'There's seven of them. An' they're mobile. We got to get some more sojers.'

'Tony?'

'What, Twillmop? Nah. He cou'n't punch 'is way out of a wet paper bag.'

Richard was right. My friend Tony was a light-weight.

'How abaht your mate Geoff?'

Geoff was no light-weight, but he might not like getting involved. The same would go for Alan. Most of my friends kept out of situations of this nature. Nobody would want to deliberately get in a tangle with the Panthers.

Richard had an established 'shiner' now, but his lip was not so swollen and the blood had stopped.

'OK, if we can't match the numbers, we'll have to use ah brains.'

Terry looked like Stan Laurel in a quiet moment. Perhaps he could pick up the bits.

'Yeah, we'll have to use ah noodles and get 'em wiv cunnin'.'

Richard's cheek bone was settling to yellow. My cheek was peppered with little scabs.

'We could do 'em one by one. Even Dennis on 'is own. An' Ralph's norra problem.'

Ralph was the eldest and in Cottesmore secondary school, but he was quite small for his age and not at all bright. Dennis was the pack leader.

'Trouble is if we do one of 'em, they all come back as a gang.'

Terry spoke, 'We could use weapons.'

'What yo' finkin' of, Tez?'

'Ball bearians.'

'Ball bearings?'

'Yeah, an' Chrissers got bone arrers.'

I did have two home-made bows and a set of arrows. The doweling arrows were sharpened and would be deadly.

'Owt else, Tez?'

'Water pistols,'

'Water pistols?'

'Yeah wiv summat nasty in 'em.'

Terry must have used up all his brain power for the day. I was impressed.

'Like tomato ketchup?' I suggested.

'Nah,' chipped in Richard, 'Not 'ard enough. Need summat like vinegar. Vinegar in the eyes would be good.'

'We can't do any really serious damage...'

'Why not, Chrissers? They'd do it to us. An' if we start owt they *will*. We gotta knock 'em down so they stays down.'

It suddenly felt like things were getting really out of hand.

'Right, let's mek a start. Find some ball bearings. Stones will do instead. I know where to get thick bamboos from: from the carpet shop in Beeston.'

Terry was sprawled on the pavement. The howling had alerted me. Two girls stood nearby. Angela was picking up the contents of a shopping bag. Lorraine saw me coming.

'It was some boys on bikes. They just raced up to Terry. They knocked him down and started kicking him.'

Terry was curled up now and sobbing.

'Was it the Panther Boys?'

'Yes. They were in a big gang.'

We helped Terry stagger back home with the shopping. I felt sorry for him and afraid for me. What if they came back for me? I wouldn't stand a chance. I glanced up and down the street. I imagined being beaten up every time I came out in the street. I thought about telling my Father. He would go round to the Tate's house and probably get punched in the face. We had to sort this out ourselves.

Richard was quietly livid, 'The friggin' rat-bags. Seven onto ar Tez. We gotta do summink right now. Looks like it's jus' yo' an' me, Chrissar. Tez ain't very well at the mo'.'

'What, just us two against all seven of them?'

'Gonna die sometime ... nah, jus' jokin. Ha-ha'.

How could Richard be joking when we were about to hold the bridge over the Tiber against the entire Etruscan army?

He grinned and tapped a finger to his head, 'Been usin' me noodle, see. I've gorra plan.'

Richard had picked up much from weekly trips to the Essoldo cinema. His plan was to lure the Panthers onto a battle field which favoured us. We would be waiting with our weapons hidden in the long grass. When they came at us we would pelt them with ball-bearings and stones. When they were stopped we would charge with the thick bamboo sticks. Richard would go for Dennis and give him a good pasting. When the leader was screaming for mercy the others would back off. My task was to cover Richard when he made his run at Dennis. I had my doubts. Richard's royal namesake had tried such a move against Henry Tudor at Bosworth. I had recently seen the film at the Essoldo with my Parents. It hadn't worked out too well for the King.

'What if *they* are armed?'

'They don't have none 'cos they're *so tough*.'

'What if you don't get Dennis?'

'Oh I'll get lickle Dennis o'right. It was him what split my lip.'

He grinned again, his eyes gleamed at the prospect of revenge.

'An here's the clever bit. While they are busy facing us they won't see what's happening to their bikes.'

Like a magician he produced a good length of chain with a padlock.

'All the bleddy bikes will be chained togevvver and we'll chuck the key. We need anovver sojer. Can yo' get Geoff?'

Geoff listened to the whole story and the cunning plan. He agreed to lay low and chain the bikes. He was concerned that there were only two facing the Panthers.

'Where's the battle field and when is the battle?'

Whilst the proposed battle was being fine-tuned, Terry recovered and was thirsting for revenge. He showed us some of the bruises. He had a small bag full of ball bearings that he had begged from an uncle. We all trooped to look at the battlefield. I guessed that Richard would choose the unused field *over tins*. The grass was untouched and too long to ride bikes on. We knew where they would dismount. They would have to leave the bikes on the street side of the corrugated steel wall. Geoff was delighted with this. He would wait until they had scaled the wall, before lashing the bikes together unseen. We hid the weapons under a bush to be positioned properly later. A weekday evening, just after tea, was the chosen time. Richard suggested padding for protection just in case. All that was needed was the invitation.

The lure was made in the afternoon of the chosen day.

