

Douglas Alan Captain

Great Hike: or, The Pride of the Khaki Troop



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CHAPTER I.

THE TALK IN AN APPLE TREE

A number of active boys were perched high among the heavily laden branches of a big fall pippin apple tree, back of the old Philander Smith house, located just outside the limits of the thriving town of Hickory Ridge.

"Take care, Landy!" called out Chatz Maxfield, whose soft, mellow voice told of his Southern birth; "that long ladder might chance to slip, suh, and it would be a long ways to the ground!"

"Oh, shucks! I've got the upper end wedged fast in the crotch along the outside of this limb, Chatz. And believe me, I'm getting my basket full of the biggest yellow pippins you ever saw. Who cares for expenses, anyhow?"

Landy, whose father owned the property, was very much inclined to be fat; though he would never admit the fact; and was forever declaring he had a new method of exercise that would reduce him to a "living skeleton," sooner or later.

Besides Chatz Maxfield, whose real name, of course, was Charles, the busy bees in the tree who were assisting their chum pick the ripe apples on this late August day consisted of three fellows, all members of the Hickory Ridge troop of Boy Scouts; and well known to every lad who has read the preceding volumes in this series.

First there was Ty Collins. Every boy in town would know Ty as far away as they could see him; for, when not going to school, winter and summer he clung to an old red sweater that he seemed to love above all the garments he possessed.

Then came a small fellow, Jasper Merriweather by name, whose one ambition it was to get out of the "runt" class. Jasper was never weary of asking some one to take his measure, and compare it with past records; but thus far he had not made much progress toward reaching the ordinary height of a lad of fifteen. Still, he clung to hope and tried to fill his position as Number Four in the Beaver Patrol, to the best of his ability.

Last of all, but by no means least, was Ted Burgoyne. Ted had the misfortune to lisp when he grew the least bit excited; though no one ever knew him to acknowledge the fact, and indeed, if accused, he would grow very indignant, even while others could catch the fatal slip in his warm denial.

They called him "Dr. Ted," for the very good reason that he had his heart set on medicine and surgery, and often found himself in great demand to practice on his fellow scouts. Outside of a few rather wild theories, and a boy-like desire to have a little fun out of things, Ted was quite practical. He was held much in respect by the twenty odd boys constituting the khaki troop.

The Hickory Ridge troop had passed the experimental stage of progress, and had become an established fact. Three patrols, of eight boys each, were complete, and there were candidates to start a fourth, if they could meet the requirements and feel capable of subscribing to the twelve cardinal principles that every true scout has to try to live up to.

Lately a rival troop had sprung up in Fairfield, led by one Matt Tubbs. Formerly Matt had only been known as a great bully, and those who trained with him had served under his banner simply through fear, without a grain of respect.

But Matt had, strange to say, seen a great light. He had watched the boys of the khaki troop in their open-air tests. Something in the business seemed to appeal strongly to him; and then had come the determination to start a troop in his town.

Of course he ran up against a snag in the beginning, for no boy with the loose principles Matt held at that time could ever be accepted as a scout. He studied the matter, watched the Hickory Ridge lads some more, and then came the great awakening.

And now Matt Tubbs was on the right road. He controlled his followers just as thoroughly as before, but generally in a different manner. They respected him too. Still, once in a while the old spirit cropped out; and it was told how, when one of his cronies, thinking to take advantage of this new mantle of meekness, boldly challenged Matt to a fight, the new leader of the Fairfield troop gave him the best kind of a whipping; after which he helped bind up his scratches, and stop the flow of blood from his nose.

But the insurrection had been nipped in the bud: and they did say that Matt tried to atone for his breaking of the rules of the organization by being unusually patient with those under him who had difficulty in keeping up with the reform pace he set.

It was pretty generally understood all through the region that Matt Tubbs might never have started to climb the ladder only for the boyish sympathy which he received from Elmer Chenowith, the leader of the Hickory Ridge troop, and assistant to the scout master, Mr. Garrabrant.

And the reformation of the worst boy in Fairfield and Cramertown long astonished the good people of those communities. When they awakened to the truth that it was no myth, but apparently an accomplished fact, they were quick to give most of the credit to the discipline of the new organization.

And the Fairfield troop from that time on had never lacked for backing from the parents of those boys connected with the same.

The fellows in the apple tree had been talking about these things as they helped Landy pick the fruit, a task that had been set for him by his father, and which must be fulfilled ere he could get off for play that day.

Of course they also discussed the great baseball game that had recently been played between the rival troops, in which Hickory Ridge came out victor, after a very strenuous afternoon's work.

"The way Lil Artha circles the bases gets me," declared Ty Collins, as he munched on a particularly fine specimen of fruit he had struck, and which tempted him beyond his capacity to decline, though it was possibly the seventh he had eaten within the hour.

