

Fast Nine

By
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*Free*editorial 

FAST NINE

CHAPTER I.

ON THE WAY HOME FROM THE FISHING HOLE.

A PARTY of five boys, ranging in age around fifteen or sixteen, trudged rather wearily along the bank of a small stream known as the Sunflower River. Some miles beyond this point it merged its clear waters with those of the broader Sweetwater, which river has figured before now in these stories of the Hickory Ridge boys.

As they carried several strings of pretty good-looking fish, the chances were the straggling group must have been over at the larger stream trying their luck. And as black bass have a failing for beginning to bite just when fellows ought to be starting for home this would account for evening finding them still some distance from Hickory Ridge and a jolly supper.

"Another long mile, and then we'll be there, fellows," sighed the stoutest one of the bunch, who was panting every little while, because of the warm pace set by his more agile chums.

"Hey, just listen to Landy puff, will you, boys!" laughed Chatz Maxfield, whose accent betrayed his Southern birth.

"He keeps getting fatter every day, I do believe," joked Mark Cummings, a clean-cut young chap with a clear eye and resolute bearing.

"Now, that ain't exactly fair, Mark," complained the object of this mirth, in a reproachful tone, "and you know it. Don't I take exercise every day just to reduce my flesh? Why, I'm making a regular martyr of myself, my mom says, ever since I joined the Boy Scouts, so that I can keep my own with the rest of you. She says if I keep it up I'll soon be skin and bones, that's what!"

A shout arose from the entire bunch at this. The idea of that fat boy ever reaching a point where such a term could be applied to him was simply ridiculous.

"What time is it, Chatz; since you seem to be the only one in the lot who had the good sense and also the decency to fetch a watch along?"

The Southern boy readily pulled out a little nickel timepiece, and consulted it, but the dusk was coming fast, so that he had to bend low in order to make sure of the right figures.

"Half past seven, fellows," he announced.

"Wow, won't my folks just be worried about me, though!" exclaimed a very tall boy, whose build would indicate that he was something of a sprinter; and whose name being Arthur Stansbury, his mates, after the usual perversity of boys in general, had promptly nicknamed him "Lil Artha."

"I don't think they'll be alarmed, because they know a bad penny is sure to turn up," laughed Mark, immediately dodging a friendly blow from the lengthy arm of his comrade.

"Hold on, I've lost my cap," declared the one who had dodged, but the others made no move toward stopping; supper was a mile away, and they felt hungry enough to eat a houseful.

Three minutes later Mark came running after them, still bareheaded.

"Hello!" exclaimed the lad who had asked Chatz for the time, and who seemed to bear the earmarks of a leader among them, as Elmer Chenowith really was, being at the head of the Wolf Patrol, and accredited as an assistant scout master in the Hickory Ridge Boy Scout Troop—"How about this, Mark; where's your cap?"

"Couldn't find it, that's all," laughed the other, good naturedly; "perhaps it went into the river. Anyhow, it's getting that dark I couldn't see the thing, and as you fellows were in such a raging hurry I just gave it up."

"Oh, say, that's too bad," declared Chatz; "I'll turn back with you, Mark, if you give the word."

"Oh, shucks! it isn't worth it, Chatz, though I'm just as much obliged to you as if we went. It's an old cap, anyhow, and even if it went sailing down the

Sunflower it wouldn't matter much. I've got another besides my campaign hat. And if it doesn't rain in the morning I may take a run over here on my wheel. Move along, fellows; I can just imagine I smell that bully good supper that's being kept for me at our house."

"Yum, yum, that strikes me," exclaimed Landy, whose one weakness was a love for eating, despite his declaration to the effect that he was daily cutting down his rations in order to reduce his girth. "And I happen to know they're having fried eggplant to-night. If there's one thing I just like above every other dish it's fried eggplant, and plenty of it. Aw!" and he sighed to think that a whole mile still lay between himself and that beloved delicacy.

"All I can say is, that it's mighty lucky we don't have a meeting to-night, that's what," remarked Chatz; "because we'd never be able to get there after this long hike. But, honest, fellows, I think it paid. I never had more fun pulling out black bass than to-day. And whew, how they do fight up here! Why, down in the warmer waters of my state, South Carolina, we have the big-mouth bass, which the natives call green trout, and he comes in as logy as an old piece of tree stump, after about one little tussle."

"But I reckon there are heaps of game fighters up in that old pond at Munsey's mill," remarked Lil Artha.

"There may be, if those fish pirates left any," declared Mark. "You know the game and fish warden found and destroyed a lot of nets, even if he didn't get the Italian poachers. But that's too far away from home, anyway; and I think we'll have to leave the bass that live in that pond to the ghost of the haunted mill."

A general laugh followed this declaration. The scouts had recently been on a long tramp to the mill in question, an abandoned place which was shunned by all the country people for certain causes. But while they had met with sundry adventures of considerable importance while there, none of them could claim to have run across the ghost said to be in charge of the old rookery.

This had been a subject of great disappointment to Chatz Maxfield in particular, for he secretly cherished more or less of a belief in ghosts, having probably been inoculated with the weakness as a very small boy, when he had for playmates ignorant and superstitious blacks, on the South Carolina rice plantation that had been his home until recently.

"Hey! what did Matt Tubbs have to say to you, Elmer?" suddenly asked Lil Artha. "I saw him talking like a Dutch uncle when I was waiting for you to come along this noon."

The boy in question was known as a bully. He lived in the neighboring town of Fairfield, which adjoined Cramertown, so that the two might be reckoned one continuous settlement. And strangely enough, Matt's house was said to be half in one place and half in the other.

Matt Tubbs had given the boys of Hickory Ridge more or less trouble in years past. He was a natural leader, and rather a tough character as well, ruling the fellows in Fairfield and Cramertown with a rod of iron.

Frequently the Hickory Ridge boys had been influenced to engage in friendly rivalry with those of the neighboring place, but it happened that as a rule these contests broke up in a row, and more than one pitched battle had resulted.

For more than a year, now, Elmer and his chums had positively refused to have anything to do with the Fairfield boys. They had even turned down several invitations to bridge the chasm and start on a new deal, because they believed that so long as Matt Tubbs was in control, just so long would rough-house tactics be brought into play whenever the game went against the Fairfield players.

But lately Matt Tubbs had seen a new light. The organizing of the Hickory Ridge Troop of Boy Scouts had inspired him with a desire to follow suit. But while he could find plenty of material in the two towns, the great difficulty seemed to be in subscribing to the twelve cardinal principles

which every candidate has to profess before he can become even a tenderfoot scout.

Matt had in secret hovered around the meeting places of the Hickory Ridge fellows. In this way he had heard things that simply amazed him, and set him to thinking deeply. Then he had chanced to have an experience with Elmer and his followers at a time when the scouts were called on to find a little boy who had been kidnapped by his step-father, an ignorant and drink-crazed rascal.

Matt Tubbs had been fascinated by the many things he had seen Elmer do in the line of woodcraft, and then and there he had declared that he was going to subscribe to the entire list of regulations as set forth in the manual of the scouts.

And Elmer had given him his hand at the time, promising to do all he could to assist him get his troop started.

The leader of the Wolf Patrol laughed softly when Lil Artha put this question at him so directly.

"I really meant to tell you all about it," he said, "but somehow it just seemed to slip my mind, we've been having such a jolly afternoon. Fact is, Matt being over in the Ridge on some business for his father, jumped off his wheel at seeing me, because he had some important news."

"Has he got his troop organized, then?" asked Lil Artha.

"That's just what he has; seventeen fellows have already signed the roll, with a promise of several more. That makes two complete patrols, and then some. Matt says they're wild over it in his town. The people are going to let them have a room in the old Baptist church, and everybody promises to help along. I reckon the good people of Fairfield understand that the coming of the Boy Scouts will mean a moral awakening in their place."

"And they need it, all right," declared Chatz, positively. "Why, suh, I'm told that during the last seven yeahs Fairfield, that used to be a model town, has become the toughest place in this part of the state. And the way Matt Tubbs

led his gang has been the main cause. It was a rule or ruin policy. If they couldn't win a baseball game squarely they'd start a little riot, and have the umpire give it to 'em, nine to nothing."

"Well, I rather think that's all in the past," said Elmer. "If Matt does half he declares he means to do, it's going to be the biggest thing that ever happened for the boys of Fairfield and Cramertown. And something more, fellows. I just rather guess we'd better be brushing up all we know of the great American national game of baseball. For Matt says he and his team are going to challenge the Hickory Ridge scouts to a big game."

"Hear, hear!" shouted Lil Artha, executing a regular hoedown to prove how joyful the news made him. "Why, fellows, d'ye know I'm just wild to get in the game again against a club that really counts. All we've done this summer has been to mow down the little chaps around the Ridge, and it was too easy. Matt will put a team in the field worth beating, and we all know what a player he is himself when he wants to do the right thing. So I say bully, bully all around!"

"Do you think his turning over a new leaf will hold good," asked Chatz; "or is he apt to drop back into his old ways if we happen to get a good lead, and bully the umpire into giving his side all the chances?"

"Well, of course I couldn't say for sure," replied Elmer, "but Matt seems dead set on cutting a straight swathe from now on, and there's the best chance of his doing it that ever happened, because he has simply got to choose between doing the square thing to others or getting out of the scout movement. No crooked work will go when a fellow has faithfully promised to be trustworthy, loyal, helpful to others, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient to his superiors, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent."

"You're right, it won't, Elmer," assented Mark, positively. "And yet if Matt has changed right-about face, so that he can live up to that agreement I'm ready to believe the world is coming to an end."

"Me, too!" echoed Lil Artha, who had had several personal conflicts with the bully of Fairfield, and distrusted him exceedingly.

"Just wait and see," said Elmer; and the subject was dropped as they hurried on toward the lights of Hickory Ridge that began to appear near by.

CHAPTER II.

A STARTLING ACCUSATION.

"Now, what d'ye suppose that fellow in the carriage is beckoning to us for, Elmer?" asked Mark Cummings, as he and his particular chum were walking along the main street of Hickory Ridge on the morning after the fishing trip.

They had been looking up a few things in one of the stores, for Mark chanced to be the grandson of a noted artist, and had himself developed a touch of genius along the line of caricature work. Often when he and his chums were together, he would pull out pencil and paper and dash off some telling and humorous drawing. If a pencil were not handy Mark could use a crayon, a bit of chalk or charcoal, and even a piece of fresh birch bark in case paper were lacking.

And so he had been picking up a few things in his line, while Elmer interested himself advising Lil Artha, who was selecting some plates for his new camera, as well as developing fluid, prepared paper, and several other necessities required by the amateur photographer devoted to his work.

The two boys had started home together, and were in the midst of an animated conversation connected with the chances for that baseball game before the summer vacation ended, when Mark chanced to hear some one calling.

"Why, it looks to me like Colonel Hitchins's rig," remarked Elmer, who possibly knew the vehicle in question better than his chum. "Yes, I know it is now, and the negro driver is Sam White, his coachman. He seems to be beckoning to us, as sure as anything. I wonder what he wants, and if it has anything to do with Diablo, the educated monkey we had all that fun with when we were in camp up on Jupiter Lake?"

"That's so, Elmer; will I ever forget what happened there, and how glad Colonel Hitchins was to get his tricky pet back, after he had robbed us of a

lot of our good grub. But Sam White has started his horses this way. Let's wait here and see what he's got to say."

Colonel Hitchins was an eccentric and wealthy man who lived beyond the environments of Hickory Ridge. He had once been a great traveler, and his big house was filled with trophies from every land. It was a treat for Elmer to examine some of the almost numberless things the collector had gathered around him. And as a rule the colonel was favorably disposed toward the boys of Hickory Ridge, though there were times when some of the more malicious chaps annoyed him greatly in various ways.

Presently Sam White pulled the two prancing horses in close to the sidewalk.

"Whoa, dar, youse high falutin' thoroughbr'ds from Kentucky! I reckons you dun gits too much oats, dat's what; an' hit makes yuh too frisky. You am de boy belongin' tuh de Cummings fambly, ain't yuh, an' yuh name am Mark, I spect?" was the way the colored driver proclaimed his advent on the scene.

"Sure, I'm Mark Cummings, and you know it as well as you do your own name, Sam. What's doing now?" remarked the boy, smiling.

"Why, yuh see, de kunnel he sez tuh me, sez he: 'Sam, ef so be yuh sot yuh eyes on dat Mark Cummings, I'd like yuh tuh ask him tuh come up hyah right away, 'case I wants tuh see him!' Dat's wat de kunnel say tuh me," the driver explained.

Mark glanced at his chum with raised eyebrows.

"What d'ye suppose it means, Elmer?" he asked, in bewilderment.

The other shook his head in the negative, as though unable to hazard a guess.

"It might stand for any one of a dozen things," he observed. "You know the colonel takes a heap of interest in the boys of the Ridge. Perhaps he wants to make some offer to them that will be to their interest. Perhaps he may

even intend to ask the scouts over to his house some night, and give them a great time. It would be just like him, you know."

"Yes," replied Mark, smiling, "but in that case why send for me? You're the assistant scout master, and Mr. Garrabrant is in town right now, so he ought to be the one consulted. But I suppose I'd better jump in and go along. Say, what's to hinder you coming with me, Elmer?"

"Nothing that I know of," replied his chum. "And I don't suppose Sam here would have any objections to my taking a ride with you. He knows I've been to see the colonel heaps of times."

Sam scratched his woolly pate, as if bewildered, and looked dubious.

"De kunnel he sez dat Mark Cummings boy, sah, but seein' as it's you, I reckon it'd be all right. So jes' step in kindly, as de hosses am a bit peeved dis yar mawnin', an' wants tuh run dey hails off."

Accordingly the two chums entered the big open carriage, Mark laying his several packages down beside him. And in another minute they were being carried at a spanking pace toward the fine estate of Colonel Hitchins.

On the way they speculated along other lines as to what the gentleman wished to see Mark about, but without being able to come to any conclusion. But never suspecting that it could be anything serious they presently allowed the subject to drop.

Turning in at the entrance to the grounds they passed along a drive where one could see the fancy fruit trees of which the owner was so proud.

"Looks like they were picking those splendid peaches, from the way the leaves lie on the ground," remarked Elmer, as he pointed to a couple of trees on which there still remained a few splendidly colored and wonderfully large specimens of the delicious fruit.

"Um! makes a fellow's mouth water just to see 'em," declared Mark. "And there's Bruno chained up to his kennel back by the barns. What a big dog

he is—a Siberian wolf hound the colonel calls him. I don't believe I'd like to meet Bruno on a dark night, and running loose."

"Oh, he isn't a bad kind at all," remarked Elmer. "I've patted him on the head often, of course when the colonel was along. He gets loose once in a while, too, but was never known to attack anybody, though if a thief tried to enter, and he was free at the time, he might jump on him and hold him. That happened once, so the colonel told me, when he lived outside of New York City."

"Well, here we are at the house," observed Mark. "Come along with me, Elmer."

"Think I'd better, when he only wanted to see you?" asked his chum, dubiously.

"Yes, come along," Mark insisted. "I don't know how it is, but I've just got a hunch that I'd like to have you with me. And the colonel is so fond of you he'll be glad you've come."

Thus urged Elmer also jumped from the vehicle.

"Jes' leab dem packages dar, 'case I 'spect tuh drike yuh bofe back tuh town agin arter yuh done seein' de kunnel," said Sam. "An' sense de door am open, p'raps yuh bettah jes' go long tuh de library, whar de kunnel am asittin'!"

"That's the ticket; come along, Elmer."

In this spirit, then, the two boys quickly reached the door of the library, a room which Elmer knew very well, as he had spent many a pleasant evening there. Mark knocked lightly on the door.

"Enter!" said a voice, which they knew belonged to the master of the mansion.

At seeing two lads the colonel's eyebrows went up, and he glanced sharply from one to the other in a questioning way. So Elmer thought it only right that he should explain.

"We were walking home together when Sam gave your message, colonel," he said, "and so I took the liberty of coming with my chum Mark."

The elderly gentleman smiled. Elmer was a favorite of his, and he had taken a great interest in many of the lad's schemes and plans that had to do with the affairs of the troop of Boy Scouts of Hickory Ridge.

"Say nothing more about it, Elmer; I'm always glad to see you"; and yet Elmer noticed to his surprise that the colonel did not offer him his hand as usual.

He asked them to be seated, and all the while his keen eyes seemed to be roving uneasily toward Mark; and several times Elmer saw him shake his head slightly.

For a few minutes they talked of various things. Elmer asked how the monkey was getting on, and the gentleman told them that Diablo had grown so vicious that he had been compelled to send him away to the Central Park collection of animals in New York City.

"I hated to part from the brute very much, too, but it seemed as though all the bad in his nature was coming to the surface, and he lost much of the charm he used to have for me." Then to the surprise of the boys the colonel leaned forward, adding: "Let me take your caps, boys."

"But we can only stay a short time, sir; I promised my mother to be home at eleven, because she wants me to go somewhere with her," Mark said, although he could not very well refuse to let the persistent gentleman take his cap.

Elmer stared when he saw the colonel actually examine the head gear of his chum. Nor was his astonishment at all lessened when he heard what he said.

"Oh, I will not detain you more than five or ten minutes at the most, I promise you, boys. By the way, I see that both of you have the habit of fastening your initials inside your caps. I suppose most boys do that

because they are apt to get their head gear mixed when they wrestle and knock around; isn't that so, Mark?"