'Hey you, rat face I'm talkin' to you.'

Ronald was on his own again feeling secure in the false knowledge that nobody would dare touch him again.

Terry slipped behind him and crouched down.

'Yeah, yo' stupid.'

Richard shoved the startled boy. He toppled over Terry. Terry scrambled to his feet and used them on Ronald. He began to cry.

Richard leered down. 'Yo just tell your friggin brother who done this. An' tell him that we'll be ready *over tins* tonight at seven o'clock. Got it?'

Ronald whimpered in the affirmative. We all gobbled on him, and walked away.

'My bruvvers are gonna get yo' boggers!'

I could barely eat my tea. All I could think of was the looming battle. Of course nothing was said to my parents except that I was playing *over tins*, jumping the stream with Geoff. I promised to be back before eight o'clock. We reached the battle ground at six thirty. Geoff

was left sitting on a fence rail with the chain in a bag. The weapons were laid out in three piles. There was a small cushion stuffed inside my shirt and I had a pair of leather gloves that used to belong to my Mother. Richard was sweating in a thick woollen sweater. Underneath was a piece of cardboard folded double. Terry wore a cowboy hat.

'Wait till I give the wo'd. Then we lob the missiles. Two in each hand. Do it again quick. That should gi'em sumfink to fink abaht. While they finkin', I'll go for Dennis an' yo' two cover me.'

'What you going to do to him?'

'Don't worry, Chrisser, He won't get killed. I'm goin' to shove this bamboo in his mush. Then I'll smack 'im rahn the head wiv it. If 'he's still standin', I'll shove him over an' give him a good kickin'.

'What about the others?'

'Well that's yourn and Tez's job to keep 'em off. Swing the bamboos abaht.'

'What if it all goes wrong?'

Geoff gave the pre-arranged wolf whistle which meant that the Panthers were approaching. I felt like going to the toilet, but there wasn't any time. Heads began to rise above the parapet. Seven fiends dropped to our side of the *tins*. They all wore the dreaded uniform. They fanned out and began walking towards us. I was frightened, I wondered if the other two were. It was slow progress because of the tussocks of long grass.

'You're dead!'

It was Dennis in the middle. His brothers either side. On the right were Melvin and Eric. On the left were Lenny and Danny. Dennis was playing with a piece of chain. I wondered if Geoff was hobbling the track bikes. I wanted to be far away. I felt sick.

'I'm gonna do you, Churchie, for what you did to my bruvver.'

'It was me!' yelled Terry.

'Yo' an'all. Yo' gonna wish yo' ain't bin born.'

I was already wishing just that.

They had stopped to hurl insults. They began to move again.

I saw another face appear over the parapet. It was Geoff. He gave the thumbs-up.

'Nah!'

We stooped down for the missiles. There were more stones than ball bearings. Twelve missiles covered the gap. It wasn't accurate aiming. More were scooped up.

The attack line faltered. Eric shrieked and clutched his head. Twelve more missiles were sent home. Danny's hands went down to his thigh.

'Wiv me. Charge!'

The bamboos were snatched up. Richard ran the point of the attack straight at Dennis. He got within two strides of the Panther leader when he lost his footing on the tussocks. He sprawled forward, 'Shit.'

The Panthers realised that the missile barrage had ceased. They looked gleeful: except for Eric and Danny.

Dennis raised the chain above the prostrate Richard. Terry was shrieking. I closed the gap between the end of my bamboo and Dennis' face. I continued forward. Any moment I expected to be dragged down and kicked. It was Dennis that went down. He tipped backwards trying to avoid the bamboo stick which was being pushed into a nostril. Terry took an overhead swing to connect his bamboo with Dennis' head. Someone was clutching at me. I swung round to face Lenny. I brought my bamboo round on a level arc. It hit Lenny's upper arm hard. Richard was up again and laying into the Mitchell's. He turned his attention back to Dennis who was clutching his bloody nose.

'Friggin' bastard. Friggin' bleddy bastard!' He swung the bamboo twice before switching to his boots. Terry and I glared around at the enemy. My heart was pounding. They were backing off. Dennis was whimpering covering his head. It had taken only a couple of minutes.

'Go on, frig off. Take this piece of dog dirt. Don't come back or you'll really get done.'

Ralph and Melvin helped Dennis away toward the *tins*. The others followed without a word.

I was shaking. Richard gave a satisfied grin. Terry was looking for his cowboy hat. We watched the defeated Panthers climb the wall.

Richard leaned his head in that direction and cupped his ear. 'Wait for it.'

There was a massed shriek of disbelief and much swearing.

'Nah, let's go fin' good ol' Geoff.'

Geoff was elated. 'They didn't take no notice of my wolf whistle. As soon as they were over, I shoved the bikes together and chained them. I've still got the key. I nicked off to hide in the telephone box as soon as I saw them coming back. They were dead mad when the bikes wouldn't come apart. It was great.

I strolled casually through the open back door just before eight.

'Whatever have you got those gloves on for in this weather?'

'Do you reckon they'll try to get us?'

'Nah, don't fink so. We done 'em proper. They wou'n't dare.'

The Panther Boys still wore their jackets and rode around together on the severe bikes. (It had taken a good hour to cut the padlock off). There was no retaliation. They avoided us or ignored our presence. They seemed subdued, almost civilised.