"Oh, I don't know," remarked Ted, swinging his legs from the limb he straddled. "Most persons them to think there's no one tho fatht as Lil Artha. Now, I admit in the thtart that he can cover the ground at a pretty rapid rate; but nobody knowth jutht how long he could hold out on a long hike. I've got my own ideath on that thubject, fellows."

"Sure you have, and so have a lot of others in the troop, suh," declared Chatz. "Might I ask who you think would have the best chance in an endurance hike that would last, say for twenty-four hours straight?"

"Why, Elmer would, for a thtarter," replied the other, quickly; "and if that ain't enough, what'th the matter with Ty Collinith himthelf? Theemth to me you'd hold out, and give long-legged Lil Artha a run for hith money."

"Me for Matty Eggleston!" declared Jasper, eagerly; for the boy in question was leader of the patrol to which Jasper belonged, and in his eyes seemed a marvel second only to Elmer himself.

"If Lil Artha fell down on the long run, I kind of think Red Huggins might pull in a victor," Ty went on. "That fellow is just chock-full of grit. When he shuts his teeth, and starts in, there's no telling where he'll stop."

"How about George Robbinth, your couthin, Matty?" asked Ted. "I've theen him walk half a dozen fellowth until they admitted they weren't in the thame clath? Perhaps now he might have a chance to win in a long tetht."

"Oh, George is a good one, all right," declared Landy. "Our family is noted for producing marvels. You just wait a little while longer, till I trim my weight down a few more pounds, and I'll

show you something worth while. Huh, if there was a long-distance hike right now, d'ye know I'd be strongly tempted to enter. You never can tell. Appearances are sometimes mighty deceiving, boys."

"There's another swift one in our bunch, fellows," called out little Jasper, who never could hope to enter any of these competitions until Nature was kinder to him, and began to add a few inches to his stature.

"Who's that, Jasper?" demanded Ty, perched high up in the immense tree, and lowering his basket when filled with an ingenious tackle he had contrived so that he need not climb down with a bulky load; though twice he had managed to upset the whole picking, to the disgust of Landy who feared the apples would be too badly bruised to find a market, as his father intended.

"What d'ye say to Jack Armitage?" the small scout went on. "Ever seen him get around and steal bases, no matter what the catcher was doing? He's a screamer, that's what! But of course I ain't sure how Jack would hold out on a twenty-four-hour walk. He's full of staying power though, and might surprise some fellows who have been reckoned at the top of the heap."

"Well, you fellows have about put all the available candidates on the list," declared Ty, laughing because he himself figured in the same. "Elmer is out of the running because he got a thorn in his foot a day or two ago, and is limping to beat the band. His best chum, Mark Cummings, might enter, but it happens he's out of town and may not be back for a week. But what's all this talk going to amount to, anyhow?"

"We ought to have thith important question thettled, boyth!" declared Ted.

"There's been a heap of hot air circulating for a month past about who is the best all-round walker in the troop," remarked Jasper; "and seems to me that matter ought to be threshed out, once and for all!"

"Hurrah, that's the talk, Jasper!" cried Chatz, throwing an apple at the other.

"Bully boy!" called Ty. "Go on and make a suggestion, Jasper. You've got something in your noodle after all. Keep it up, my boy, and success to you."

"That's right, Jasper," said Landy, stretching around to pick several tempting yellow beauties that seemed just beyond the reach of his rather short arm. "Tell us what you've been thinking about. Is it a big hike for the best walkers and runners of the celebrated Hickory Ridge troop?"

Jasper swelled with importance. It was not often he found himself in the lime light, and his opinion in demand. The experience seemed delightful, and he was not in too great a hurry to satisfy the demand for information; since once they had his views the discussion must become general, and he would only stand on an equal footing with the rest.

"Well, to tell the truth I was thinking about suggesting a great hike, with, say a limit of half a dozen fellows connected with the troop as contestants. Perhaps you noticed that I mentioned a twenty-four-hour consecutive tramp as the basis of the test. Each fellow could be bound by a solemn promise not to accept a lift on the way, under penalty of displacement. And several others, like Elmer for instance, might keep tabs on the bunch by following them on their wheels."

"Listen to him, will you? Hasn't Jasper got it down pat?" cried Landy, again exerting himself to the utmost to gather in another lot of unusually tempting pippins.

"He's going to fill a long-felt want," declared Chatz. "We need an organizer, some one who could take the responsibility of fixing up these meets from the over-burdened shoulders of Elmer. And, suh, I suspect Jasper is going to develop into a master of ceremonies."

"Then you rather like the idea, fellows?" asked the small scout, pleased beyond measure.

"It's just the thing," declared Ty.

"We'll take the thame up at wunth, and have the affair arranged in a jiffy," Ted announced.

"Hey, take care there, Landy, your ladder's slipping! Quick, grab hold of something, or you're a goner!" shouted Ty, suddenly.