"Why, yes, sir, I guess that's the main reason they put the initials there," replied the one addressed, his eyes opening wide with surprise at the peculiar turn given to the conversation by the colonel.

"I suppose, now, you've always done it, Mark?" continued the gentleman, watching the boy's face.

"For several years, yes, sir. I've had as many as five sets of initials in that time. And the habit has saved me a lot of caps, too. If a fellow claims mine, all I have to do is to point at the three initials inside, and he gives up."

"H'm! like this, for instance," remarked the colonel, picking something up from behind a pile of books on his table and holding it out.

It was a fairly well-worn cap, and had evidently belonged to a boy. Elmer immediately sat up and began to take notice. He realized that the colonel must indeed have an object in asking Mark to drop in and see him.

For unless he was very much mistaken Elmer had seen that same cap before, many times, and on the head of his chum!

As for Mark, his eyes had opened very wide as they fastened on the article the gentleman was holding out before him.

"Will you kindly take this cap in your hands, my boy?" said the colonel, and almost mechanically Mark did so, for as yet he could not find his voice to express his mingled feelings.

"Please examine it, now, and tell me if you have ever seen it before," continued the colonel, whose heavy brows were lowered, as though under their shelter he were trying to analyze the emotions that chased each other across the face of the boy.

Mark made a pretense of looking inside and out, but it was not necessary, for the fellow who cannot instantly recognize a cap he has worn for some months must be pretty dense indeed.

"Well?" said the gentleman, with an interrogation point in the one word.

"I know it is mine, sir, because—well, every little mark about it is familiar, even to this little triangular tear. Besides, here are my initials inside—just as they are in this other cap I own—M. A. C., which stand for Mark Anthony Cummings."

The gentleman moved uneasily. It seemed as though he might be both surprised and annoyed because of this frank acceptance of the ownership of the cap.

"You're quite positive there can be no mistake—that some other boy may not have the same initials?" he asked.

"I don't know of a single one, do you, Elmer?" replied Mark, steadily.

"Not that I can recall just now; and besides, Mark, I ought to know that cap as well as you, and I'm ready to declare it's your property. I'm only wondering how it happens to be in the possession of Colonel Hitchins after you lost it," Elmer remarked, watching the face of the gentleman and wondering why he looked so downcast over such a little thing.

"I'm sorry to hear you say it belongs to you, Mark, because you are one of the last boys I'd dream of accusing of such a thing as robbery."

"Robbery!" gasped Mark, his face turning a trifle white with the shock.

"It is just that, for my premises were invaded last night by some bold thieves, who raided my choice peach trees, and almost cleaned them of the prize fruit that I would not have taken its weight in silver for. And I regret to say that this morning I found this self-same cap under those trees, where it would appear it had been accidentally dropped by one of the fruit thieves."

CHAPTER III.

WHEN THE CHALLENGE CAME.

A SILENCE so dense that, as Elmer afterward said, it could almost be felt gripped that library when the colonel made his astonishing declaration.

The two boys stared at each other in dismay. Then Mark once more looked down at the cap he held in his hand, as though he expected it to be given speech in order to indignantly deny the accusation. Twice he opened his mouth to say something, but no sound followed.

"Please remember, Mark, that I am not accusing you of having done this miserable thing," continued the gentleman in a softer tone; "I cannot find it in my heart to believe that you would be guilty of doing an old friend such an unkindness. But I found the cap just where I stated; it bore those initials, and I sent for you to see if you claimed it. And now, could you tell me how it chanced to come there under my prize peach trees that were robbed last night?"

Mark shook his head slowly.

"I'm sure I can't do that, sir, because I don't know," he said.

Elmer opened his mouth to explain under what circumstances the cap had been lost at twilight on the preceding evening, then he thought better of it and held his tongue. It might be as well for the gentleman to conduct the examination after his own fashion. The truth was bound to come out shortly, at any rate.

"Since you admit that the cap is yours, Mark, will you please tell me when you saw it last, for if I am right in judging what Elmer just said, you claim to have lost it?" Colonel Hitchins continued.

"Why, yes, sir, I wore it yesterday afternoon when a party of us went fishing away over to the old hole where the Sunflower runs into the Sweetwater," Mark began.

"Don't I know it as well as any lad," remarked the old gentleman, with a faint smile. "I was brought up here, and came back home after many years' wandering, partly on account of those recollections of my boyhood days. Well, you did your fishing in the afternoon, you say. And if those bass act just the same now as they used to many years ago, they began biting just when you thought of starting back home—how about that, Mark?"

"Just what they did, sir; and we caught nearly all we had, a good string apiece, from that time up to after six. Then we couldn't stay any longer and started home. On the road, when we were about a mile or so away, and just going to leave the little Sunflower stream, Lil Artha got to cutting up with me, and I lost my cap."

"Just so, as I have done many a time in the long ago. That Sunflower River has memories for me I can never forget," declared the colonel, sighing.

"I stopped to hunt for it, sir," Mark continued, "but the evening was on, and there were more or less bushes around. Besides, the fellows were drawing farther away all the time, and I didn't care much for the cap after all. So I began to think it might have just fallen into the river, and I gave it up, chasing after the rest of the bunch."

"Was that the last you thought of the cap?"

"Why, no, sir," Mark went on. "This morning I ran over there on my wheel and gave another hunt, but it was no use. That made me all the more sure it must have gone sailing down the river. And you can imagine my surprise when you hauled it out just now."

"Strange how it came to be under my peach tree, isn't it?" asked Colonel Hitchins.

"Perhaps some fellow found it, sir, and wore it last night," suggested Elmer.

"Ah, I had quite forgotten about you, Elmer," remarked the other. "I suppose, now, you were along with your friend last evening, and knew about him losing his cap?"

"I was, sir, and besides there were three others—Landy Smith, Arthur Stansbury, and Chatz Maxfield. And more than that, colonel, I went over to Mark's house after supper, and we sat up till nearly eleven o'clock, arranging things about our scouts' baseball club; for you see we expect a challenge from Fairfield troop any day now."

The look of distress left the bearded face of the colonel. He thrust out a hand in his customary hearty manner.

"I want you each to shake hands with me," he said; "and Mark, I hope you will not feel badly because with suspicion pointing so strongly toward you, I wanted to ask you a few questions about this cap. As Elmer said, no doubt some boy picked it up and left it under the tree, either accidentally or in the hope of turning suspicion toward you."

"Oh, I hope not that!" said Mark, who could not believe in his heart that any boy in all Hickory Ridge could be so mean and tricky as to want to get one of his schoolmates in trouble.

"No matter, I am now absolutely sure it could not have been you, and I shall not give the matter another thought. I would advise you to forget it also, if you can, my boy," and he laid a hand caressingly on Mark's shoulder.

"I'll certainly try to, sir," returned the boy, looking up with a smile and meeting the eyes of the gentleman squarely, as was always his wont, "but sometimes it's hard to forget things like this. I suppose I'll just bother my head about how my cap got under your tree when I lost it a mile away, up to the end of the chapter. And I reckon it will never be cleared up."

"As your ten minutes are about up, Mark, I won't detain you any longer," said the old traveler, "but promise me that you will come over with Elmer next Saturday night, and look over some of my curios. I like to have boys around me, and there's an interesting story connected with some of the strange things I've rounded up in various unfrequented quarters of this old world. You'll come, won't you, Mark?"

"I sure will, colonel, and be mighty glad of the chance. Shall I take my old cap away with me, or do you want to place it among your curios as an unsolved mystery?" and Mark laughed as he said this.

"I think you had better carry it off, Mark," replied the gentleman. "But unless I am lucky enough to catch the rascals who robbed me of my prize peaches last night, I'm afraid the truth will never be known. What puzzles me most of all is the fact that Bruno was loose last night and never gave the alarm. He must have been off roaming, as he does whenever he manages to slip his collar and chain."

He shook hands with both of them again, and when Mark felt the pressure of the old gentleman's fingers, as well as saw the kindly look on his face, he felt positive that Colonel Hitchins had eradicated all suspicion of his guilt from his mind.

Sam was waiting for them, scolding his restless horses the while. And no sooner did the two boys jump into the carriage before the driver gave the word, and they were being carried out of the grounds in great style.

On the way they met Lil Artha returning home. The tall fellow stared at seeing his two chums seated so delightfully in the elegant carriage which he, of course, recognized as belonging to Colonel Hitchins. He shouted something after them, but Elmer only waved his hand out of the vehicle as they went on.

"How about it, Mark?" he asked; "Lil Artha will never rest until he tries to pump it all out of you. Will you tell him about the cap, and how it was found?"

"Why not?" demanded Mark, instantly. "I haven't anything I want to hide that I know of. And perhaps, if all the fellows learn about it some one may be able to give me a pointer about who could have taken this cap that I lost on the bank of the Sunflower last night, and left it where the colonel found it this morning."

"I see by the way you talk that there's small danger of you not bothering your brain about that mystery," laughed Elmer.

"Well, who wouldn't, just tell me that? I'll never feel easy till I'm able to patch up some sort of an explanation, Elmer. If some fellow picked my cap up, did he leave it there on purpose to get me in trouble, or was it only an accident? That's the point, you see."

"Oh, well, I hope you find out sooner or later," remarked Elmer, who knew from previous experience how such little things worried his chum, and would have liked very well to have influenced Mark to cross it off entirely. "Now, let's talk about other things — that coming great game with Fairfield, for instance, and what chances we have with our poor pitching staff."

"Rats!" cried Mark. "When everyone believes that you're stronger than ever this year, and that break of yours works like a charm. I tell you Fairfield will have her hands full trying to hit some of those Christy Matthewson slow floaters you can waft up to the rubber. They'll nearly break their necks trying, and it's going to be the greatest fun watching 'em."

Talking in this vein they were soon dropped in front of Elmer's home. As Mark lived close by he chose to leave the vehicle at the same time.

"Why, whatever do you suppose my folks would think?" he declared, "if they saw the Cummings hope and heir driving up with a carriage and pair? Not that I don't expect to tell all about this cap racket, for I've always been in the habit of letting my mother know all I do, and many the time she's advised me as no other person could."

Elmer sighed. He had no mother himself, and always envied this chum who was lucky enough to be possessed of such an adviser. And fortunate indeed is the boy who can go to his mother, or father, either, for that matter, to seek advice in some of the puzzling little problems that are apt to arise in the life of a lad.

So the two chums separated for the time being.

"See you this afternoon, then, Mark?" called Elmer, as the other started to hurry away, for it was very near the time he had promised to be home; and one of Mark's strong points was a scrupulous regard for his word, no matter to whom given.

"That's right, Elmer; call for me, and we'll go down for a practice game. Most of the fellows are going to come out, and perhaps we can get a scrub team to bat against us," and waving his hand once more Mark hurried off.

Elmer looked after him. There was the light of a sincere affection in his eyes, as he shook his head while muttering to himself:

"No wonder Colonel Hitchins knew that cap was no indication of guilt, once he looked in the face of my chum. There isn't the faintest streak of double dealing about Mark Cummings, and his face shows it. Even if things looked ten times blacker than they do, and he said he didn't do it, everybody would just have to believe his simple word. I'd sooner take it than lots of people's bond, that's what"; and with this eloquent tribute to the honesty and fair-play qualities of his friend, Elmer turned into his own place.

About two o'clock Elmer dropped in at Mark's home. He always liked being there, for Mrs. Cummings was very fond of the motherless boy and made much of him. Indeed, she never ceased being thankful that Mark had found a chum with such high principles; for while Elmer was a boy all over, full of fun and ready to take a joke with the rest, he had drawn a line for himself, beyond which nothing could ever tempt him to pass.

"Ready?" he asked, upon bursting into Mark's den, where he found the other engaged in some sort of sketching.

He immediately threw everything aside. With the call of the diamond in the air what boy, who loved baseball, could resist or allow any other pursuit to hold him in check?

So together they presently went out, Mark having hastily donned his baseball suit. It was the regulation Hickory Ridge uniform, and had been

carried by the players of the town for years past, long before such a thing as Boy Scouts had ever been thought of.

Possibly the only real mark that distinguished the members of the troop when on the diamond was, first their badge with the significant words: "Be prepared," such as all scouts in good standing are entitled to wear; and second the little totem telling that they were members of the Wolf, the Eagle, or the Beaver Patrol.

Once they reached the field where the games were held they found fully fifty of the town fellows on hand, some tossing the ball, others batting flies for a host of catchers.

It was soon arranged. Among the fellows who did not, for various reasons, belong to the scouts there happened to be some pretty good timber for the several positions on the field. And Johnny Kline was the one to act as captain. Johnny was a good player, but addicted so much to strong slang that he despaired of ever being able to make good in the troop, and kept putting off the day when his application for membership would go in.

"Now we're all ready, Elmer," said Mark, who caught for the regular team.

"Yes, let's get down to business," remarked Lil Artha, who, besides being a cracking good first baseman, was also a field captain.

"Just wait a minute, please," said little Jasper Merriweather, "for here comes Mr. Garrabrant, and he looks like he might be bringing us some great news."

"Hey! bet you that old challenge has arrived!" shouted Red Huggins.

"And you win, hands down, Red," declared the fine-looking young man who gave more or less of his time to the affairs of the troop, on account of the deep interest he had in boys in general, "because you see that is just what I am holding in my hand. So close in and listen while I read it to you!"

"Hurrah! now will you be good, Fairfield?" shouted Lil Artha, waving his cap.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PRACTICE GAME WITH THE SCRUB TEAM.

"I RECEIVED this by special messenger not more than half an hour ago," remarked the scout master of the Hickory Ridge Troop.

"Was it Felix Wagner, the second baseman of Fairfield, who brought it?" asked Lil Artha; "because I saw him on his wheel pass our house just before I came out."

"I believe he did say that was his name," replied Mr. Garrabrant, "though I didn't bother asking him, and might not even have remembered it only for your mentioning the same. Hurry along, Landy, if you want to hear the challenge read."

"Well, I do now, the worst kind, even if I ain't on the regular team," replied the fat boy. "Something might happen to one of our fellows, and then perhaps they'd give me a show. I know I'm a little clumsy, but I'm improving all the time and can run half a mile now without breathing very hard."

"Hold your horses, Landy, and give Mr. Garrabrant a show!" called one.

"Yes, we want to hear about the challenge; we can listen to your talk any old time, Landy. You'll be with us some time yet," added another.

The scout master held up his finger, and instantly every sound ceased. Even the boys present who did not belong to the regular scouts understood that Mr. Garrabrant enforced obedience, and were ready to yield it with the rest. Besides, even if they did not play on the team, they belonged in good old Hickory Ridge, and the interests of the town were dear to their boyish hearts.

"MR. RODERIC GARRABRANT, SCOUT MASTER,

"Boy Scouts Troop of Hickory Ridge.

"We, the newly organized Boy Scouts of Fairfield and Cramertown, having made up a team composed wholly of the members of our organization, do

hereby challenge you to a game of ball on the afternoon of Monday the twentieth of August, to settle the question of championship on the diamond between our different organizations. No one not a scout in good standing to participate in this match game. Please settle this matter at your earliest convenience, and send us a reply, so that the game may be advertised. It will be played at three o'clock upon the neutral field of Basking Ridge, the home nine there having disbanded.

"Signed by the Committee,

"FELIX WAGNER,

"ADRIAN COOK,

"JOHN BASTIAN,

"MATTHEW TUBBS, Chairman."

No sooner had Mr. Garrabrant finished reading this communication than a great uproar broke out. Two dozen tongues wagged at the same time. Everybody seemed to have something to say on the subject, and while most of them applauded the tone of the challenge, there were numerous suggestions in the air.

Again did the scout master hold up his hand.

"Silence!" hissed Lil Artha, with both hands motioning at the same time.

"Mr. Garrabrant says be still, fellows!" called another.

When it was so quiet they could almost have heard a pin drop, the scout master once more addressed the fifty-odd boys around him.

"Please remember," he said, pointedly, "this is a matter that concerns only the Boy Scouts. I expect every other fellow to keep the utmost silence while we talk it over. You are being handsomely treated in being allowed the privilege of staying here and listening to what we have to say. Now, scouts, what is your pleasure about this courteous challenge?"

"I move that it be immediately accepted, and the time be set as Monday next at three in the afternoon, and the game to come off on the Basking Ridge diamond," suggested Mark.

"Second the motion!" followed Lil Artha, quickly.

"Any remarks before the motion is put?" asked Mr. Garrabrant, smiling as he looked at the eager faces by which he was surrounded.

"Are we to take it for granted that the Basking Ridge people would allow us to come over and use their diamond, sir?" asked Elmer.

"That is a point well taken," replied Mr. Garrabrant, "and I will say for the general information that I asked the messenger about that very thing. He assured me that the Fairfield people have the written consent of the owner of the ground at Basking Ridge. And the people of the town are just wild for the game to come off there. They are starved for good baseball, since their club broke up early in the season. So that point is disposed of. Any other question, boys?"

"There is only to be this one game, I understand it, suh?" queried Chatz.

"Only this one game," replied the gentleman.

"And the club that wins will be known as the champion team of the Boy Scouts league in this part of the state—is that it, suh?" the Southern boy went on.

"I so understand it," Mr. Garrabrant answered.

"There isn't anything said about umpires, suh; and we've found in the past that if we want to have a square deal the umpire should never come from either of the towns playing in the game," Chatz declared, positively.