Landy tried to wriggle himself back again, but his stretch had been fatal to all chances for maintaining his position. The top of the long ladder lost its grip in the swaying crotch and slid from

under him. There was a rattle of apples thudding down on the ground twenty feet below; but Landy had, on the spur of the moment, seized hold of the outer branches, so that there he hung, swinging back and forth; afraid to let go, and yet incapable of long maintaining his frantic grip.

CHAPTER II.

JASPER'S IDEA TAKES ROOT

"Hoop-la, somebody grab me before I drop!" shouted Landy, as he kept trying to get a grip with his fat legs on the foliage of the outer branches which seemed to take particular delight in evading his ambitious designs.

"Get a feather bed under him!" shrieked Ty, although at the same time he was changing his position in the tree with all possible haste, meaning to assist the clinging boy, if it could possibly be done.

"Oh, save me first, and joke about it afterward!" cried Landy, who was really alarmed and under a tremendous strain, both bodily and mentally.

"If I only had a rope with a loop in it, I could lasso him!" declared Jasper.

"But you haven't, you see," cried Landy. "Think up something else! Hurry along, boys; I can't hold out much longer. I'm no Elmer as a gymnast. I'm slipping right now, I tell you. Wow! Is that measly old ladder under me, and will I come down with a splash on it?"

He panted as he uttered this complaint, and the boys saw that his face resembled the setting sun, as he looked up to them almost piteously. But who could reach him there? On the very outer edge of the big tree, with the ground fully twenty feet below, and nothing to break his fall, it began to look like a serious business for poor Landy.

Dr. Ted realized that there was real danger of the boy getting a broken leg if he fell that distance. Landy was not like agile Lil Artha, or some other members of the troop. His weight made him solid, and being without any spring, he would likely come down with a dull, sickening thud.

"Hold on as long as you can, Landy!" yelled Ted, even neglecting to lisp in his great excitement.

He was slipping down the tree like a "greased pig," as Jasper termed it, though what that sort of animal would be doing up in an apple tree he never took the trouble to explain.

Ty saw what the idea was. He had been about to try and reach Landy by standing far out on a limb; but the prospect of success was very small. And so he followed Ted down the tree, slipping from limb to limb with the agility that some boys can only display when the owner of the orchard is seen coming on the full run with a ferocious bulldog at his heels.

"Oh, hurry! hurry! I'm near gone, and can't hold out much longer! What're you doing down there to help me, boys?" wailed the one whose legs swung back and forth like a couple of pendulums, as they vainly sought for a chance to grip something that would ease the strain on his arms above.

"The ladder! They've gone to set it up again, Landy! Just hold on half a minute longer. And there's Elmer jumped off his bicycle; and he's already raising it up. Set your teeth, Landy; take a fresh grip, and it's going to be all right!"

So the excited Jasper shouted as he sat there in the tree, unable to lend a helping hand, but at least capable of offering good advice.

A boy who had been coming toward the place on a wheel, seeing the state of affairs, had instantly sized up the situation; and even while those in the tree were shouting back and forth, and before they could get started, Elmer Chenowith, jumping from his saddle, had limped forward to where the unlucky ladder lay.

By the time Ted, followed by Ty, landed on the ground, he had raised it single-handed, and with a readiness that told of long familiarity with ladders; for one not accustomed to such things would never know the secret of bracing the bottom against some root and then lifting rapidly.

So just in the nick of time the treacherous ladder was dropped against the outer branches of the tree, alongside the hanging boy. Elmer himself flew up the rounds, for he feared that Landy, always more or less clumsy, might not be able to swing his form around, and take advantage of the opening.

But desperation gave Landy new abilities, and he managed by a violent effort to roll around to the outer side of the leaning ladder. Utterly exhausted by the strain he had been under, the fat boy must have slipped helplessly down only that Elmer managed to clutch him.

Step by step the gasping Landy was lowered until he reached the bottom round. He was no longer furiously red, but had turned a sickly white.

"Here, let him down on the ground," said Dr. Ted, taking command at that point as though it were his acknowledged right. "He's only getting the reaction now. I'll fix him up, boys, and he'll be picking apples again before ten minutes, believe me."

He was as good as his word, for Landy soon recovered; but it was noticed that from that moment the fat boy showed great caution how he climbed up that ladder, by which he had once been betrayed.

"What was all that talk going on as I passed?" asked Elmer, a bright, wide-awake young fellow, whose year out on a Canadian ranch belonging to an uncle was proving of considerable value to him in his experience as a scout.

"What did you hear?" asked Jasper, assuming a little of his former importance.

"Seemed to me it smacked of a contest," Elmer replied, "and somebody was telling how a few of us could keep tabs on the same, while using our wheels. That struck me as interesting, and so, wanting to know more, I just wheeled around, and was coming in through the back gate to the garden when the ladder fell. Now tell me the rest, fellows, because you all know that I'm head over ears interested in anything that touches on contests of any sort."

"Well," spoke up Ty, grinning; "somehow we got to talking about who the best all-round walker and runner in the troop might be. A lot of names were mentioned, including my own. Then there were Red, Lil Artha, Matty, George Robbins and Jack Armitage. Even Landy here threatened to enter for the big hike."

"But what was the idea?" asked Elmer, his face aglow with interest.

"To fix up a long-distance hike, say for twenty-four consecutive hours; and a few fellows, mounted on their wheels, kind of superintend things by keeping tabs along the line. The contestant coming in ahead at the end of the walk to be declared the pride of the troop, and the greatest ever."

Jasper rattled all this off with a fluency that told how he had indeed been deliberating over the scheme for some little time, and only sprang it on his chums now because the talk had gotten around to the subject.

"How's that strike you, Elmer?" asked Ty.

"Yeth, give uth your opinion, Mr. Thcoutmaster!" echoed Ted.

"Boys, it's just dandy, and that's a fact!" declared Elmer. "We can make up the arrangements to-night, if you'll all come around to my house. I'll get a lot of the other boys on the phone. I was thinking this morning that we ought to have a meeting about now, anyway, for there are a lot of matters that need attention."

"Then if you say so, it will be a go," declared Jasper, highly pleased because his little scheme had met with such instant approval at the hands of one in whom he placed the utmost confidence.

"Sure to be, Jasper," came the reply. "And it does you great credit too. Some of us were wondering what we might do to stir things up a little. With school opening just two weeks off, we want to make the most of the few days left of our vacation. Now this big hike will be just the thing."

"Besides, you see, Elmer," the small scout continued, eagerly, "it's going to settle a dispute between the lot of us here. Some think one fellow is going to have a walkover, and others hold different opinions. Of course we all know you're bound to be shut out, on account of that sore foot of yours. And as Mark is out of town, he can't enter the game either. But we think the six fellows we picked out ought to make things lively enough to suit anybody."

"They will, for a fact," replied Elmer. "Of course I pin my faith on Lil Artha, but I may be mistaken just as well as any one of you. But I must be going, fellows, as I was on an errand, and just

ran around here to see how you were getting on. Better not try those gymnastics again, Landy. That was an ugly scrape for even an acrobat, let alone a fellow as chunky as you are."

"Elmer, never again," said the fat boy, solemnly, as he slowly shook his head. "I'll be sore for a week after that job. My arms feel right now like they'd been nearly pulled out of their sockets. Gee, but nobody can understand just how it feels to be hanging twenty feet up, on the outside branches of a tree, and slowly slipping, slipping! And I lost a basket of the biggest pippins you ever saw; every one a prize winner, but now all bruised and wasted!"

"You'd have been the biggest squashed pippin of the lot if you went down that time," sang out Ty from the top of the tree.

"Now that's real cruel of you, Ty," complained Landy; but he did not take the jibes of his comrades much to heart, for he was fond of a joke himself.

"Remember, every one of you drop around to-night," said Elmer, as he picked up his wheel, which he had hastily thrown aside at the moment he discovered how necessary prompt action was required in order to save Landy.

"Any chance of striking some of that delightful sponge cake your housekeeper makes to beat the Dutch?" asked Landy, who had never forgotten the treat set before the scouts the last time some of them were invited around to Elmer's home.

"Seems to me Mrs. Gregg was making a big batch this very morning when I left home," called back Elmer; just as if he hadn't asked her to do the same, since he intended having the boys in khaki there that night.

"Then count me in," declared the fat boy, firmly; "even if my arms are so sore I'll have to ask somebody to raise the cake to my mouth. Yum, yum; that was the finest thing that ever came down the pike, barring none! And you tell her that, Elmer, with my compliments."

"All right, I will," sang out the departing one, as he passed out of the rear gate, mounted on his wheel and riding as one to the manner born.

The apple picking went on, with the heap at the base of the tree growing in size as basket after basket was added to it. And the conversation between the five lads covered a great variety of subjects as they stripped the big tree of its golden freight.

"What makes me sore," remarked Landy with a big sigh, "is the fact that I upset the basket that held the finest apples going. You see, my dad expected to show some of these at the fair next week, if they turned out as well as they looked from the ground. And I was just saying to myself that I had the beauts, when the silly old ladder went back on poor little Philander."

"Don't weep, old chap," called out Ty. "If you look over that last lot I sent down on my little cable here, you'll find them the mates of the ones you dropped. And for a wonder, too, I got that basket down safe without an upset."

"Thanks, you make me happy again, Ty," remarked Landy. "And for that you'll be remembered in my last will."