"I took the pains to ask the messenger about that," said Mr. Garrabrant, smiling, "for I realized that half of our trouble in the past has come from having a partisan umpire. But the messenger who carried the challenge said that Home-run Joe Mallon, who belongs to the Tri-State League, is home in Basking Ridge, waiting for a broken arm to heal, and that he'd

gladly do the umpiring. You know he used to be an umpire long before he got to playing ball. So that question is fixed, too. Any more?"

"Question! Question!" shouted a number of the scouts, eagerly.

When the motion, to the effect that the challenge of the Fairfield nine be unanimously accepted, was put, it met with not a single dissenting vote, and Mr. Garrabrant called it settled.

"The committee will go with me immediately following the game to-day, and after we have drafted our answer we'll get it over to Fairfield to-night, if I have to borrow somebody's car to do it," declared the scout master.

Then the cheers broke out in earnest. Every boy in all Hickory Ridge would be circulating the great news before night. Little need there would be to go to any expense in getting out posters when there was such a splendid circulating medium close at hand.

"Now let's start play!" called Chatz, impatient to see whether Elmer would put in that tantalizing slow ball such as always proved such a tempting bait to the ordinary batter, causing him to swipe the air fiercely, besides losing confidence in himself meanwhile.

In a short time the scrub game began. Johnny Kline was on the firing line for the scrub, and he certainly had some speed along with him that day, for he sent them in "scorching hot," as Lil Artha declared.

However, it seemed as though Elmer and his chums just lived on speed, for they nearly every one fattened their average of batted balls that eluded the vigilant fielders.

Of course, with everything favoring the regular team, they soon began to pile up runs, while sensational fielding on their part cut the hard-working scrub team out of several tallies.

After the game had run through seven innings it was called because the hour was getting on toward six.

"And we have a meeting to-night at which the committee will report," said Mr. Garrabrant.

"How does the score stand now?" asked an outsider who had been away most of the time after the fourth inning, and only just returned when they came in off the field.

"Seven to one, in favor of the scouts," some one replied.

"It would have been a shut out only for Ty Collins out in center letting that swift fly pass him, that Johnny Kline made his home run on," replied another.

"All the same it was a hard-fought game, fellows," remarked the genial scout master, who knew the outsiders felt very sore over their inability to hit Elmer, and whose nature it was to soften hard blows for the under dog.

"If it had been any other pitcher we'd have knocked the stuffing out of him, and that's no lie," asserted the captain of the scrub nine, defiantly. "My team had their batting eyes along, but that balloon ball fooled us every time. It's sure the finest ever, and I see poor old Fairfield's finish if ever she gets up against Elmer this year."

"I see you found your old mouse-colored cap again, Mark," remarked Lil Artha. "Glad you went back after it this morning. Was beginning to be afraid you might put in a claim against me for a new lid, because I was the cause of your losing that one."

Several others heard what was said, and, of course, boy-like demanded to know what Lil Artha meant; so he simply said Mark lost his cap while scuffling near the bank of the Sunflower River, while they were on their way home from fishing on the preceding evening at dusk.

Both Mark and Elmer had arranged it between them to keep on the watch and see if anyone appeared to be any ways surprised at Mark wearing the familiar gray cap. But so far as they were able to notice the matter caused only a slight passing ripple, and was then apparently forgotten.

If the party who had found the cap, and later on deliberately left it under the prize peach trees of Colonel Hitchins, in order to get Mark in bad odor with that gentleman, were present, he had the shrewdness to avoid showing any feeling of astonishment that would naturally come to him on seeing the owner of the cap wearing it again, with the utmost indifference.

"Nothing doing, Elmer," whispered Mark to his chum, in rather a disgusted tone, when they found themselves apart from the rest of the homeward-bound players and spectators.

"If you mean with regard to finding out who had your cap, I guess you hit the nail on the head," chuckled the other. "Either the fellow wasn't there, or else he was smart enough to keep a straight face, and take no interest in your old cap."

"Then I don't wear it again, I tell you," remarked the other. "It's pretty punk anyhow, and whoever had it, started to tear the lining out. Just see how it's torn, would you?"

Elmer took the cap and glanced at the badly used interior.

"It is, for a fact," he remarked, as a look of intelligence flashed across his face, only to vanish again. "Looks like it had been through the war. Are you sure the lining wasn't torn that way when you lost it, Mark?"

"Not one bit, I give you my word. But enough of that. The thing haunts me if I happen to wake up in the night. D'ye know I just see before me that one question: 'Who found Mark Cummings's cap?' But never an answer comes, and I keep groping in the dark. Perhaps some day I may happen on the answer, Elmer, or you may, for you're always so smart at solving riddles."

"Perhaps I may, Mark, and if I do you can just bank on it I'll be telling you the first thing," laughed the other.

"Well, I should guess you would," declared Mark.

Then others joined them, and the conversation became general; of course, pretty much all of the talk being in connection with the coming battle with

the strong Fairfield team that had given them so hard a tussle two years ago.

"But we're twice as strong now as then, boys," said Mark. "We didn't have our prize pitcher then, and some of us have improved a heap in that time."

"So has Matt Tubbs and several of his nine," declared Ty Collins, who played center. "They beat the Rochesters early in the season, when the regulars were practicing. Don't you believe for one minute we're going to have a walkover. The Fairfield team's a hustling lot, they tell me, and always working for runs. They're bigger than our men every way."

"They can be as tall as the housetops," chuckled Lil Artha, "and that won't help one bit to meet up against Elmer's benders, or engage that balloon ball he has learned to throw just as good as Christy Mathewson ever did."

"Oh, what rotten stuff!" mocked Elmer, though of course he could not help feeling satisfied with the confidence which his teammates seemed to repose in him.

A short time later they reached the borders of the town, where they divided up in smaller groups, according to where their homes chanced to lie.

"Remember the meeting to-night, boys!" had been the last words of Mr. Garrabrant, and a number who did not belong to the scouts wished they had the nerve to put in an application right away, for they did seem to have such glorious times.

When Elmer parted from his chum, and walked on to his own home, he was nodding and muttering to himself somewhat in this style:

"Yes, perhaps I may have some news for Mark about that blessed old cap before a great while goes by, because I've got my suspicions. But now it's mum as an oyster for me."

CHAPTER V. BETWEEN EARTH AND SKY.

ON the following morning about ten o'clock Elmer was passing along the road a short distance from his house, carrying quite a good-sized package, when he heard his name called from the rear.

Turning around, he discovered the tall, angular form of Lil Artha hurrying after him and making motions as though he wanted to overtake him.

"Hello! were you looking for anyone?" laughed Elmer, as the long-legged chap covered the intervening ground at a great rate and joined him.

"Well, I was just on my way to your house to ask you something when I glimpsed you turning the bend. So I put on a little steam, and here I am," replied the one who was considered by all odds the best walker among the scouts, barring none.

"Why, yes, I'm on my way over to Mr. Bailey's with something he wants, and which my father has just run across. Thought I'd take the short cut through his patch of woods, as it cuts down the distance a third. If you haven't anything else on hand just now, what's to hinder you going along, Lil Artha?"

"Nothing that I can see," replied the party who received the invitation, falling into step at Elmer's side. "And if you feel tired carrying that big package just heave it over to me; I'll spell you."

"Oh, it looks heavier than it really is, but I'll take you at your word if I feel that way. Now, what was it you wanted to see me about?"

It proved that the long-legged first baseman had been doing considerable thinking in connection with the coming game of baseball. He believed he had discovered a way where a few little changes in the batting order and such things would add materially to the strength of the team.

This was a subject very close to Elmer's own heart, and he was ready and willing to talk about it in and out of season.

So the two boys walked along the road debating the matter seriously. Lil Artha had prepared himself to back up his claims with all the shrewdness of a lawyer advancing his ease before a jury, and knowing how enthusiastic the other was when he had a subject in his mind Elmer was very careful not to allow himself to be carried off his feet by such eloquence.

Such a little thing as the arrangement of the batting order has won and lost innumerable games of baseball. Some fellows, once they manage to reach first base, are almost certain to get around, if one or two sure pinch hitters follow. And since Lil Artha knew the peculiarities of the Hickory Ridge fellows much better than Elmer did, because the latter was a comparative newcomer, he was in a position to give advice.

Of course, as field captain, Lil Artha had the right to make changes himself, but he wanted advice from the pitcher, with whom he worked in common for the good of the team.

When they came to the spot where the short cut through the woods began Elmer turned into the path. Lil Artha had insisted on taking over the package that was going to Mr. Bailey, and as the trail was exceedingly narrow in places Elmer was compelled to step ahead.

He kept turning his head as he listened to the arguments advanced by his comrade, and occasionally made a reply.

They were now in the midst of the Bailey woods, known all over the region as the finest and most extensive grove within some miles of town. On this warm August morning it was cool under those big trees, and one of Elmer's reasons for taking the short cut now became apparent, since the dusty road promised a hot walk as well as a much longer one.

Squirrels barked as they played among the branches above; birds whistled, crows flapped their wings and cawed solemnly at being disturbed in their caucus; a timid rabbit darted out of a patch of brush, stopped to observe the intruders, and then bounded away as though not very much

frightened; for this being close season the report of a gun was as yet an unheard thing in Bailey's woods.

All at once Elmer came to a sudden stop, so that Lil Artha, intent on the point he happened to be arguing at the time, almost ran into his comrade.

"What's the matter—stub your toe, or get a bug in your eye?" he asked, as he clutched the package tighter to prevent its dropping to the ground.

"Not a bit of it," replied Elmer; "but what in the world do you suppose that queer sound can be?"

Now that his attention was called to it, Lil Artha also detected the noise which had attracted his chum's notice.

"What d'ye think it could be, now?" he asked, turning a look of wonder on Elmer.

The other shook his head as though puzzled.

"I thought I knew every animal you could find in these woods, and the sound of his grunt or squeal, but that's a new one on me," he remarked.

"I tell you," said Lil Artha, after listening again intently; "it must be a pig, that's what. There, didn't that sound just like a big grunt, and wasn't it followed by a squeal? One of Bailey's hogs had sneaked out of its pen and is rooting around. Perhaps it's got into trouble. We'd better investigate this thing a little, don't you think, Elmer?"

"I think so a heap," replied the young scout leader; "because that last grunt didn't have a piggy sound at all to me, and I give it to you straight."

"Then what do you reckon it was?" demanded Lil Artha, with added interest.

"More like a groan," remarked Elmer, starting on again.

"A groan—you mean a real human groan?" exclaimed the tall boy. "Say, now, that would mean somebody might be hurt over there."

"Then the sooner we find out the better." Elmer answered over his shoulder.

They had little difficulty in tracing the course of the sounds. And the further they advanced to the left of the path the louder the singular combination of sighs, groans, and grunts became.

"I know this place, all right," whispered Lil Artha, presently. "I've been here more'n a few times, Elmer. There's the queerest hill just beyond you ever saw. It's got one face shaved off just like it had been split, and half of it carried away. Us boys call it Echo Cliff. I've been up on it lots of times. Gee, it's sure a jump down to the tree tops below!"

"Yes," Elmer remarked, "I remember hearing about it now, though I've never been up on it. Perhaps some poor fellow has tumbled over the edge, and is lying with broken bones among the trees."

"Ugh, you give me a cold shiver!" Lil Artha said. "But p'raps he didn't fall all the way down, Elmer, because, seems to me those awful sounds come right out of the air up yonder."

"That's just what they do," muttered the other boy, in a puzzled tone; "but come on, and we'll soon find out the worst."

Resolutely he led the way and Lil Artha followed. No matter what dreadful thing might suddenly meet their sight, Elmer would not be deterred now.

"Listen!" whispered Lil Artha, as he gripped the shoulder of his comrade; "he's talking to himself, Elmer. Where under the sun d'ye suppose he can be? It don't stand to reason that he's up on the top of Echo Cliff, because that's farther off."

Elmer gave a chuckle, and when he turned his face around his companion saw that he seemed to be shaking with laughter.

"I think I've got on to it, all right!" said Elmer.

"Well, let me in, won't you?" pleaded Lil Artha. "You look like you wanted to burst out laughing, and just didn't dare. If a human life is in danger I don't see what there is funny about it."

"Tell me first, is there an open place just below this Echo Cliff you talk about?" asked the other, in the same low, cautious voice.

"That's just what there is," Lil Artha replied, readily enough. "Many a time I've dropped chunks of rock down, just to see 'em smash on the ground below."

"That settles it, then; he was trying it out," remarked Elmer, nodding.

"Hey, what d'ye mean?" demanded Lil Artha. "Trying what out? And who d'ye think it is? tell me that, Elmer."

"Come here with me; I believe I see him, all right," remarked the other. "Follow my finger now; notice that thing moving up yonder in that little old tree? Now it kicks like all get out. You'd think a fellow had gone up there to take lessons in swimming. Well, that's him!"

"Who?" demanded the other, imperatively.

"A fellow by the name of Tobias Ellsworth Jones, known among the boys by the more familiar name of just plain Toby," chuckled Elmer.

"Wow, now I'm beginning to get on, Elmer!" exclaimed the tall boy, excitedly.

"You remember Toby is just crazy to fly like the Wrights and all the other bird men who sail through the air in their aeroplanes?"

"Sure he is," commented Lil Artha; "haven't I heard him tell about what wonderful things he was goin' to do some day, to make the name of Jones famous? Say, honest, now, I believe you've hit her right, Elmer. Toby has been trying it out! And that big flapping thing up yonder in the tree top must be his wonderful parachute he's been talking about this long while. Say, I believe the silly must have dropped off Echo Cliff!"

"That's what he did," remarked Elmer, "and instead of lighting in that nice little open place, as he meant to, the wind just carried him into the top of a tree!"

"And he's caught up there right now—caught by his trousers seat mebbe, and kicking to beat the band. I don't wonder he grunts and groans and talks to himself. Now what d'ye think of that for a loon? Why, he might have broken his leg if he had fallen on those stones! What're we going to do about it, Elmer?"

As usual Lil Artha was only too willing to have his companion take the lead in suggesting action. Some boys seem to be just fitted to occupy the position of guide, and their mates soon come to rely on them exclusively. Elmer occupied that position, and so Lil Artha looked to him in this emergency.

"Why, we've got to get him down out of there, that's flat," returned Elmer. "He's our comrade; and scouts must always help their fellows, or anybody else, for that matter, when in distress. Let's move on a little farther and give him the high sign."

All this talking had been carried on in such low tones that the sound of their voices could hardly have reached the ears of the ambitious aviator, who was caught in the tree, fully thirty feet from the ground, unable to break away, and confronted by a nasty drop if he did succeed in separating his garments from the branch that had gripped him.

They could now see that what Elmer had suggested was indeed the truth. A boy was flapping at a great rate, his arms and legs going at the same time, as he tried his best to squirm around so as to get at the seat of the trouble, but apparently without success.

After each tiresome struggle he would give vent to a new series of those queer grunts and sighs, and then do some more talking to himself.

Above him, and just barely caught on the tree top, was a strange affair that had somewhat the appearance of a big umbrella, made out of canvas or

muslin. A number of holes had been punched through the parachute by its descent through the branches, so that taken altogether, the brave would-be aviator and his apparatus seemed just then to be in a state of collapse.

Elmer waited until the squirming had ceased, with one last groan as of despair. Then he gave the signal of the Wolf Patrol, as only one who had actually heard the long-drawn howl of the timber wolf in the darkness of a Canadian Northwest night could imitate it.

Evidently the sound stirred Toby to new life, for his movements began again. He tried to make an answering signal, but the sound was more like the bleat of a lost calf than anything else. However, it answered its purpose, which was to let the comrade below, who had come to the rescue, understand that his presence was known.

"Hello! up there, what are you doing to that tree?" called Lil Artha, who could not keep from trying to extract some fun out of the situation for all its gravity.

"Better ask the tree what it's adoin' to me!" wailed Toby, who had managed to whip himself around so that he could now catch a glimpse of the boys below. "Hey, Elmer, and you, Lil Artha, get me down out of this first and have your fun afterward! I'm as dizzy as an owl in daytime, and if my pants give way I'm going to squash flat! Come up here and grab me, can't you? Tell you all about it later on. What I want now is sympathy and brotherly kindness, don't you see?"

CHAPTER VI.

A QUESTION OF A SCOUT'S DUTY.

"HE'S right," said Elmer, energetically, as he prepared to climb the particular tree that bore such strange fruit. "Toby's hung there so long that all the blood's just going to his head. Come along, Lil Artha; drop that pack and follow me up there. We can rescue him, all right, if we're smart."

They went up among the branches like a couple of monkeys, both being good climbers. And presently they were close to where poor Toby was dangling, watching their movements feverishly. His face was very red, and he did not look very comfortable as he swung there, without any hold above or below.

Lil Artha was immediately reminded of the stirring piece which he had himself recited in school more than once—about the captain's little boy on board a ship in a harbor, who daringly climbed to the very top of the mainmast and stood up on the main truck—"no hold had he above, below; no aid could reach him there!"

In that case the captain had shouted to the boy to jump far out, so that he might strike the water, and they would pick him up, which in the end the little fellow did, and was saved; but the same advice would not apply with regard to poor Toby, for he could not jump no matter how much he wished to, and it was hard ground below and not soft water.

But Elmer sized the situation up as soon as he arrived. He saw that by good luck the branch that held Toby up was a solid one, and would bear considerable weight, so that it was safe to crawl out on it.

"I'll go and get within reach of him," he said, quickly. "You brace yourself, and be ready to pull him in when he drops. And Toby, make a grab for that branch just below when you feel yourself going, understand?"

"Yes," groaned the other, "I guess I can make it all right, Elmer. But say, what you goin' to do now?" as he saw the other taking out his pocket knife,

opening the largest blade, and then gripping the tool between his teeth so that he might have the free use of both hands.

"I've got to cut you loose, you know; don't worry, Toby," replied the other, with such assurance in his steady voice that he unconsciously gave the dangling boy new courage. "We're going to bring you down; only try to help yourself by getting hold of that branch, see?"

"I will, Elmer, you just bet I will!" Toby answered.

A minute later and Elmer was bending down above Toby. He had to brace himself against a sudden shock, for he knew what the result must be, once Toby's weight was cast loose so that the limb could spring back.

"Ready everybody?" Elmer sang out.

"Sure!" answered Lil Artha, taking a new clutch on the garments of Toby, with one of his legs twined about the tree trunk so as to better hold his own when the shock came.

"Ready, Elmer; let her go!" said Toby, weakly but gamely.

Fortunately that knife blade was as keen as a razor. Elmer always made it a point to keep his knife in the best condition possible at all times, and this was one of the occasions where he felt amply repaid for his foresight.

One circular sweep, and the thing was done.

Toby dropped like a plummet. His hands were outstretched and, as he had planned, he gripped the branch just below; but had it depended wholly on Toby's ability to maintain his hold, he must have gone plunging down, banging against the various projections until he finally brought up on the ground, lucky if he escaped broken ribs or collar bone.

But Lil Artha was there like a young Gibraltar. He could not be moved, since his left leg was twined around the tree trunk. So he swung Toby inward and gave him a chance to get his breath, while Elmer was hurrying down to assist.

Between them they managed to right Toby, who was soon panting as he squatted in a friendly fork of the tree.

"Now let's get down to the ground," said Elmer, who did not seem to think that he had done anything very much out of the common in rescuing the ambitious would-be aviator.

"Oh, Elmer, just wait a minute!" exclaimed Toby, entreatingly.

"What ails you now?" demanded Lil Artha. "Can't you get your nerve back yet? Say, we'll give you a hand down, Toby, all right. Just depend on your fellow scouts."

"It ain't that, Lil Artha," declared Toby; "but while you're about it, why won't you make a clean sweep of the thing, a double rescue so to speak?"

"Well, now, did you ever hear the beat of that?" laughed the tall boy. "He wants us to risk our precious lives cutting his old umbrella machine loose above there, so he can just take chances again. That's nervy, all right."

"But Lil Artha," continued the other, persuasively, laying a hand on the sleeve of the tall scout, "don't you see that it's only held slightly? If you could cut that rope, and break that small branch off, I believe the whole outfit would have to fall to the ground. Elmer, ain't that so?"

Of course Elmer was compelled to admit the fact, for the parachute was only lightly held, after its adventurous passage through the tree tops. So Lil Artha, grumbling somewhat, though obliging, proceeded forthwith to climb farther aloft until he could use his knife on the cord that seemed to be helping to retard the downward progress of the parachute.

"Now break that branch, and she's just bound to drop, Lil Artha!" cried Toby, who was keenly alive to the fate of his beloved airship. "There she goes, fellows! What did I tell you? Whoop! Sailed down as soft as a thistle ball! That's the ticket. Bully boy, Lil Artha! I will never forget this of both of you. Some day mebbe I'll have a chance to take you up with me in my balloon!"

"Nixy, never, not me!" declared the tall boy, as he came scrambling down from his elevated perch. "The ground's good enough for this chicken. If I ever dropped from this height, whatever would happen to my bones, tell me that? Now, let's see if you can climb down, Toby."

Toby proved to be all right again, now that he had regained an upright position, and the blood ceased to gather in his head. He made a decent job of it, dropping down the tree. Lil Artha kept close beside him, to guard against any accident, for, as he said, he "didn't want to have his work all for nothing, and let Toby get a broken leg after he had once been safely rescued."

They all arrived on the ground under the tree about the same time. Toby's first thought seemed to be in connection with his beloved parachute, and, of course, he started for the spot where the broken umbrella-like apparatus lay, upside down; as Lil Artha declared, "for all the world like a duck that, being shot in the air, had fallen on its back."

Hardly had the unfortunate Toby taken half a dozen steps away than Lil Artha suddenly burst out into shrieks of laughter that caused the other to whirl around in his tracks and look at him in astonishment.

"What ails you, now, I'd just like to know, Lil Artha?" he demanded. "You sure act like you'd gone bug-house. Say, Elmer, is he crazy, or can it be the reaction set in after his daring feat in grabbing me?"

"Turn around!" yelled Lil Artha. "Let Elmer see the air hole he made. Oh, my! Oh, me! but don't you feel cold? Ain't you afraid of a draught, Toby?"

Toby apparently suddenly began to understand, and as his hand went back of him a grin broke over his face.

"Oh, murder!" he ejaculated, "he cut out the whole seat, and these are my newest trousers, too! Won't I get it, though, when mom sees what's happened? And I don't dare tell her how it was done, because she wouldn't let me keep on studying about aeroplanes and such. Whatever am I going to do now!"

"I'd advise you to get an awning before you show yourself in town," jeered Lil Artha. "If any of the scouts see you, Toby, they'll sure think you're flying a flag of truce. But don't you blame Elmer for your troubles, hear? He did the only thing there was open to him. And if he hadn't happened to have that sharp knife along, you might be hanging up there yet and for some time to come; get that?"

"Sure, and I'm making no kick," replied Toby, with a grimace. "Reckon I pulled out of a bad scrape lucky enough. Wow! Thought at one time my goose was cooked! But it's all right now, it's all right, boys!"

"Yes," sang Lil Artha, "everything is lovely, and the goose hangs high, or he did up to the time his chums happened along and yanked him down. But it was a good thing for you, Toby, Elmer here happened to be sent over to Mr. Bailey's house, and concluded to take the short cut through the woods."

"Well," remarked Toby, philosophically, and boy fashion, "I always heard it was better to be born lucky than rich, and now I believe it."

"Come along, Lil Artha," said Elmer; "we've got business on hand, you remember, and can't waste any more time here. But I hope Toby won't think of trying to drop down from the top of Echo Cliff again."

"Not if he knows it," returned the other, whose face was scratched in several places from contact with twigs during his crash into the tree. "Next time I try out any of my inventions I'll make sure to pick a place where there ain't any plagued trees. Perhaps I might try a jump from the old church tower some fine day. That would make the people of sleepy old Hickory Ridge stare some, hey?"

"I sure think it would," returned Lil Artha, as he stepped off after Elmer; "and your folks in particular. I see you're in for a heap of trouble, Toby, with these fool notions of yours. It'll be a good thing if you get cured before you're killed."

"That's a fact," called out Toby, with one of his grins; "because it wouldn't be much use after that same thing happened, hey?"

Elmer was chuckling as he walked along.

"Never will forget how Toby looked as he kicked, and pawed, and tried to get hold of something," he remarked to his companion.

"Same here, Elmer," replied the other, shaking with merriment.

"But all the same it was a ticklish thing for Toby, and what you might call a close shave," declared Elmer, thoughtfully.

"Whew, I wouldn't like to take the chances of a thirty-foot drop like that, if the branch broke or his trousers tore!" Lil Artha remarked. "And after all Toby ought to be thankful that they were new goods and not rotten stuff."

"Think of his nerve in jumping off that high cliff," said Elmer, shaking his head, as though the idea appalled him. "That fellow is getting too daring. I wouldn't be much surprised if he did try to drop down from the church tower some fine day if this thing isn't nipped in the bud."

"Then perhaps we ought to tell, Elmer?" suggested Lil Artha.

"You mean, let his folks know about the narrow call he had here to-day?"

"Yep. Seems to me it's kind of our duty to inform his dad. Another time, perhaps, Toby won't be just so lucky. And Elmer, if he got smashed or had his legs broken, you and me would feel like we was guilty, ain't that so?"

"I'll think it over, Lil Artha," replied the other. "I hate to tell on a chum, but this is something out of the ordinary. It may mean Toby's life, for all we can tell. And on the whole I think his folks ought to know."

"He won't blab on himself, that's dead sure," remarked the tall scout.

"Sounded like he didn't mean to, for a fact," Elmer continued.

"Tell you what, I'd have given a heap to have been around just then, Elmer."

"You mean when he took the jump? It must have been a bit thrilling for a fellow to deliberately drop off such a high place. But Toby's got the nerve, only sometimes it seems to me he's reckless. And that's a bad thing in anyone who wants to sail around through the air regions."

They went on exchanging opinions, and in due time arrived at the Bailey house, where Elmer delivered his charge to the owner of the big woods.

On the way back they neither saw nor heard anything of Toby, though they could easily imagine him hard at work trying to get his broken parachute in shape, so that it might be transported back to town, and fixed up for another exploit.

It would not be in boy nature to keep such a remarkable story secret, and before night it had likely traveled from one end of Hickory Ridge to the other in about a dozen different shapes. Some even had it that Toby had flown a mile before being caught in a tree, while others had him a wreck, with all the doctors in town trying to patch him up. But Elmer went straight to Mr. Jones, and gave him the true version, so that he might not be alarmed at anything he heard.

CHAPTER VII.

MORE WORK ON THE DIAMOND.

WHEN Lil Artha showed up on the field that afternoon, clad in his old baseball suit that showed the wear and tear of many a battle, he had his camera slung over his shoulder with a strap.

"Want to take the nine in action?" asked Elmer, as he noted this fact, and paused in his delivery of the ball to the catcher, Mark Cummings.

"Oh, I might, if the signs were right, and they showed that they deserved all that sort of attention," replied the tall scout, "but I've made up my mind about one thing, Elmer."

"What might that be?" asked the other, smiling at his friend's seriousness.

"I'm going to carry this little box around with me day and night, that's what. Just the time you want it most you haven't got it along," declared Lil Artha, with a look of sheer disgust.

"Well, I always heard that a fellow could see all sorts of game when he didn't happen to have a gun," laughed Elmer; "and I suppose the same thing goes with a camera. But I can guess what's ailing you now, my boy."

"Of course you can," grinned the other. "Say, just think what it would mean to you and me if we only had a picture of Toby Jones kicking the air up in that old tree, and learning to swim! Wow, no chance of us ever getting the blues while we had that to look at! It would have been the funniest ever. And to think it's all lost to us, just because I was silly enough to leave my box at home. Shucks!"

"Don't suppose Toby would pose it over again, do you?" suggested Larry Billings, who was passing a ball with Matty Eggleston, the leader of the Beaver Patrol, and one of the reliables in the nine.

"Well, hardly," Lil Artha replied. "I reckon Toby got enough of hanging that time to last him right along. Is he here this afternoon?"

"Sure he is, and as chipper as ever. Only grins when anybody tries to josh him about flying. Nothing ever teases that feller. He comes up again after every knockdown, as fresh as a daisy. Says he's going to give the old town a sensation some day before long. And he means it, too," remarked one of the other boys near by.

Elmer and Lil Artha exchanged meaning glances, and presently the latter managed to whisper to his companion of the morning:

"Did you do it, Elmer?"

"I asked my father what I ought to do, and he sent me over to tell Mr. Jones the whole story, because all sorts of yarns were going around, and he said Toby's mother might hear something awful had happened, and be frightened."

"And what did Mr. Jones say?" continued Lil Artha.

"He laughed a little," replied Elmer, then looked serious like. "I rather expect he'll put a crimp in Toby's flying business after this, though up to now he's rather encouraged the boy, thinking it was smart in him. Now he sees the danger. But get out in the field, and throw in a few from first, old fellow."

The scene was an animated one, with boys in uniform and without, banging out high flies, passing balls, and exercising generally. It really seemed as though every one in the town who could get off must be there that afternoon to see how the Hickory Ridge team gave promise of playing when up against the strong Fairfield nine.

Girls had come down in flocks, and not a few men were present, among whom Elmer noticed his old friend, Colonel Hitchins.

This fact caused him to remember something, and the sight of his catcher, Mark Cummings, fitted right in with his thoughts. Apparently Mark had also noticed the presence of the Colonel, for after throwing up his hand as a signal that he had had enough of practice for the time being, he advanced toward Elmer, and was presently speaking in a low tone to him.

"See who's here, Elmer?" he asked.

"Well, I notice a lot of mighty pretty girls for one thing," smiled the other.

"You know I don't mean them, or any particular girl," replied the catcher, who was a singularly modest lad as well as a handsome one. "Over yonder in that bunch—the old colonel!"

"Oh, yes, I noticed him a bit ago," remarked Elmer. "But that isn't surprising. He's always taken a heap of interest in boys' sports, and used to play baseball many years ago, he says, when it was a new game. He told me he was in a nine that played the old Cincinnati Reds the first year they ever had a league. And that was a long time ago, Mark."

"You're right, it was, Elmer; but when I saw the colonel it reminded me that so far I haven't done anything about finding out how that lost cap of mine happened to be picked up under his peach trees, when I dropped it a mile away, over on the bank of the Sunflower."

"I heard that two men had been arrested, charged with stealing those peaches," Elmer remarked.

"Yes, that's so, for they were silly enough to sell the fruit to Phil Dongari, the man who keeps the biggest fruit store in town. Colonel Hitchins could tell his prize peaches anywhere, so he went and bought them back again; and getting a line on the men, had them put in the town cooler, where they are yet."

"Just so, Mark; that's ancient history," smiled Elmer; "but as you say it doesn't do the first thing along the line of explaining how your cap got under those same trees, does it?"

"But, Elmer, I'm relying on you to get a move on and find out something before the trail gets cold," argued Mark.

"That sounds pretty fine, my boy," observed Elmer; "but what makes you believe I can do anything to help out? You've got all the advantages I have."

"That's so," admitted Mark; "only I'm a greenhorn about following a trail, and you know heaps. Besides, something in your manner seems to tell me you've already got a hunch on about this thing."

"Oh, that's the way you look at it, eh?" mocked Elmer.

"Yes, I haven't been going with you all this time not to know how to read your face and actions," replied Mark, boldly. "And it's my honest opinion right now that if you chose you could put your finger on the culprit."

"Thank you for your confidence, my boy; but I'm not quite so dead sure as you make out," returned Elmer.

"But you think you know?" protested Mark.

"I believe I've got a good clew; I admit that, Mark."

"Were you over there again?" demanded the other.

"Now you're referring to where you lost your old cap, I take it?" Elmer said in a noncommittal way.

"That's just what I mean—over on the bank of the Sunflower, where Lil Artha began kidding me, and in consequence my cap fell off. You rode over on your wheel, didn't you, Elmer?"

"Well, yes, I did," the other admitted; "but not like you, to look for the cap, because at the time I went I happened to know it had been found, and you had it at home."

"Then why should you bother going all that way over a rough path? Hold on, let me change that question, because I see why you wanted to look over the ground. Did you find anything there to tell you who picked that cap up?" and Mark looked directly in the face of his chum.

"If I did you needn't expect that I'm going to tell you about it till I'm good and ready," laughed Elmer. "And that will be inside of twenty-four hours, perhaps. This is Saturday, and by Monday night I hope I'll be in a position to show you something interesting. Just bottle up till then, my boy. And

now there's the scrub team going out, so we have lost the toss and must take our first turn at bat."

Mark knew that it would be useless trying to urge his chum to relent. Elmer no doubt had some good reason for holding off longer. So, although he was very anxious to learn the solution of the mystery connected with his cap, Mark put the matter out of his mind for the time being and prepared to play ball.

The game was, as before, hotly contested.

Johnny Kline, as captain of the scrub, bent every energy to beating the regulars, and pitched as he had never done before. But Elmer was also in fine fettle on this bright Saturday afternoon. His speed was better than ever; and when in pinches he floated the ball up in one of those tantalizing drops, he had the heaviest slugger guessing and beating the air in a vain attempt to connect.

The crowd numbered several hundreds, and they were as ready to applaud any clever work on the part of the scrub players as Lil Artha's team. And with such a host of pretty high-school girls present every fellow strove to do his best in order to merit the hand clapping that followed every bit of fine play.

For five innings the score stood at nothing to nothing. Elmer was equal to each and every crisis, and somehow the boys back of him did not seem able to solve the puzzling delivery of Johnny Kline any better than the scrub team did that of the scout pitcher.

In the sixth there came a break. Lil Artha led off with a rousing two bagger, and the next man up, who happened to be Chatz Maxfield, sent him to third with a clever sacrifice, for which he was noted.

Then along came Red, who was equal to the emergency, and whipped out a tremendous fly which the fielder caught handsomely, but tumbled all over himself in so doing; and of course the long-legged first baseman had no difficulty in getting home before the ball could be returned to the

diamond. Indeed, Lil Artha was such a remarkable runner that once he got his base his club counted on a tally three times out of four.

That broke the ice, and in the innings that followed the boys took sweet revenge on Johnny's benders, smashing them to all parts of the field until the spectators were roaring with laughter and a halt had to be called to let the overworked fellow in center come in to get a reviving drink of water.

The result of the game was a score of eleven to two, and neither of these runs for the scrub were earned, but presented to them on errors in the field.

"It looks good to me," remarked Red Huggins, as he and several others of the scouts plodded homeward after the conclusion of the game. "If we can do as clever work on Monday as we did this afternoon, those Fairfield giants won't have a show for their money."