"Huh!" grunted Jasper; "he deserves a heap of credit for letting all those fine pippins get past him; because he acted like he meant to gobble every extra good one that came along. I've counted about a dozen he's got away with up to now; and I think even at that he's just taken the edge off his appetite."

"Well, in that case I'll get down and pick out a basket from the pile to take in the house, before Ty starts at full speed," and Landy did actually head for the ground to put his threat into execution.

So they kept up a crossfire of remarks, sometimes more or less witty, until the last apple that could be reached was bagged. Then the game was declared off, and Landy invited his chums in to help dispose of a quart of peanuts he happened to have in his room.

"We'll all be around to-night at Elmer's house, I suppose?" remarked Ty as, with Ted, Jasper and Chatz, he started for the door.

"Count on me, if I have to be carried on a stretcher," vowed Landy, laughing at the speaker, as he recalled to mind the attractive lure that had been held out for their attendance.

"And I'm anxious to have this thing put through," declared Jasper; "because, you see, it was partly my suggestion; and besides, I've got a hunch that the Fairfield troop are figuring on a long hike, to try out their best fellows. I'd like to see our Lil Artha or Matty Eggleston up against the best they have. It'd be a hike worth hearing about, believe me, fellows."

"And perhaps we *can* fix up a match; I'm going to mention the thing to Elmer, anyhow," remarked Chatz, who really had no small nature, and could see one of his comrades winning laurels without showing the slightest envy.

And talking it over earnestly, they left Landy, heading for their various homes.

CHAPTER III.

AS THE CLOCK IN THE TOWER BOOMED SIX

It lacked but ten minutes of six.

The sun had been up for about half an hour and there was every promise of a fine August day. Possibly, before the shades of evening fell, the heat of the dog days might prove more or less exhausting; but at that early hour the outlook was all that could be asked.

Around the old church with the belfry, fully half the young people of Hickory Ridge seemed to have congregated. Girls were there as well as boys; for what with the sisters of the scouts, as well as all the other fellows' sisters, the starting of what promised to be the greatest hike on record among the lads of the new organization was an event that could not be missed.

Of course, besides the six contestants, there were numerous other khaki-clad members of the various patrols. Each fellow was, as a rule, the center of a questioning group and felt compelled to supply all the information in his power.

Mr. Garrabrant, the young man who served so faithfully as scout master to the troop, was talking to the boys who expected to participate in the long tramp. He encouraged them, and at the same time laid down the law in plain language.

No one was to accept any kind of a ride while on the hike; even if only for a short space, it would invalidate all his rights to be considered in the contest. And of course each fellow gave his solemn word of honor to abide faithfully by the rules, a copy of which had been given to him.

The conditions were simple enough; Mr. Garrabrant had arranged with the scout master of the troop of Boy Scouts in Little Falls, and each of the rival contestants was supplied with a letter of greeting, which they were to hand to that gentleman upon arriving at the headquarters in Little Falls. This town being some forty-seven miles away from Hickory Ridge, as the crow flies, it can be seen that a herculean task awaited the boys, in order to cover this distance inside of the twenty-four hours.

What added spice to the game was the fact that it was known there were to be several fellows who meant to leave Fairfield at exactly the same hour, and under similar conditions. And the spirit of Hickory Ridge was aroused in civic pride. They yearned to win out over all competitors, just as they had done in that wonderful baseball game only a short time before.

Elsie Craig, one of the prettiest girls in the whole town, and who was particularly fond of Elmer, waylaid Landy as he was changing his position, meaning, to get closer to the group where the six who had entered for the race were making ready for the start.

"Oh, please wait a couple of minutes, Landy!" she exclaimed, with an entreating smile on her winsome face.

Landy, much as he wanted to get where he could hear the last instructions given to the half dozen scouts before they started, could not resist this plea. Truth to tell, Landy was a little "soft" himself when it came to a certain girl, and Elsie happened to be her chum.

"All right, Elsie," he remarked, as he came to a halt, though looking longingly toward the excited group about Mr. Garrabrant. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to know, that's all. Elmer is so busy he just can't spend one little minute talking to me," she replied with a pout.

"Why, you see, he just has to do his duty as the assistant scout master," declared Landy, actually wincing when the girl rested a hand on one of his sore arms. "But I was at the meeting where all the particulars were decided on, and perhaps I might be able to tell you what you want to know, Elsie."

"First of all, do the boys only walk and not run?" she asked, eagerly.

"This is a hike, and that means a walk, not a Marathon race. So every fellow is put on his honor not to run," replied Landy.

"But I should think Arthur Stansbury had all the advantage, because he can take such big steps," observed the girl, frowning a little, as though Lil Artha had never been a very great favorite of hers.

Landy laughed with the air of one who knows all the ins and outs of walking matches.