"And that's what we're going to do, just you make your mind up to it," declared Lil Artha. "And to think what a great catch our Toby made when he had to run and jump into the air for that liner. Shows he's all to the good, no matter if he did get such a bounce this morning. We'd miss him if he took a notion to fly away between now and Monday P.M.," and the speaker cast a side glance toward the right fielder, who was limping along, talking over the game with Ty Collins.

"Oh, there are several good fellows just waiting for a chance to break in!" declared Red; "Larry Billings, for instance, who can hit 'em some; Jack Armitage, who is nearly as swift as Lil Artha on the bases; and George Robbins, who knows how to rattle a pitcher to beat the band. I guess we don't need to worry, since we've got plenty of good material handy in case of accidents."

"But Toby isn't going to fail us," asserted Elmer. "He's too good a scout not to know his duty in this crisis. For we've just got to beat that Fairfield crowd this time, or we'll never hear the end of it."

"Don't worry, fellows; if we play like we did to-day we'll have their number, all right. Wait till you see how Elmer teases their heavy batters

with that drop of his! There'll be need of a lot of dope after the game, for the arms that swing nearly out of joint swiping the air. Wow, don't I wish to-morrow was Monday, though!" and Lil Artha gave further emphasis to his wrought-up feelings by a certain gesture that was one of his peculiarities.

"I've heard lots of people say Hickory Ridge never had so fast a nine before," remarked Matty.

"Thspare our blushes, pleath!" laughed Ted Burgoyne, who could never conquer that hissing habit that caused him to lisp, though no one ever heard him admit the fact, which he always vigorously denied.

It was a jolly and well-satisfied party of athletes that journeyed back to town from the field where the game was played. Even the members of the badly beaten scrub could not but feel a certain pride in the work of the regulars, and declared that if the boys could only do as well in the game with Fairfield there need be no fear of the result.

And luckily Sunday would come as a day of rest before the match game at Basking Ridge was to take place.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PUNCTURED TIRE.

IT was Saturday night.

Elmer Chenowith had put in rather a strenuous day, all told, what with that morning walk, the rescue of poor Toby from the tree top, and then nine full innings of warm work pitching during the afternoon hours.

But he fancied he did not feel half so used up as Toby, for instance, after his fall into the branches and vain struggles for release.

It was about eight o'clock when the telephone bell rang, and as he was alone in the library at the time, Elmer answered the call. To his surprise he recognized the voice at the other end of the wire as belonging to Colonel Hitchins, for once heard those smooth, even tones could never be mistaken.

"Is Elmer at home?" asked the gentleman.

"Yes, sir, this is Elmer talking with you," replied the boy, wondering immediately what could be wanted.

"Oh, is that so? How do you feel, Elmer, after your hard afternoon's work? I was much pleased with your pitching, and meant to tell you so, only I found myself called to town by a message from the head of the police; for it seems that by some bad management they let those two rascals slip through their fingers—the fellows who took my fruit, I mean. Are you dead tired, my boy?"

"Oh, not at all, sir. I took a bath as soon as I got home, and feel first-rate right now. Did you want me for anything in particular, colonel?"

"Well, I'm afraid you'll think me as impatient as any boy," laughed the gentleman, "but the fact is, that box I mentioned to you as coming from India has just arrived this evening, and I'm going to unpack it. I had an idea that if you weren't too tired, possibly you might like to jump on your wheel and come over to give me a little help."

"Of course I will, sir, and only too glad!" declared Elmer, for he knew about what that marvelous box was supposed to hold, and fairly itched to be on hand when its contents were exposed.

"But are you sure you are not worn out after that hard game?" persisted the old gentleman.

"Well, I could ride twenty miles without much trouble if I had an object back of it; and I certainly do want to see what you told me was in that box of curios, colonel. My father will be in at any minute now. I'll tell him where I'm going, and I'm sure he won't object, for he likes me to be with you. Then I'll jump on my wheel and run across. I've got a good lantern, you know, and there's a fairly decent road most all the way."

"Good! I shall expect to see you soon, then, Elmer," said the gentleman, who had taken a deep interest in the boy.

"I ought to be there inside of twenty minutes, I expect, sir"; and Elmer cut off communication, because he heard his father's step in the hall.

When he communicated the message of Colonel Hitchins to Mr. Chenowith there was not the slightest objection raised to his going. Well did that father know he could trust his boy anywhere, and at any hour, without feeling anxiety as to what sort of company he was in. And the father who has this confidence in his son is to be envied indeed.

So Elmer got his wheel from the back hall where he usually kept it and, passing out, was quickly on the way. His lantern lighted the road in front of him fairly well, and since he was not apt to meet with many vehicles at this hour he could make pretty good time.

Just as he arrived close to the gate leading into the large property belonging to Colonel Hitchins, he heard the well-known hiss of escaping air that told of a puncture.

"Well, now, wouldn't that just jar you!" he exclaimed in disgust, never dreaming at the time what a tremendous influence that very same incident was destined to have upon his fortunes. "Now I've either got to ask the

colonel to give me a lift home, which I certainly won't do, or else trudge all the way back on foot, trundling my old wheel, for of course I couldn't expect to put a plug in without daylight to work by. Oh, well, it's all in the game. Let it go at that."

In this manner, then, free from care and ready to take the hard with the easy, Elmer pushed his useless machine ahead of him as he walked along the drive leading to the house, far removed from the country road.

As he passed the peach trees that had been shorn of their prize contents Elmer was, of course, reminded of the lost cap; but whatever he thought, he said nothing aloud to indicate that he had solved the mystery.

"There's old Bruno giving tongue," he presently remarked. "What a deep bark he has! Wonder what he would do if he broke loose right now? But he ought to know me well enough. Still, I hope the chain holds him. And here I am at the house."

Once again did he enter and pass along to the library where the colonel spent most of his time when at home. Elmer remembered that the last occasion of his entering that room was when he accompanied Mark there, as the other was responding to the request of the colonel that he would call and see him.

"Glad to see you, Elmer; and this is nice of you, humoring a cranky old fellow like me when you deserved your rest to-night," was the way the gentleman met him as he entered.

"I rather guess, sir, that I'm the one to feel grateful, because of your letting me be with you when you open that big box"; and he eyed the case with the foreign markings, knowing that it held many almost priceless objects, which the other had secured when last in India and left there until he chose to send for them.

A servant came in with a pitcher of iced grape juice and some cake.

"Before we get to work, suppose we sample this, my son," remarked the gentleman, smilingly; for Colonel Hitchins knew boys from the ground up, even though he had never had any of his own.

A little later the lid of the case, which had been loosened previously by one of the servants probably, was lifted off, and the colonel began to take out the costly little articles that were so snugly packed in nests of paper and cloth.

These he placed upon the table as he brought them forth. They were of ebony, copper, brass, and ivory. Elmer had never before looked upon such a queer assortment of curios. And the best of it was that nearly every one represented some sort of adventure in which the present owner had taken part.

He related the story of each as he placed it there on the table and fingered it, while allowing memory to once more recall the lively incidents.

Elmer never passed a more enjoyable evening in all his life. Why, it seemed to him that Colonel Hitchins must be one of those wonderful story-tellers he had read about in the Arabian Nights Entertainment. And yet, strange though many of these narratives might be, he knew they were absolutely true, which made them seem all the more remarkable.

So deeply interested had the boy become that he hardly noted the flight of time. When a clock struck eleven he drew a long breath.

"I'm afraid I must be going, sir," he said, rising regretfully. "I promised my father not to stay longer than eleven, but I was surprised when I counted the cuckoo notes, for I thought it was only ten o'clock!"

"Thank you, Elmer," said the other, as though greatly pleased. "That was as delicate and yet positive a compliment for my powers of entertainment as I have ever received. I will not try to detain you, because I appreciate the confidence your father puts in you. Give him my best regards. I expect to have him over next week with a couple of other friends, for a hand of whist, and they will then see what you have helped me unpack to-night."

True to his resolve, Elmer had not mentioned the fact that his tire being flat, he would either have to push his wheel all the way home or leave it there and come on Monday, when in daylight he could render it serviceable again. For he knew the genial colonel would insist on getting the colored driver out, have him hitch up the horses, and take his guest home; something Elmer did not care to have happen.

Having shaken hands with the old gentleman again, Elmer made his way to the front door and passed out. By this time he knew more or less about the arrangements of both house and grounds, and when the idea came to stow his wheel away until he chose to return for it, he remembered that there was an outhouse where some garden tools were kept, just around the main building.

"I guess I'll see if it's unfastened, and if so I'll leave my old wheel there. It'll be safe in case of rain, too. Wonder if Bruno will act half crazy when he hears me moving around."

While thinking after this strain, Elmer was softly trundling his wheel around to that side of the mansion where he remembered seeing the tool house he spoke of. Not wishing to make any noise that might excite the chained hound, or be heard in the house, he kept to the turf as he walked.

"Now that's queer," he said to himself, as he stopped to listen. "Just when I expected to hear Bruno carry on wild, he's as still as a clam. And yet a while ago he was barking fiercely, too. Must have tired himself out and gone to sleep; or else he's broken loose again, and is taking a run over the country, as the colonel says he always does when he slips his collar."

However, he was not at all sorry for this silence. Had the hound, hearing his suspicious and stealthy movements, started to baying and yelping, he might have drawn the attention of some servant, who would be apt to give him trouble.

And so Elmer presently discovered some dark object looming up alongside him; which on closer inspection proved to be the very tool house of which he was in search.

And better still, the door turned out to be unfastened by any lock, a staple and a wooden pin doing the holding act.

Groping around until he found a way to open the door, Elmer carefully pushed his useless wheel inside. Then he quietly closed the door again.

"I suppose somebody will be surprised to find a bicycle inside of a tool house," he chuckled, as he began to fasten the door again just as he had found it; "but if the fact is brought to the colonel's attention, trust him for understanding how it got there, and why."

Turning once more, he started to retrace his steps, intending to pass around the house and out at the gate that lay some distance away. A mile was not so very far to go, even for a tired boy. And as he had said, that cold bath had worked wonders for his muscles.

Elmer had gone possibly one half of the distance to the gate, when he believed he detected something moving ahead of him. The first thought that flashed across his mind was that it must be Bruno, who was in the act of returning home after a little run about the country.

He hoped the big dog would recognize him as a friend before attempting to jump at him; for Elmer knew that Siberian wolf hounds are not the easiest animals in the world to handle when met in the dark.

So the boy prepared to speak, in the hope that Bruno would recognize his voice. Better after all to arouse the house, than have the dog attack him under the impression that he was a thief.

Again he detected that movement as he stood perfectly still alongside the bush. This time, however, it struck him that it did not seem so much like a dog; and while he was trying to figure this out, another sound came faintly to his ears. Whispers! That meant human beings, and at least two, or they would not be exchanging remarks!

Could it be any of the servants belonging to the house? Their actions would not warrant such an idea, for Elmer could now see that the two dusky figures were creeping along, bending low, and behaving in the most suspicious manner possible.

A sudden thought struck him so forcibly that it sent a shiver through his whole body. What was that the colonel had said over the wire about the two men whom he had had arrested on a charge of stealing his prize fruit, getting away from the poorly guarded lock up in town?

Could it be possible that these shadowy figures were those same rascals; and had they come to the home of Colonel Hitchins, determined after their lawless way, to get even with him for having caused them to suffer a short time in the jail?

Elmer could feel his heart beating like mad as he watched them drawing nearer and nearer.

CHAPTER IX.

FAITHFUL TO HIS FRIEND.

NOW they had stopped again, and seemed to be conferring in whispers. If Elmer had had the least doubt before concerning their evil intentions, it was no longer in evidence. Honest men do not creep around the house of a rich man at such an hour of the night, and put their heads close together.

He flattened himself out on the ground, having dropped like a stone, though without the least noise.

"How lucky that I happened to come along this way!" was the thought that seemed uppermost in the mind of the scout as he crouched there, waiting. "If my wheel had stayed all right I would have been far away right now, and never known a thing about this. And it was that tool house that made me go around to the back."

He even grew bolder, and began to speculate as to how he might creep closer to the pair. If he could only overhear what they were saying, it might help more than a little. And, somehow, his desire to be of some assistance to his good friend the colonel, urged him to make the attempt.

To an ordinary lad it might have seemed an impossible task, for in his clumsiness he must certainly have made some sort of sounds calculated to arouse the suspicions of the men.

Elmer's experiences in the Canadian Northwest had proven of great value to him ever since he joined the Boy Scouts. And when he started to creep forward, it was with some of the stealth of the cat gliding toward a coveted dinner in the shape of a feeding sparrow.

As he covered several yards of territory, Elmer noticed that he quickly began to catch the sound of conversation. The men were talking low, but one of them had a harsh voice, and while this had come to Elmer at first as an indistinct murmur, presently he began to catch distinct words.

Having attained a place behind another bush, where he could have tossed a pebble and touched the two fellows, had he been of a mind, he strained his ears to catch the tenor of their earnest talk.

The man with the husky voice seemed to be scolding his companion, and accusing him of being either timid or over-particular.

"But ye was jest as dead set on doin' it as I was, Con Stebbins; an' now that we got the chanct ye show signs o' the white feather. Brace up, an' lets git busy!" he was growling.

"Aw! what's eatin' ye, Phil?" the other remarked, with a whine. "I'd like tuh do the job jest as much as yerself; but what if we got ketched? It'd mean a long time in the pen, Phil."

"I tell you we ain't agoin' to be caught," declared the heavier of the two, in an angry tone. "Ain't I aknowin' the ropes here; didn't I uster work for the kunnel as a gardener? That's what made me so crazy mad when he had me locked up, jest because we went and took some o' his ole peaches, an' sold 'em so's to get the hard stuff."

"But how d'ye know the dorg ain't goin' tuh git back an' tackle us while we're adoin' the job?" demanded the whining Con.

"Didn't I tell ye that Bruno knows me, an' that when I kim hyar an hour back I let him loose?" declared the heavy-set man, warmly.

"But he might come back any ole time," protested the other.

"He ain't goin' tuh," declared Phil. "I orter know his ways right well. Every time he breaks loose he stays away the hull blessed night. It's a picnic fur the dorg. Reckon he's got some friends he visits, an' has a few scraps. Jest ye forgit there is sech a thing as a dorg, and leave it tuh me to fix the game like we wants it."

"Huh! ye sed as how ye knowed jest how the game cud be worked, didn't ye, Phil?" went on the taller man, nervously.

"Sure I did. All ye got tuh do is to foller me. I'm willin' tuh take the lead. Yuh sed as how yuh had matches along, didn't yuh, Con?"

"Plenty of 'em, Phil," mumbled the other.

"That's good. All yuh has tuh do is to strike a match, and then drop it! I wants tuh make sure both of us has a hand in it, that's all. Now, are yuh ready to move along, Con?" asked the shorter scoundrel.

The other seemed to want to take one more nervous look around before consenting. Undoubtedly his nerve had failed him in the critical test, and he was now being actually dragged into the thing by his more determined and vindictive partner.

Elmer had been thrilled by what he heard. When he caught the significant word "matches" the terrible truth flashed upon him, and he realized that these rascals, bent on revenge on the colonel because of their recent arrest, meant to set fire to either the stables or the mansion itself.

In either event it was a dreadful thing. No wonder the boy grew cold, and then hot alternately. But he did not flinch. Elmer was made of good stuff, and such an emergency as this called it out.

He shut his teeth so hard together that he could hear the gritting sound, and so excited was he at the moment, that he wondered whether either of the men could have sharp enough hearing to have detected the noise which to his aroused fancy appeared like the creaking of a seldom-used door.

But they gave no sign of any suspicion. Con seemed to have recovered a little of his lost grit, and was allowing the ex-employee of Colonel Hitchins to draw him along again. They made progress slowly, stealthily keeping in the densest shadows, and at times almost creeping on their knees.

"What shall I do?"

That was the thought that flashed through the mind of the boy as he watched the pair of intended incendiaries moving off. He could shout, and

thus arouse the house; or after they had gone it was within his power to hasten back to the door, and demand admittance.

Doubtless the colonel would still be in his library, for he seldom retired before midnight, Elmer knew. And once he found a chance to communicate the terrible news to the owner of the place, prompt means could easily be taken for preventing the incendiary fire.

Then, while he was trying to decide which of these courses might prove best, a sudden inspiration assailed the boy. It was, of course, born of his former experiences among the "men who do things" on the broad plains. Another lad would never have dreamed of such a bold course; or even had it appealed to him, he must have quickly decided against undertaking so hazardous an attempt to balk the wicked designs of these rascals.

But to Elmer it appealed irresistibly. He believed he could do it, given half a chance. And, unable to resist the temptation, he began to creep after the two shadowy figures, now almost beyond range of his vision.

He noticed that they were passing around the house. This would indicate that they expected making their attack from the rear. Phil had worked on these grounds, and apparently knew every foot of the estate. Possibly he may, as he said, have been a gardener to Colonel Hitchins; Elmer faintly remembered some man of about his squat figure, whom he had seen trimming hedges, and working among the flowers early in the spring.

All at once the boy had a new thrill. They were certainly headed straight for the very tool house where he had left his wheel! Doubtless there must be some particular object in this action on the part of Phil. Did he wish to secure some sort of tool to be used in furthering his evil designs?

"Oh!"

This exclamation was forced from Elmer's lips when he suddenly remembered something; but fortunately it was hushed to a whisper.