"Oh, that's nothing to go by, Elsie," he declared, with a shrug of his shoulders that compelled him to make an immediate grimace, for the muscles were sore. "Why, it often happens that some little runt can outstrip a fellow nearly twice his height. It's endurance that tells in the long run. The boy who can set his teeth together, and fight it out to the bitter end. That's what Mr. Garrabrant says, and all of us athletes understand it."

Elsie smiled, and looked roguishly up and down Landy's plump form when she heard him mention that word so proudly. But then, after that experience when the ladder fell and left him dangling twenty feet from the ground, Landy really believed he deserved to be classed among the strenuous ones, even though it might be in an humble capacity.

"And they have to walk all the way to Little Falls before to-morrow morning; poor fellows, don't I pity them, though!" the girl went on. "Elmer would have been in the game too, only for that ugly thorn in his foot. And don't you think he would surely have won the prize, Landy, if he had competed?"

"Oh, nearly everyone believes that," replied the fat boy, readily; "though to tell the truth, there never has been a hike like this around here before, and we don't just know who's got the Injun sign on the rest of the bunch. Between you and me, Elsie, I'm pinning some faith on George Robbins. You know he's my cousin, and he's got some of the old Philander Smith stock in him. The record of my family is a proud one"; and he drew himself up as he inflated his chest with a pompous air that would have well become the drum major of the town band.

"To be sure, Landy," remarked the little miss, quickly; "and it covers a lot of ground, too. Why, even in history we come across it every now and then. But, Landy, how will it be known that the six contestants keep to the route that has been laid out for them? Some one might look up a map and find a road that would be a short cut. That would be an unfair advantage."

"Sure it would," remarked the boy; "and it was just to prevent knowledge and craft from winning when this was to be a question of speed and endurance, Mr. Garrabrant says, that made the committee insist on stations along the way."

"Stations? Whatever do you mean by that?" Elsie demanded.

"Well, they picked out a number of taverns where one of the scouts who goes on ahead with Mr. Garrabrant will establish a register. In that book every fellow in the great hike is expected to enter his name in his own handwriting, also the time of his arrival and departure."

"Oh, now I understand; and Landy, that is a clever idea!" the girl exclaimed. "But Elmer intends setting out on his wheel later on in the day; will you please tell me what reason there is for that, Landy?"

"Oh, it was arranged by the committee, that's all. Several of the fellows will go from time to time. Sort of keep tabs on the contestants and see how they are getting on. I expected to be chosen to be one of these inspectors, but I had a little accident yesterday that knocked me out. But all the fellows said that the game old Philander Smith spirit copped out, and that few boys could have held on up in that tree as long as I did."

But if sly Landy expected in this manner to lead the conversation into a personal line, so that he could glorify his own prowess, he made a mistake. Evidently the pretty little miss with the golden locks and the blue eyes had no desire to hear about his wonderful escape.

"How will the six contestants get anything to eat on the way?" she asked.

"Oh, that's left to them," answered the fat boy, frowning with disappointment over the failure of his attempt to rivet her attention on himself. "They can stop and have a meal at any old tavern; but I reckon most of the fellows are wise to the fact that they must lose valuable time that way. I know George has a snack stowed away in his haversack right now. He's on to all the dodges, you know."

"Why, of course he is, because he is your cousin, Landy. But suppose one of the poor fellows breaks down? It's a terrible long trip, and all sorts of things might happen, don't you think?" Elsie continued.

"Not much danger of that, I guess," Landy answered. "You see every one of them had to undergo a physical examination before Mr. Garrabrant would allow them to enter; and they're all as fit as fiddles. Of course we don't expect that after they've put, say twenty miles, behind them they'll be as chipper as they are now. Their feet will drag more or less; but that's where the grit must show."

"They expect to start all at the same time, then?" asked the girl.

"Sure, but after a mile or so they'll be likely to separate. One will believe the pace too warm for the start, and drop back. You know they say it's a bad thing to urge your horse early in a long race. All sorts of ideas will prevail, so that long before the first ten miles have been covered the six boys may be far apart, and each trudging along to suit his ideas."

"How much you know about all these things, Landy!" said Elsie, with a twinkle in her sunny eyes that he failed to catch; for he again stiffened up with that superior air that boys are apt to assume when explaining the science of baseball or some other manly sport to a girl who has never attended a game before.

"Oh, well, we just have to, you see, if we ever expect to make good scouts," he replied, thinking that after all Elsie was even a little prettier than her chum, when she chose to smile on a fellow that way. "And besides, we pick up a lot of information from our scout master, and Elmer, who knows all about woodcraft, because he lived out on the big plains. But it must be getting near time for the start, because they're lining up now. Let's push ahead so we can see what happens."

Despairing of getting away while the persistent little maid continued to seek information, Landy was now hedging, and content to carry her along with him as he pushed through the crowd of talking, laughing spectators.

The clock in the church tower pointed to two minutes of six. And at the first stroke of the hour they were expected to be off.

Six boys stood in line, eager and expectant. Their particular friends called out encouraging words, and there was a perfect babel of confusion about this time. But Mr. Garrabrant anticipating such a happening, had spoken the last words of caution. So that there was now nothing to be done but wait for the loud boom of the big clock in the tower.

"Good luck, Lil Artha!"

"Keep that good left foot of yours going right along, George!"

"Red, we're counting on you to win out, remember!"

"That's Ty Collins on the extreme left; just you watch his smoke!"

"Take it easy, Matty! You know the rules of the game, old fellow!"

"Jack, don't you ever come around again unless you bring that prize with you!"

This last created a roar of laughter, as one of the scouts imitated the voice of a girl whom everyone knew Jack Armitage was sweet on.

One minute of six!

Gradually this clamor died down as the critical minute drew closer and closer. Many eyes were turned upon the big face of the clock on the side of the square tower of the church.

"Ready, all!" they heard Mr. Garrabrant call out.

Then came a deathly silence. Everyone craned his or her neck, and the figures of the six contestants who wore the khaki garments of the Boy Scouts proved to be the hub of all glances.

Some of the boys looked grim and determined; others, like tall Lil Artha, wore confident smiles, as though they believed in their hearts that it would be an easy snap. But all were evidently primed to do their level best, no matter what the final result.

Ah! There was a whirring sound up in the tower. Well did the boys know that the big clock always emitted this seeming gasp just before the striking of the hour. Then came a reverberating boom!

It was time.

"Hurrah!" yelled the crowd, as hats and handkerchiefs filled the air; "they're off!"

"And may the best man win!" said the smiling scout master, looking after the fast walking line of contestants.

CHAPTER IV. SIGNS OF TROUBLE

"Look at 'em all in a bunch!" cried one of the watchers; for the crowd had been particularly requested not to follow the six walkers or annoy them in the start.

"But with Lil Artha at the head!" called another exultantly.

"But they're all keeping up close with him, even if Red does have to cover five steps to three by Lil Artha. It ain't the length of a fellow's legs that counts for everything in a hike, let me tell you!"

"Shucks! Why, Lil Artha is just playing with 'em," laughed another.

"Sure he is; when he feels like it, he'll make a ring around the rest, and then not be pushed!"

"Oh, he will, eh? Shows how much you know about these things. Lil Artha may be due to a little surprise before many hours go past; and it'll be George Robbins who will do it," said Landy, proudly.

"For he has the true Philander Smith grit," sang another; at which there was a shout from the rapidly breaking-up crowd, for this little weakness on the part of the fat boy was pretty generally known.

Presently a turn in the road shut out the walkers. They were all going strong when last seen, and Lil Artha even turned to wave a jaunty farewell to those of his friends who had wished him success in the great hike.

Elmer and the balance of the scouts gathered together to talk over matters connected with the affair. A plan of campaign had been mapped out with almost as much care as if a battle were impending. Indeed, all sorts of road maps had been consulted in laying out the course over which the six contestants were expected to pass. And a copy of the same, as well as the rules governing their actions, had been sent over to the Fairfield troop at the earnest request of the scout master who had lately taken charge there.

The morning began to wear on.

Some of those who had gathered to watch the start had come without waiting for breakfast, though the scouts, as a rule, could not be reckoned in that class, being early risers. And as the hours went by there was always more or less excitement around headquarters.

Several fellows had brought their wheels around. These were the chosen inspectors whose duty it was to sally forth at certain hours when Elmer gave the word, and pick up the several contestants along the way, perhaps telephoning any interesting news connected with them from some convenient inn where the registers were placed.

Mr. Garrabrant and one of the scouts had gone off in an auto long ago. They expected to establish the chosen stations and leave the registers in which each fellow was to enter the time of his coming and going.

At ten o'clock the first scout on a wheel was sent out. Another would follow at twelve, and around four Elmer, as the last inspector, expected to start. He chose to be last because a fellow who owned a motorcycle had loaned it to him for the occasion, and thus he had a big advantage over the others.

When noon came there was a ripple of interest. A scout had come from the store where the telephone station happened to be located, and he brought the first news of the big hike.

All the contestants had made the first station easily, passing within five minutes of each other. And, strange to say, it was Lil Artha whose time seemed to be just at the tail end of the procession. No one could understand it, and all sorts of speculations began to pass current.

"Got a stone in his shoe and bruised his heel!" one suggested.

"More'n likely he's gone and strained a tendon again; remember he did that two years ago when he made the home run that won the game!" another exclaimed.

"Rats!" called out a third, scornfully. "The sly old fox is only doing that for fun. He's playing with the other fellows, believe me. When he gets good and ready he'll pass the bunch, and leave 'em so far behind they'll forget their names. Oh, I know Lil Artha! Why, he even took his little camera along. Said he wanted to snap off a few pictures on the way, just to pass time, when he got too lonesome."