"That was kerosene I smelled when I was putting my wheel away," he said to himself. "Perhaps there is a barrel of it kept in that place for use about

the house, or making an emulsion to kill insects on the trees and rose bushes! And Phil knows all about it if he used to be the gardener here. He also knows that the door of the tool house is never locked, but just fastened by a staple, a hasp, and that big nail held by a cord."

If, as seemed probable, the two men were bent on starting a fire that would, according to their evil way of thinking, pay the colonel back for their recent arrest, one of the first agencies for making a fierce blaze that Phil would be apt to think of must be that kerosene. It seems to appeal to every rogue who means to become an incendiary.

Elmer did not halt his footsteps. The terrible truth had thrilled, but not dismayed him. He was, in fact, more determined than ever to balk these villains in their intended work; though just why he kept on after them, when by rights he should have made direct for the front door of the house, Elmer was never able to explain to his own satisfaction. Some subtle power seemed to just pull him along as though he were being drawn by a powerful magnet which he could not successfully resist.

Yes, there could not be the slightest doubt now but that his guess was the true one; for just ahead he could see looming up the dark outlines of a building which he knew full well must be the tool house.

Again the men were whispering together, and the harsher tones of Phil seemed to breathe threatenings of some sort. Evidently the more timid Con was weakening once more, and had to be pulled on. His desire for revenge was doubtless quite as strong as that of his companion; but he lacked the bull-dog courage to put his evil designs into execution.

"Oh! if they would only both go inside that tool house!" Elmer was saying to himself exultantly, as a wonderful possibility flashed before his mind.

Phil evidently wanted to fully incriminate his companion. It was his desire to make the weaker rascal appear equally guilty with himself. His expressed intention of having the taller fellow strike the match that was to start things going, was ample proof of this.

Would he himself enter the tool house to secure the kerosene? That would leave the timid one outside; and possibly he might seize upon such a golden opportunity to flee.

If Phil suspected him of harboring such an intention, then it was hardly likely that he would allow the other a chance to remain alone. On the contrary, his plan would be to insist upon Con accompanying him in. And that was just what Elmer was hoping would occur; for he had a little plan of his own, which had come into his active mind almost like an inspiration, and which he would then be able to put into practice.

Now they were at the door of the tool house. Elmer was trying to remember just what it looked like. It had a small window, to be sure, but, unless he was mistaken, this had been protected by several stout iron bars, apparently with a view of preventing thieves from entering at some time in the past, when valuable things may have been kept there by the gentleman owning the estate before its purchase by the present occupant.

Yes, Elmer decided in his mind, it was worth a trial. At the worst a failure might only mean the escape of the rascals; and their vicious plot would have been frustrated at least.

He crept closer, still snaking his way along the ground in a fashion that some of his former cowboy friends on the ranch farm three thousand miles away might have recognized as familiar, since they had taught him how to do it.

Con was trying to beg off about entering the tool house, but Phil had overruled his scruples, meeting every objection that was raised.

"Yuh jest got tuh do it, I tell yuh, Con," he finished, angrily. "The thing's in our hands right now, an' yuh promised tuh stick by me. So quit yer hangin' back, an' come along in. I know jest where tuh lay hands on the five-gallon can, an' we kin be out agin in a jiffy. Yuh ain't skeered, be yuh, Con?"

"Aw! course I ain't," whimpered the other, trying to steady his quivering voice, and probably bracing himself up under this accusation which stirred his last drop of courage into life. "Lead off, Phil, an' I'm with ye."

"I'm agoin' tuh make dead sure o' that, Con; that's why I got this grip on your arm. Come right along, the door's open, and nawthin' tuh hinder, see!"

The two shadows passed from Elmer's range of vision. Instantly the boy arose, and darted silently forward. A dozen, yes hardly more than half as many steps, carried him to the tool house. Then, quick as a flash, he prepared to close the heavy door, and fasten it with what means were at hand!

CHAPTER X. GIVING HIM ANOTHER CHANCE.

"HEY! what was that, Con!" Elmer heard the shorter man say, inside the place.

"Oh, we're found out! It's all over, Phil!" gasped the other fellow, in a sudden panic.

"Shut up, yuh fool! Reckon as how 'twar only the night wind. Here's the can; take hold and we'll kerry her out! I jest gotter do it, now!"

That was enough for the boy outside. He understood that they must be at the farther end of the little house, and evidently bending over the object of their solicitude. His chance had come!

Elmer had already taken hold of the door, and laid out his plan of campaign. He expected every act to dovetail with the others, so as to form a complete whole. And not more than two seconds must elapse after he once started to move, before he finished his work.

Slam went the door shut. A low cry from within told how the nervous Con had given expression to his alarm. Utterly regardless of consequences, now that he had made a start, Elmer slapped the hasp over the stout staple, and then feeling for the hanging nail proceeded to drop it into its place.

Things worked like a charm. The nail was shot into place in even less time than Elmer had anticipated. He only hoped that the staples at either end of the hasp were clinched. Then, if the imprisoned men threw their weight against the door, it was not so apt to give.

Elmer did not wait to hear what happened after he had shot his bolt. He expected a great commotion would begin immediately, and the determined Phil start to using any tool upon which his groping hands might alight in the endeavor to batter his way to freedom.

"Now for the house and the colonel!" was what Elmer thought, as, turning, he made a bee line for the front door, out of which he had passed not more than fifteen minutes before.

The first thing he knew he was pounding at the panel, after having pressed the electric button. On either side of the door were long panes of stained glass; and while the boy could not have recognized anyone coming in answer to his summons, he did discover that there was a light within the broad hall. This would tend to prove that the colonel could not have gone up to his room.

Yes, now he could see some one issue from the library, and advance toward the door. Oh, if he would only hurry! From the direction of the tool house came sounds of heavy pounding. Doubtless the imprisoned rascals, fearing that they had been caught in a trap, were trying to smash their way out. What if they should strike a light, and that oil catch on fire! Perhaps there was gasoline stored in the place as well as kerosene!

Now the colonel was unlocking the door. It was something unusual to have such a loud summons beaten upon the panels of his front door; but while some men might have shown signs of timidity, this old traveler, seasoned to adventure, was opening up without the first symptom of alarm.

As the door flew open he looked keenly at the figure before him.

"What, you, Elmer, my boy!" he exclaimed. "Why, what has happened? I hope you did not take a nasty header off your wheel?"

"No, no, sir, it wasn't that!" cried the scout, hardly knowing what to say first, so as to impress the gentleman with the seriousness of the occasion. "Some men—they mean to burn your house—the two who escaped from the lock-up, Phil Lally and Con!"

"What's that?" exclaimed the colonel, stiffening up instantly and showing all the signs that mark the conduct of an old war horse at scenting battle smoke. "How do you know this, my boy?"

"I heard them talking—my wheel was punctured, and I put it in the tool house. Then I followed them. They were going to get kerosene to use. They stepped into the tool house, and I slammed the door shut on them, and fastened it! Listen, sir, that pounding you hear is them trying to get out!"

"Well, well, did I ever!" ejaculated the astonished gentleman. "Wait here just a minute till I can get something."

He turned and ran into his library as though he were nearer thirty years of age than seventy. In the excitement of the moment he had forgotten that time had silvered his head and given him twitches of rheumatism. The colonel was young again, and ready to respond to the call of duty.

Elmer listened. He could hear that terrible pounding keeping up from the back of the house, and understood what it meant. Oh, how he hoped that in the darkness Phil could not see to wield his ax effectively, and might thus fail to cut a way out! For it seemed as though part of the victory would be lost if those two rascals secured their freedom.

Perhaps the colonel was gone a full minute. It seemed ten to the waiting boy, who was wrongly figuring time by the rapid pulsations of his heart.

Then he became aware of the fact that once more the gentleman had joined him, and that he was busily engaged pushing some cartridges into a shotgun he carried.

"Here, Elmer, take this!" he exclaimed, thrusting the weapon into the hands of the scout. "I know you are used to handling firearms, or I wouldn't ask you to do it. Now, come with me, please, and we'll see if we can't influence those two fire-makers to be good!"

Down the steps he ran, so that Elmer was even put to it to keep at his heels. At least the prisoners of the tool house could not have as yet managed to effect their escape, for the battering sounds still continued, accompanied by loud excited cries.

Quickly the two hurried along, until they arrived on the scene of action.

"Look, sir, there's another of them coming!" cried Elmer, pointing to a skulking figure among the bushes, indistinctly seen.

"Here, you, come out of that; we've got you covered, and you can't escape!" exclaimed the colonel, who was gripping something that shone like steel in his right hand, and which Elmer guessed must be a pistol of some sort.

"Don't shoot, kunnel!" cried a quivering voice; "'deed, an' I surrenders, suh! I reckon I's pow'ful glad yuh kim. I's Sam, suh, yuh man Sam! Please don' pull de triggah ob dat gun, Mars Kunnel!"

It was the coachman who had driven Elmer and Mark on the occasion of the latter's being summoned to an interview with the old traveler.

"Here, go and get a lantern at once, Sam, and run for all you're worth!" called the old gentleman. "Meanwhile, the rest of us will surround the tool house, and be ready to give them a volley if they succeed in breaking out!"

Sam had already turned and hurried away toward the stables, where he must have been sitting in his room at the time the row broke out, that drew him toward the scene of the disturbance.

Of course, the last remark of the colonel's had been made with the intention of its being overheard by the men who were fastened inside the outhouse. The sounds of pounding had suddenly ceased as the colored man started to answer the command of the colonel, and those within could easily hear every word uttered.

A silence followed that was only broken by low groans within. Doubtless the more timid rascal was repenting of having been led into this dangerous game of seeking revenge. The dreadful penalty meted out to house burners loomed up before his horrified eyes. The only pity was that he had not allowed himself to see this earlier, and resisted temptation.

"Hello!"

That was Phil calling. His heavy voice seemed to express all the signs of acknowledged defeat. Elmer waited to see what the colonel would do, nor was he kept long in suspense.

"This time you're caught in a trap like a rat, Phil Lally," remarked the old gentleman. "I'm sorry for you, more than sorry for your poor old mother; but since you took to drink this was bound to be your end. It came quicker than I thought, I admit, but you've got nobody to blame save yourself."

An intense silence followed, broken only by occasional low whines from the weaker rascal. Then Phil called out again.

"Well, I reckon yuh speaks only the truth, kunnel. I allers had a job up tuh the time I took tuh drinkin'. Sense then hard luck has follered clost tuh my heels. An' now I sure knows it's got me. I'd like one more chanct tuh try an' do better; but I reckon it's too late, an' I'll have tuh grin an' bear it."

Elmer heard him give a big sigh. Somehow the sound affected the boy more than he would have believed possible. He had supposed that Phil must be just naturally a bad man, wicked all the way through. Now he realized that it all came through his one weakness, a love for strong drink.

The colonel moved up a step closer to the door. Elmer wondered whether he meant to throw open the barrier and hold the two scoundrels up as they came forth. But he mistook the action of the old gentleman.

"Phil!" he said, quietly.

"Yes, sir," answered the gruff tones from within, but no longer filled with a savage brutality, for Elmer could detect a quaver as of strong emotion. Perhaps it may have been the mention of that old mother whose heart would be broken when her boy was sent to prison for a long term. And somehow Elmer found himself hanging on the next words of the gentleman with an eagerness which he could hardly understand—for it seemed to him that a human soul was trembling in the balance.

"Listen to me, Phil," continued the colonel. "What if I gave you one more chance to make good; do you think you could keep your pledge, if you

gave it to me, never to take a single drop again as long as you live? Are you strong enough to do this for the sake of that old mother of yours?"

There was an inarticulate sound from within. It might have been Phil talking to himself; but Elmer was more inclined to believe something else—that the strong man was almost overwhelmed by the magnanimity of the gentleman whom he had once served, and whose kindness of the past he had returned so meanly.

"How about it, Phil?" continued the colonel. "Shall I 'phone in to town and have the police come out here to take you into custody, or are you ready to put your signature to a pledge for me to hold?"

"I'll do it, kunnel, I'll do it, and thank yuh a thousand times for the chanct!" broke out the man. "Oh, what a crazy fool I was to go agin the best friend I ever had! I'll sign anything yuh arks me tuh, an' I'll keep it, too, or die atryin'!"

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Phil," went on the colonel, with a low laugh. "You were a good gardener up to the time you began to booze and neglect your work. My new man proved a failure, and I've let him go. The job's open, Phil!"

"For me?" cried the man, as though utterly unable to believe his ears. "D'ye mean, kunnel, yu'd dar take me back agin, arter the way I been actin'?"

"Oh, we'll try and forget all that, Phil. It wasn't you, but the devil you took inside, that made you act that way. And since you're never going to give way to the tempter again I guess I'll risk the chances."

He raised his hand and removed the big nail, just as Sam came running up, bearing a lighted lantern in his ebony grip. As the door opened a figure issued forth. It was the short man, and his head was bowed on his chest, which seemed to be heaving convulsively, either because of his recent exertions with the ax, or through some emotion.

"Is that straight, kunnel, an' do yuh mean to fergive me?" he asked, humbly, as he stood there before the old gentleman.

"For the sake of your old mother, yes, I'm going to give you another chance, Phil. And let's hope you can make good. I'm not one bit afraid, if only you stick to your word. And to prove it, here's my hand!"

The man seized it eagerly. He was shaking with emotion now, and somehow Elmer felt his own eyes grow moist; for he realized that he was looking on one of the tragedies of life right then and there; and the thought that he had had a hand in bringing this finish about, and making the repentance of Phil possible, thrilled the Boy Scout strangely.

No one paid any attention to the skulking figure that slipped out from the open door of the tool house, and ran hastily off. Of course it was Phil's confederate, the timid Con Stebbins, who, seeing an opening for escape, had hastened to avail himself of it.

CHAPTER XI.

READY FOR THE BATTLE OF THE BATS.

"GOOD NIGHT again, colonel," said Elmer, thinking to start for home once more.

"Ah, are you there, my boy?" said the old gentleman, turning around. "Well, perhaps you wouldn't mind waiting over a little, and acting as witness at a little business ceremony that Phil and myself want to carry through?"

"Certainly not, sir," replied the boy; "only I was thinking that, since my wheel is out of the running, I will be very late in getting home, and I promised father to leave at eleven, you know."

"Oh, that's easily fixed, Elmer! I'll just call him on the phone, if you think he's up still, and explain matters. And Sam here, will hitch up the team, and take you home presently. Now, please don't object, for you know I like to have my way. Both of you come with me into the house."

Once in the library, Elmer saw that the man Phil was not such a desperate looking scoundrel as he had imagined from hearing him mutter and threaten. Indeed, he had a very decent face, which was now red with the confusion and shame that overwhelmed him because of his recent miserable action.

Readily he put his signature to a paper the gentleman wrote out, and Elmer signed his name as a witness. He knew that it all depended upon the ability of the repentant man to make good. If he could show himself worthy of trust, his future was safe in the hands of that fine old gentleman.

"I'll never forget this, kunnel," he said, brokenly, as he stood there and looked his employer in the face firmly. "You're goin' tuh make a man uh me. I don't deserve it a bit, either; for if I got what I deserved — —"

"There, that will do, Phil," interrupted the colonel. "If we all got what we deserved there'd be few of us walking down the street to-morrow, I'm

afraid. But, see here, don't you think you owe some thanks to this bright young chap for what happened? If he hadn't just happened to overhear you talking to your friend, and crept after you, to shut you in the tool house, possibly you might have found a chance to carry out your harebrained scheme, and then there could be no turning back. In my mind you owe a great deal to Elmer Chenowith here."

"I jest reckons I do, sir. It was mighty plucky for him tuh foller us, and tuh do that clever trick. I'd like to shake hands with the boy, and thank him, if so be he's your friend, kunnel," said the former gardener.

The old gentleman had before this succeeded in catching Mr. Chenowith over the wire, and assured him that circumstances had arisen to keep Elmer beyond the time he had promised; but that he would send him home presently in his vehicle.

"And you've reason to be proud of that lad of yours, Chenowith," he had added. "To-morrow I hope to see you, and tell you something that's happened here, in which he bore a part manfully. Good night, now!"

He chuckled as he turned away from the phone, knowing that Elmer's father would now be eager to ask questions when the boy reached home.

As the carriage lights could be seen just below on the drive showing that Sam had hitched up as he was ordered, and there was really no cause for further delay, Elmer shook hands with the colonel again and went out.

"I'll be after my wheel on Monday morning, sir," he said at parting; "when I can see to put a plug in that tire. I hope Phil didn't smash the whole thing when he got working with that ax."

"If he did I'll see that you have a new wheel, my boy; and, indeed, I think that I'm deeply in your debt as it is," replied the gentleman, smiling. "Just think what a big difference it would have made, to myself and Phil Lally here, if you hadn't had that puncture. I'm not the man to forget, Elmer. Good night, and God bless you!"

As Elmer lay back in the comfortable carriage, and was drawn homeward by the spirited bays, he chuckled more than once at the idea of a healthy lad like himself being thus treated, as though he were an invalid.

"Only that the colonel seemed determined, and he does not like anyone to oppose him, I sure would have declined this lift," he said to himself.

But on the whole, he could not say that he would have had anything different from the way events had come to pass, even though he had the making of the chart. And he was inclined to agree with the colonel in declaring that if any misfortune could ever be looked upon in the light of a lucky accident, that puncture which he had given his tire just as he reached the place he was heading for was such.

When he arrived home he found his father waiting for him. And since the gentleman's curiosity had been stirred by those words of the colonel, he was bent on asking questions until he learned the whole facts.

Elmer was not a boaster, and he made no attempt to show himself up in the light of a hero. But reading between the lines of his story, his father saw that there might be still more to hear when he met the colonel in the morning, as he was now fully determined to do.

Perhaps, after such an exciting experience, the boy did not sleep as soundly as he might have done under ordinary conditions. But the event had made a powerful impression on his mind, and the generous conduct of his old friend toward his erring servant had served to teach Elmer one more lesson that might at some future day bring forth good fruit.

He did not mention the matter save to his best chum, Mark; and even he was placed under bonds never to reveal it. The colonel had asked this as a favor, for he did not want the story to get to the ears of Phil Lally's old mother.

Of course, it would soon be known that he had taken Phil back again as his head gardener, and that all matters against the young man had been quashed; but that was nobody's business save the two involved.

Monday came, and about every boy in and around Hickory Ridge, upon getting out of bed that morning, made a bee line for the window and consulted the signs of the weather. For it was certainly going to be a famous day for those who were fond of the great national game, since the Boy Scouts of the neighboring town of Fairfield were due to meet their nine in a struggle for victory.

And not only Hickory Ridge and Fairfield, but Basking Ridge, where the game was to be played on neutral territory, seemed baseball mad.

Elmer himself had hardly gotten downstairs before he heard the phone bell ring, and, as no one else was around, he answered it. Just as he surmised, it proved to be one of his chums, Red Huggins, after him for information.

"How about this weather business, Elmer?" demanded the other, as soon as he learned that he was in touch with the patrol leader.

"Well, what about it?" returned Elmer, chuckling. "I hope none of you think to hold me responsible for whatever comes."

"Oh, shucks! you know better than that," retorted Red, eagerly; "but we've heard you explain just how they know what sort of a day it's going to be, away up there in the Canadian wilderness, and we want your opinion right now. Ted and Toby are over at my house and I'm commissioned to hold you up and get an answer, so's to know what to expect. See?"

"But see here, why d'ye want to know how the weather away up in the Northwest is going to be to-day? Have you got any wheat planted; or do you mean to put the steam plow into that quarter section, if the signs are favorable?" demanded Elmer.

"Aw, let up on a feller, Elmer, can't you?" went on the other, in what was meant to be a wheedling tone. "We want you to make use of the knowledge you picked up away off yonder, to tell us what sort of afternoon it's going to be. Get that, now? Is there any rain storm in sight? Will it be as hot as the dickens; or are we in for a cold wave? We want to know, and we depend on you to tell us. Open up now, won't you, and be good?"

"Oh, is that all you want?" laughed Elmer. "Why, if I could tell you what's sure going to happen eight hours ahead I'd hire out to the government as Old Probs."

"But you can hit it pretty fair, Elmer," persisted Red. "Come on, now, and tell us. We've seen you do it lots of times, and nearly every shot came true. Now, some of us think we're due for a rain, because the sky was a little red this morning. And you know that old saying, 'Red in the morning is the sailor's warning.' What do you think? Give us a drive now. Elmer."

"Well, I took a squint around from my window, and so far as I could see—"

"Yes, sir; but go on, Elmer," broke in the impatient Red, nervously.

"It was a beautiful morning."

"Oh, rats! We all know that much, Elmer; but the signs, what do they say? If it pours down rain the game's all off, and that means bad luck to our fellows," Red went on, being addicted to a belief in all sorts of signs and tokens; just as the boy from South Carolina, Chatz Maxfield, was a believer in ghosts, and charms, and the hind foot of a rabbit killed in a graveyard at midnight by the light of the full moon.

"Don't worry, Red," Elmer went on, purposely holding back the desired information, since he owed this comrade more than one long-standing debt because of tricks practiced by the prank-loving Red.

"Then the signs are favorable; do you mean that, Elmer?" begged the other.

"The sky looks good to me. The little color you saw was only the rosy flush of a summer dawn. And the breeze seems to be coming from the right quarter, Red. I don't think it's going to be a roasting day for August."

"That sounds all right to me, Elmer. On the whole, then, you predict that we'll have a decent afternoon; just the kind to spur every fellow on to doing his best licks?" continued the boy at the other end of the wire, with joy permeating his tones.

"I never predict, and you know it," laughed Elmer. "All I can say is that just now things look good. If the clouds don't come up, and it stays as clear as it is right now, the chances are we'll not get wet."

"Oh, rats! but you've said enough to tell me what you think, and that's the main thing. Do we practice any this morning, Elmer?" asked Red.

"The last thing I heard from Captain Lil Artha, he said he didn't want a stale team on his hands this afternoon, so there'll be no regular practice this A.M. I expect to toss a few over with Mark, just to make sure I've got control; but as the game promises to be a pretty warm affair, it's best everybody keeps rested up until we get in practice half an hour before the umpire calls on us to play. Anything more, Red?"

"No, nothing; only the boys here want me to ask you how your arm feels."

"Fine and dandy," laughed Elmer. "Couldn't be in better shape. If those swatters from Fairfield straighten out my curves this afternoon, it'll only be my own fault. You won't hear me complaining I wasn't in condition, for I am."

"Bully boy! We all know what that means when you're feeling right. I'm sorry for Matt Tubbs and his crowd, that's all," Red said over the wire; whereupon Elmer, unable to stand for any more of this palaver, cut him short by hooking up the receiver.

When later on he went out with Mark to do a little preliminary pitching, every boy they met seemed to fall in behind, until there was quite an imposing procession heading for the field where Hickory Ridge athletic contests were always pulled off.

They understood that everything depended on the ability of the pitcher of the Hickory Ridge Boy Scout nine to baffle these heavy hitters from Fairfield; and hence, everyone wanted to see for himself just what Elmer could do on the eve of the great and important battle with the bats.

Elmer would much rather have found a chance to do his practicing in secret; but at the same time he sympathized with these kids who were

baseball mad. So for half an hour he and Mark worked their many little games, and exchanged signals that were supposed to be known only to themselves, while groups of fellows lounged under the neighboring trees and kept tabs on their actions, commenting favorably on every play that struck them as cleverly done.

Later on Elmer, having donned his sweater because of his heated condition, was waiting for Mark to join him, the latter having gone off to speak to a girl who was passing in a little pony cart, when he was suddenly startled to have a hand laid on his arm and hear little Jasper Merriweather say in a thrilling tone:

"It's all off, Elmer; they've got you marked for the slaughter. If you pitch this afternoon, those sluggers from Fairfield are going to just knock you out of the box. It's a mean shame, that's what it is, now!"

CHAPTER XII.

STEALING THE SIGNALS.

"WHAT'S that you're talking about, Jasper?" demanded the pitcher, whirling on the smallest of the scouts, whose father kept a tailoring establishment in town and made the khaki suits worn by the Hickory Ridge troop.

Jasper was a very timid fellow as a rule. His chums were often joking him about the truth of the old saying, to the effect that it took nine tailors to make a man, and that in consequence he had a heap to pick up. But Jasper took these things in good part, because he knew his failings even though trying the best he could to overcome them.

He was looking very much worried when Elmer turned on him. The hand that had been gripping the sleeve of the pitcher's sweater fell to his side again. Elmer noticed that the boy shot a quick glance toward a group of fellows who, seeing practice was over for the day, seemed to be getting their wheels out, as if intending to ride away.

"Why, I'm afraid it's all over but the shouting for Fairfield, Elmer!" replied the small scout, in answer to the question Elmer fired straight at him.

"You don't say?" retorted the other, laughing. "Well, my work must be pretty bad, if even Jasper Merriweather calls it rotten. Whew! the boys had better be trotting out their other pitcher, if I'm going to be sent to the stable so easy."

"Oh, it ain't that, Elmer, sure it ain't, because don't I believe you're the best pitcher in the whole world?" pleaded Jasper, looking pained that his fidelity was being doubted in the least.

"Then whatever ails you, Jasper?" continued the other, realizing all of a sudden that perhaps there might be something worth noticing in this strange conduct of the scout belonging to the Beaver Patrol.

"It's the signals, Elmer; the signals you and Mark have been practicing, don't you see?" Jasper cried.

"Hello! so that's what troubles you, is it?" remarked Elmer, seriously. "What's wrong with my signals, tell me, Jasper? I don't suppose you could understand what we were doing most of the time; and even if you did, a Hickory Ridge Scout would never think of betraying a secret belonging to his troop. What about my signals?"

"Didn't you see him?" asked Jasper, eagerly.

"Well, now, I have seen a few dozen fellows this same morning, so I don't know which one you mean," replied Elmer, shaking his head in the negative.

"Lon Braddock!" almost whispered Jasper, looking after the group of fellows just starting away on their wheels.

Elmer shook his head and smiled.

"You've got me this time, Jasper," he remarked; "because, you see, I don't know that I ever heard that name before. Is he a new boy in Hickory Ridge; and does he say my work is off color?"

"But—he don't live in Hickory Ridge at all, Elmer," expostulated the other; "that's the trouble, you see."

"Oh, is it? Well, I don't see, and you'll sure have to explain what you mean. If he doesn't live in our town, perhaps he's visiting here"; and Elmer waited to see how Jasper took this.

"I think he came over to see Bob Harris, because they were together pretty much all the time," Jasper went on, nodding his head with almost every word in his eagerness to be emphatic. "You see, he is a Fairfield fellow, Elmer!"

"What?" exclaimed the other, suddenly stiffening up, as a consciousness of what tremendous possibilities there might be in this morning visit of a Fairfield boy dawned upon his mind.

"And when I was over there a few days ago I heard Felix Wagner, the second baseman of the Fairfield team, say that they had made a good find in Lon Braddock, who promised to be an even better pitcher than Matt himself."

Elmer was showing considerable eagerness now.

"Hold on there, Jasper," he said, in his quiet, but impressive, way; "go slow, boy, and let me understand just what you mean. This fellow is named Lon Braddock, you tell me; and he's a newcomer at Fairfield. That accounts for the fact that none of our fellows recognized him as he sat there watching me. And now, more than that, you say he's an extra pitcher of the Fairfield Scout team. Have I got that all O. K., Jasper?"

"Yes, that's all to the good, Elmer," declared the smaller lad, earnestly. "And honest, now, I believe that fellow came over here this morning just on purpose to get some points about your pitching. He knows what signal work does in a game, and he wants to knock you out. Why, Elmer, I tell you, before three hours every fellow on the Fairfield team will know that code of signals you and Mark have been practicing."

"Now you're not just guessing, are you, Jasper? Because I'm the last one in the wide world to want to condemn a fellow on general principles. He might have had a genuine errand over here, and just dropped around to take my size."

"Perhaps he did, Elmer, perhaps he did; but was there any need for him to put it all down in a little notebook he carried, and waiting till he thought nobody was watching him?" demanded Jasper.

"Say, did you see him do that?" asked the other, sternly.

"At least three times, Elmer," came the quick reply. "And every time after he had made some note he'd nod his head and grin like he was just tickled to death over something."

Elmer whistled, and Mark, turning, saw him wave a hand. Apparently the catcher must have said a hasty good-by to the pretty little miss in the pony cart, for she whipped up her steed and Mark started toward his chum.

"Oh, what can you do, Elmer?" exclaimed Jasper. "He's gone off now with Bob Harris, and pretty soon it'll be too late."

"Too late for what, Jasper?" asked the pitcher.

"Why, I thought, you see, that perhaps a lot of us might get hold of him and make him give up that notebook," explained Jasper.

"You don't say!" laughed Elmer. "What particular good would that do us, tell me, when he's sure got everything down pat in his mind, just the same? And we can't lock a Fairfield fellow up, even for stealing signs."

"Then he'll get away with it!" burst forth Jasper, with almost a wail.

"I reckon he will, my boy; but that isn't saying the knowledge he's stolen will do him, or any of his mates, any good," chuckled Elmer.

"But how can you help it?" demanded the smaller boy, dubiously observing the face of his comrade and wondering why he did not seem to detect any uneasiness there.

"How? Oh, by switching the signals, I suppose. I'll put it up to Mark, here. We can mix things around so that every sign stands for something different than it did just now. And if the Fairfield fellows expect to gain anything from thinking they're onto our signals, they're going to be badly surprised. You'll see some bally old batting until they understand that fact."

"What's all this row about?" asked Mark, coming up just then in time to overhear Elmer's last few words, which, of course, mystified him considerably.

"Why, we've just learned that all the time you and I were practicing our signals a spy from Fairfield was watching us," said Elmer.

"Is that straight, or are you just kidding me?" demanded the catcher of the nine.

"Which his name is Lon Braddock; and he's a newcomer, who can pitch as well as Matt Tubbs himself. Of course, he must be a scout, or else he couldn't play in this match game; but how a fellow can be a scout and do such a ratty thing as that, beats me all hollow," Elmer went on.

"Tell me the whole story, that's a good fellow," remarked the other. "Where did you get it—from Jasper, here?"

"Yes, I've been watching him," replied the smallest scout, nodding. "I heard of him over in Fairfield, and he was pointed out to me as the man Matt depended on to fool the Hickory Ridge nine in case he got knocked out of the box himself. Besides, I saw him write something down in a notebook as many as three or four times, and always chuckling to himself to beat the band."

"Well, that's a nice surprise to have thrown at your head just after we were saying we had those signs all down pat. This means another turn at it"; and Mark threw his coat on the grass with an expression of disgust.

"Hold on till that bunch of fellows gets out of sight, Mark, which will be in a few minutes," remarked Elmer, who failed to look at the thing with the same shade of annoyance that marked the countenance of his friend; "but in the end this may turn out to be in our favor, you know."

"Perhaps it may," replied the catcher; "but it's a nuisance, all the same. Now we've just got to go and unlearn all we fixed up."

"Easy job, Mark; just push 'em ahead one point and everything's altered. Makes me laugh to think how those fellows will tumble into the trap. Why, I can see one or two strike-outs every inning till they get wise. And say, perhaps our new pitcher, Lon Braddock, will feel like kicking himself because he was such a fool as to believe all he saw."

"Now they're around the bend of the road, Elmer, with that strange boy alongside Bob Harris, plying him with questions by the dozen, I reckon. Luckily, Bob doesn't know very much about our nine, for his application to be a scout was turned down, you remember, Elmer."

"So it was," mused the pitcher; "which makes me suspect that perhaps Bob knew why the man from Fairfield was over here. It's pretty hard to find that there are traitors in your own camp. But let them keep it up; we're going to take their number to-day, as sure as you're born, Mark. I just feel it in my bones. I only hope Matt Tubbs didn't know about this trick. I'd hate to think he had a hand in it; and after seeing what a change has come over the former bully of Fairfield and Cramertown I won't believe it, either."

So they once more started in, passing the ball. A few of the small boys had remained to continue their scrub ball game. They wondered what the battery of the regular nine could be doing and stopped playing to watch; but as Jasper had been particularly cautioned not to breathe a word of the valuable discovery he had made, they were none the wiser for their survey and soon went back to their happy-go-lucky game.

It did not take the two boys long to get familiar with the new version of the sign code. Even Mark allowed that he had it down just as pat as the older style.

"And just as you said, Elmer," he admitted, "if those fellows over at Fairfield believe they're onto our signs, they're going to make a heap of trouble for themselves, believe me. I can see a fellow whacking away at a wide bender that he expects is going to be a swift one over the rubber. The only trouble will be for me to keep a straight face through the circus."

"Oh, it won't last long," replied the other. "When a few of them have made a show of themselves they'll talk it over and conclude the spy got the signals mixed. But by that time the mischief may have been done. Remember, Mark, we owe a lot to little wide-awake Jasper, here. He's always on the watch for chances to build up the credit of Hickory Ridge troop."

Each of them gravely shook hands with Jasper, who turned very rosy in the face at hearing himself spoken of in terms of praise, for there had been times when the boy had begun to despair of ever accomplishing anything

worth while in the organization, his size seeming to be so much of a handicap against him.

But now hope was taking on new life within him, for he had found that size really counts for little in many of the things a scout may do to bring credit on himself and honor to his troop.

It was nearly noon when Elmer and Mark turned their faces homeward. Earlier in the day the former had walked over to Colonel Hitchins's to get his wheel and ride it home, after putting a plug in the puncture. He was considerably surprised, and pleased as well, to see Phil Lally working in the garden as he passed.

The man looked up and waved a hand cheerily, and it gave Elmer a queer little sensation, altogether pleasant, in the region of his boyish heart to realize that that young fellow was laboring honorably there that bright morning, instead of languishing in jail with a forlorn outlook before him, thanks to the kind heart and generous impulse of the man who owned the estate. And it also pleased Elmer to feel that he, too, had had something of a share in what seemed like the reformation of Phil Lally.

And when noon came around the skies still smiled, guiltless of clouds; while a delightful breeze gave promise of a grand afternoon for the great game.

CHAPTER XIII.

READY FOR THE GREAT GAME.

"WHAT'S the matter with this for a corker?"

Lil Artha, the long-legged first baseman of the Hickory Ridge nine, put this question to his mates as the big carry-all containing the team, with several substitutes, came in view of the fine field at Basking Ridge on the afternoon when the great game was to be decided.

No one tried to answer.

The reason was plain, for they were utterly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the immense crowd that had assembled to see the anticipated spirited contest between the rival teams of Boy Scouts.