After a hasty lunch the boys again assembled at the church, and if anything, in greater numbers than before; for every fellow in town seemed to be on the spot, anxious to hear what news might come dribbling in.

Two o'clock came, and with it a running scout from the store, where several were stationed in order to be ready to answer the phone.

More news, and of a character to arouse great excitement. At the second station there was a difference of just thirteen minutes between the arrival of the leader and the last contestant. That leader was Lil Artha; and sad to relate, the tail ender trailed the proud banner of the Philander Smiths in the dust, for it was no other than George.

"Told you so!" burst out the fellow who had been so positive about the tall Lil Artha playing tricks. "He's starting now; and by night time he'll be hull down in the distance. It's sure a walkover for Lil Artha."

"Reckon you're right, and that it's all over but the shouting!" declared another, who had been for Red Huggins, but proved rather weak-kneed in his faith.

Strange how the different natures of boys crop out under such conditions.

"Huh, it's too early in the game to throw up the sponge like that, Ben!" declared another fellow, derisively. "All sorts of things might happen to Lil Artha. You never can tell about them long-legged fellows. They're apt to double up like a hinge with cramps or something. Wait and see. Jack's holding his own with the rest, because he was only three minutes behind the leader!"

"Next time it'll be half an hour, because Lil Artha has unlimbered his heavy artillery. Why, I bet you he's going along like a Weston, right now, and just eating the miles up."

"Yes, we'll get a message from Little Falls any minute now telling how he blew in there with his seven-league boots, and has started back!" mocked another, who apparently did not love the lanky one any too well.

Meanwhile Elmer was trying to keep his finger on the pulse of things as well as he could. It was while he was taking a look at the motorcycle that had been placed at his disposal, to make sure the tank had a full gallon and a half of oil aboard, and everything in order for a start, that he heard the tooting of a horn up the road.

A couple of the scouts chanced to possess motorcycles. True, they had seen considerable of service, and were often in a condition far from useful; but then Nat Scott, whose father was at the head of the schools in Hickory Ridge, and Toby Jones, had had more or less sport in times past with the second-hand machines purchased with their savings.

It was now just five minutes of four, and Elmer expected to make his start as the hour struck. He knew that he would have time enough to overtake the leading walker long before night set in.

Somewhat to his surprise, the boys who were coming began to shout as soon as they drew near; and he noticed that both of them seemed very much excited.

Elmer's face paled a trifle. He wondered whether any accident could have overtaken one of the contestants; though he could not imagine how such a thing might be.

"Hold on, Elmer, was afraid we wouldn't get here in time to catch you!" called Nat, as they came along, both machines popping merrily; though it might be noticed that they were erratic in their explosions, proving that the spark could not be doing its full duty.

Of course nothing could have tempted Elmer to hasten off now. He wanted to hear what these scouts had to say.

And he remembered something just then. Neither Nat nor Toby had been present to witness the start of the six who had entered for the race. The scout master had appointed them, at their

earnest request, as a committee to go over to Fairfield and watch the start of those scouts in the rival organization, so as to bring back a detailed account.

Perhaps Mr. Garrabrant, knowing boys as well as he did, may have secretly suspected that it might pay to have a couple of wide-awake fellows around Fairfield during the day to keep their eyes and ears open. He happened to know that there had arisen a new bully in Fairfield, who was doing all in his power to assume the reins laid down by Matt Tubbs at the time he saw a great light and gave over his evil ways when taking up the attractive scout movement. And it might be that some of those turbulent Fairfield fellows would get together and hatch up a scheme for keeping the Hickory Ridge scouts from winning the long hike.

All this flashed into the mind of Elmer as he saw Nat and Toby speeding toward the church and waving their hands as they shouted.

They came to a stop with something of a dramatic effect, and leaned their motorcycles up against the wall of the church. Of course there was a rush on the part of everyone within sight and hearing of the spot; and already all sorts of wild theories were circulating, as they will at such a time.

"What's happened, d'ye think?" one gasped, looking frightened; for he had a brother in the contest, and his first fear was that something had happened to him.

"One of the boys must have been badly hurt! Perhaps they've come for the ambulance to fetch him home!"

"Aw, get out! What's the use talkin' that way, Jim? However could they get knocked out that way?"

"Besides, ain't Nat and Toby been over at Fairfield all day under orders? Must be news from that place. Perhaps Matt Tubbs has gone back to his old ways again and plans to do our fellows up on the road!"

"Matt Tubbs is all right, and don't you forget it. Here, quit your pushin', and give a feller a chance to get in near Elmer!"

Meanwhile Elmer had waited until the two scouts had saluted, as they had been taught to do when meeting a superior officer; since respect to authority is one of the cardinal principles to which the tenderfoot subscribes when he first joins a patrol.

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