In every direction were great masses of people, all decked out in their holiday attire. Girls in white and every color of the rainbow waved parasols, gay handkerchiefs, and little flags on which the name of their favorite team had been emblazoned.

"Why," gasped Ted, when he could catch his breath, which had been actually snatched away from him by his amazement, "there must be a thousand of them here!"

"Better say millions and be done with it," laughed Red, eager for the fray.

"The whole county has turned out to do us honor, it seems," remarked Matty.

"And because of that, fellows," put in Elmer, "every Hickory Ridge scout ought to shut his teeth hard and make up his mind to win out; never to give up; and if he makes an error, do something right afterward to atone for it."

"Right you are, my boy," remarked Mr. Garrabrant, the efficient scout master, who fortunately was enabled to accompany the boys on this trip. "I was just going to say something along those same lines myself when you took the words out of my mouth. Hickory Ridge is watching you to-day,

fellows; and Hickory Ridge expects every one of her sons to do his duty. Nobody can do more."

"Well, here we are, safe and sound," remarked Ty, as the vehicles came to a stop in the midst of the tremendous throng.

"Wow! listen to that, would you?" said Toby, as cheers started that seemed to rock the very earth.

The team from Fairfield had arrived some time before. They were busily engaged in building up their batting abilities by sending out hot ones that a number of local baseball enthusiasts caught in the field.

"Say, they're a lot of hustlers, now, let me tell you," declared Red, as he stood for a minute watching the actions of the others.

"Oh, they're big enough," remarked Lil Artha, indifferently; "but since when did size count for everything in baseball? You'll see the smallest fellow step up and knock out a homer, where a big stiff like me swings at three wide ones and sits down on the mourners' bench."

"Like anything you will," said Red, disdainfully.

"The pitcher who strikes you out has got to get up early in the morning, that's what"; since the gaunt first baseman was noted for his keen batting eye and could pick out a "good one" as well as any in the business.

"Come on, fellows, let's get busy," called Elmer, as he passed a ball to one of the others, and in almost a twinkling the whole bunch was tossing back and forth, gradually widening out.

Then a few of them fraternized with their opponents, as they happened to know most of the Fairfield fellows, and in this way a number of Elmer's team found a chance to take a turn at bat.

It was a sight that would not soon be forgotten in Basking Ridge. They certainly did have a splendid field for the sport; and the grand stand was a little gem in its way, but on such an occasion it did not begin to hold one fifth of the spectators who would have been glad of a chance to use it.

"Ground rules to-day, that's sure, Elmer," remarked the field captain of the Hickory Ridge team, as he stood alongside the pitcher, receiving the ball at intervals and returning it.

"That goes, without a doubt," replied Elmer, as he surveyed the mass of people packed around the diamond and the field. "And if I were you, I'd look up Matt Tubbs right away, so as to have that matter settled."

"Sure," said Lil Artha. "And I reckon that a hit into the crowd will stand for two bases and no more."

"As near as I can see, there's only one place anybody can hit to-day for a homer," declared Elmer, again surveying the field.

"Tell me where that is," remarked Lil Artha, "because I want to know. As field captain, it's my business to know; and as an humble batter, I might want to look that way before the game grows cold."

"You'll notice that none of the crowd seem to want to pack upon the right of the center field," Elmer went on in a low tone. "If a batter could send one out there like hot shot, that managed to escape the fielder, it would never stop on that little down grade till he'd made the rounds."

"Aw, thanks!" replied Lil Artha, dryly. "I'm sorry that my specialty happens to lie off there in left; but I'm going to twist around a little and keep that down grade in mind. Perhaps, who knows?" and he winked at Elmer in his comical way as he hurried off to confer with Matt Tubbs.

Home Run Joe Mallon, the professional ball player who was home at Basking Ridge nursing a broken arm, was on the spot, ready to serve as umpire. He had been well known in this capacity before he broke into the big league, and people used to say that he seldom erred in his decisions. They called him "Honest Joe" at the time he umpired, and few ever disputed his decisions. He might make a slight slip, but everyone knew he decided plays just as he saw them and the rabble of the bleachers never had any weight with him.

Elmer and Mark found a chance to get together and confer where they could speak their minds without others hearing.

Later on they expected to warm up for business, but it was too soon, as yet. After the rest of the team had started in on their fifteen minutes of practice it would be time enough for Elmer to try out a few of his curves and drops.

"I had Jasper Merriweather show me the fellow," Elmer remarked.

"Meaning our slick friend, Lon Braddock?" questioned the catcher.

"Yes. That's Lon talking to Henry Cobb, who plays third base for the Fairfield nine. And Mark, between you and me, I don't just like his face or manner."

"Same here, Elmer," declared the other quickly.

"He's got a tricky way about him, and I warrant you that fellow is going to give Matt Tubbs more trouble than all the rest of his team combined. Look at him chuckling now. Ten to one he's telling Cobb how he's got the Injun sign on our signals, and what great stunts the Fairfield batters are going to do with your curves and slants."

"Well, you know the old saying to the effect that the fellow laughs hardest who laughs last; and Mark, believe me, we're going to have that privilege. But I hope you won't give it away by jeering the unlucky batter when he nearly kills the air swiping at one that is away beyond the end of his stick."

"I'll try and keep a straight face, Elmer," chuckled Mark. "Got a piece of alum in my pocket right now, and before the game begins I mean to rub it over the side of my mouth, so as not to be able to crack a smile. There go our boys out in the field for practice."

"Well, perhaps we'd better get a move on, then, and pass a few, though after our morning work I don't feel much in need of it, Mark."

As Fairfield had already taken the field, and there was now only fifteen minutes left before game would be called, the battery of the rival team was also hard at work when Elmer and Mark started in.

Of course, neither pitcher tried his best in that preliminary bout. Well did they know that eager eyes were watching them for points connected with their delivery, and that these would be quickly seized upon for an advantage. Hence they contented themselves, as a rule, in sending in swift, straight balls simply to warm up.

Hickory Ridge had batted against Matt Tubbs for several seasons, and yet never had a game been actually finished. Up to the present they had always broken up in a beautiful row, in which both sides claimed victory.

Elmer had pitched part of a game the preceding summer. At the time he had proven so much of a mystery to his opponents that, seeing prospective defeat staring his team in the face, Matt Tubbs had found some pretext for disputing a decision of the umpire to end the battle.

But since that time the Fairfield team had been greatly strengthened, and in all their games thus far this season they had beaten their opponents easily.

On a neutral field, with a firm umpire directing matters and with all the participants members of the Boy Scouts, it was believed that for once a game between these old rivals might be threshed out to a conclusion.

Many shook their heads, remembering the Matt Tubbs of old and prophesying all manner of evil things that might spring from this bitterly contested game. Others, who knew something of the principles governing true scouts, tried to take heart of hope and believe that there must have been a great awakening in the former bully. But even they admitted that "the proof of the pudding lay in the eating of it," and that they would be better satisfied when the end came without a riotous demonstration on the part of Fairfield and Cramertown.

The Hickory Ridge boys seemed to acquit themselves very well in practice. Numerous dazzling pick-ups were made by the infield that brought out roars of applause from the big crowd; while those tending the outer gardens had to make rapid speed and do some air-jumping in order to drag down the flies that were sent out in their direction.

Having seen both teams at work, the crowd hardly knew which looked the better. And, as in most cases, it ended in a strictly partisan division, each town standing loyally by its athletes, with Basking Ridge about equally divided.

Finally the Hickory Ridge fellows were called in from the field. The time for practice had expired, and presently, when a few little details were gone through with, real business would begin.

The two teams lined up for the fray in this order:

There was a wave of talk passing over the throng as the two captains conferred. It was understood that they were deciding finally on the ground rules that must prevail, on account of the mass of spectators pushing in on the lines. All Basking Ridge's local police force was on the spot, but half a dozen good-natured officers are next to useless when up against thousands; in contests of this sort dependence must be placed on the spirit of fair play that is generally a part of baseball crowds, especially in smaller towns, where the players are known.

"The game is called; now for it!" yelled the nearest spectators, as they saw the umpire pick up his mask and step forward to announce the batteries, while the Hickory Ridge players started for their positions.

"And we have the last look-in, as we take the field first!" howled an enthusiastic follower of the team that looked to Elmer as the keystone of their arch.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THE FIGHT WENT ON.

"THE batteries for to-day's game will be: Chenowith and Cummings for Hickory' Ridge; Tubbs and Ballinger for Fairfield!"

The last word of the umpire was drowned in a roar, and the air seemed filled with waving hats, parasols of gaudy hues, handkerchiefs, and anything else that could be utilized for the occasion.

Then came a dead silence. Every eye, doubtless, was at that moment riveted on the young pitcher of the nine in the field as he sent in a few straight ones to his catcher, just to find the plate.

"They say he's got speed to burn," remarked one Basking Ridge spectator who had never before seen Elmer pitch.

"But the best thing he's got is a nasty little slow drop that's running Christy Matthewson a close race," commented a second one.

"Oh, shucks!" laughed a Fairfield boy close by; "wait till you see how our fellows fatten their averages on those nice little drop balloons. We've heard a heap about 'em, and have been practicing at hitting all such. Why, mark my words, before the end of the fifth inning this wonderful Elmer will be so tame he'll be eating out of the Fairfield players' hands."

"Wait and see. The game is young," called another fellow.

"I should say it was, when the first ball hasn't been sent over the rubber yet," declared still a fourth spectator.

"Play ball!" shouted the umpire, as he settled himself back of the pitcher.

Again came silence as Elmer, receiving the ball from first base, rubbed it on the leg of his trousers preparatory to shooting the first one over.

A shout went up. Wagner, the stout second baseman, had failed to judge correctly and "one strike" was recorded against him.

"But did you hear the swish of his bat?" demanded the Fairfield enthusiast. "Say, if ever he leans up against one of those curves, good-by to the ball, that's all."

"Sure! Only let him lean; that's what we say. He just can't do it on Elmer," answered a devoted Hickory Ridge lad near by.

Then came a second strike, followed by a foul. Wagner looked puzzled. Evidently he was watching the pitcher closely and going by his signals to the catcher, but as these had been turned almost completely about, he mistook every one of them and was letting himself out at what would easily have been called balls.

When for the third time he had a strike called on him the batter retired amid a storm of mingled cheers and catcalls. He had allowed a good ball to pass by him without making an effort to strike, believing from the gestures of Elmer that it was meant to be a wide one.

Wagner went off, shaking his head. He was evidently mystified, and the Fairfield crowd began to sit up and take notice.

"That's a funny thing for Felix to do," they commented. "He's the most reliable batter in our bunch, and yet he acts as though he didn't know a good one from a wide curve a foot from the plate. Say, that pitcher must have him locoed."

Next came Adrian Cook. He, too, was known as a hitter, and when he stepped to the batter's line the fielders were accustomed to backing off, ready for a terrific drive.

But it began to look as though Adrian must have forgotten to bring his batting clothes along with him, judging by the way he swiped at the empty air twice, and then managed to pop up a measly little foul that Mark easily smothered in his big catcher's mitt.

"What are we up against?" the Fairfield crowd began to say.

"Oh, that's nothing," others put in, more confident. "The boys will wake up after a little. You wait and see them take his number. Once they begin, the air will be full of balls and those fielders' tongues will hang out of their mouths from chasing them!"

So they talked, as all partisan crowds do, while Bastian toed the mark. He looked particularly dangerous as he half crouched there watching Elmer like a cat might a mouse he expected to devour.

But Bastian was no better than the others who had preceded him. He had two strikes called on him by the umpire without having even made a motion.

"Hey, wake up! Get out of that trance. Jack! He's feeding you good ones and you don't know it! Now, altogether, and send one out in center for a homer!"

Jack did his best, just as Elmer knew he was bound to. He believed he saw the pitcher signal that he meant to cut the middle of the plate with the next; when in reality it was intended to be a wide one. And so he too perished, amid the cheers of Hickory Ridge, and the groans of Fairfield.

By the time another chance at bat came for Matt Tubbs's band, there would be excited conferences going on. These heavy batters would soon awaken to the fact that the signals given to them by Lon Braddock were all wrong; and that by trying to take a mean advantage of Elmer they were only digging their own graves.

Matt Tubbs was certainly at his best that day; and he had always been known as a clever pitcher. Ted followed the fate of the three Fairfield batters, and along the same road, for he struck out.

Toby lifted a great fly that soared away up in the air. He was making for second under full steam, believing that McDowd out in center field could never get under the ball, when the cheers that broke forth announced a clever catch. And Toby was compelled to walk back to the bench, resolving that another time he would try to put it far over McDowd's head.

Lil Artha succeeded in placing a corking one that landed him on first, to the accompaniment of riotous cheers; but he died there; for Chatz was able only to connect with the ball after he had had two strikes called on him, and put up one of those miserable pop fouls that make a batter rave.

So the second inning began.

When Cobb had also fanned at most unreasonable balls, that could never have been hit, his comrades stared at each other. There was a hasty conference. Then Matt Tubbs was observed to say something to the next batter, Poole.

Elmer smiled broadly at Mark, and nodded. It was just as though he had remarked the words: "It's all off, Mark, they've finally caught on to the fact that we've switched our signals. And now to play a different brand of ball!"

That was exactly what the Fairfield players had decided. When such batters made guys of themselves trying to meet balls that never came where they expected to find them, the truth could not long remain hidden. And now Tubbs had told his players to forget entirely everything they had learned from Lon Braddock. They must depend on their own judgment of balls, and nothing else.

Poole struck a vicious one, but it fell foul clearly enough, so that there was no chance for any disputing the umpire's decision.

"See that!" exclaimed a spectator; "they're getting his size already. If that had only landed fair it would have been a two-bagger."

Elmer realized that the time had already come to play the game. The next one he sent in was with exactly the same movement that he used to shoot a cannon-ball express over the rubber; yet it hung there in the air in the most exasperating manner, passing over the plate long after Poole had struck.

Then arose a tremendous shout as the crowd became aware of the fact that Elmer had disclosed his long suit—that tantalizing floating drop by which Matthewson long ago won his fame on the diamond.

"Get that, did you, partner!" laughed the Hickory Ridge backer, turning to the adherent of the rival nine. "Now you'll see who's going to do the eating out of hand business. Before the ninth inning comes he'll have your fellows breaking their poor old backs trying to connect with that dead one. Just wait, and see the fun!"

Poole did not get on base, but perished on a feeble little infield hit that Lil Artha gobbled close to the bag, prancing back with ease.

"Gee, look at that daddy-long-legs, will you!" shouted an amazed Fairfield rooter, as he stared at the way Lil Artha got over the ground. "Hey, if he ever gets his base he c'n just step down to second! No cutting him off by a throw."

McDowd, the center fielder, generally a reliable batter, did succeed in making a hit, the ball just eluding the fingers of Red at short, as he jumped up in the air, hoping to make a dazzling stop.

But it did him no good. Elmer just toyed with Mulligan, and after feeding him two swift curves with which he could not connect, he gave him one of those lovely slow balls. Now Mulligan was a crafty chap, and he saw what was coming. Thinking to have the laugh on Elmer, he declined to strike; and was already grinning with joy over his smartness, when the ball seemed to receive a new impetus somehow, and went jumping by.

"Batter's out!" declared the umpire; at which Mulligan dashed his bat down, and walked away, also shaking his head.

The crowd yelled like mad. This was work well worth coming miles to see.

"He's got them all guessing," shouted Larry Billings, who was also in uniform as a substitute. "If they strike at it, they fan the air; and if they hold off the umpire says 'get out!' It's a cold, cruel world, Fairfield!"

Red was first to face Tubbs in their half of the second. He waited until he had two strikes and three balls called; and then, knowing that the pitcher in nine cases out of ten tries to put one straight over, Red lined it out for a single.

Ty stepped up with a firm manner, and gripped his bat as though he meant business. He spoiled several good ones by knocking long fouls, and finally walked. As two were now on bases with nobody out, the chances for a tally looked good to the Hickory Ridge fellows.

Amid a chorus of shouts Matty stepped up and, hitting the first ball a tremendous swipe, sent it speeding through the air. Everybody jumped up to see where it went.

They saw the agile Felix Wagner near second make a leap upward. As he came down he whirled, and sent the ball into second; and Mulligan, who had darted thither was just like lightning in getting it down to first. Red and Ty were thus caught between bases and a most brilliant triple play had been accomplished.

"Why, he caught it!" gasped the Hickory Ridge enthusiast, as though unable to believe the evidence of his eyes.

"You just bet he did," mocked the other fellow. "And the whole side's out in two shakes of the lamb's tail. Zip, bang, splash; and it's all over! That's the way we do it."

The crowd went fairly wild, even the people from Hickory Ridge joining in the applause that greeted this clever play.

And so the game went on, both sides struggling like giants for an opening; yet the third, fourth and fifth innings passed with no one getting past that fatal second.

The first half of the sixth opened with Fairfield looking dangerous. Elmer had passed Wagner, it being the first time he had given anyone transportation on four balls. Cook went out on three strikes, being led to bite at a slow one in the critical moment. Bastian hit for a single, and by clever running Wagner managed to reach third.

The crowd sat up and began to figure on a run, as there was only one man out, and almost any kind of a fly would allow Wagner to come in.

But they counted without their host. Cobb failed to do anything, also going out on the three-strike route. And Poole shot one straight for Red at short, who gathered it up in fine shape, getting the ball to first ahead of the runner.

A sigh went up from the great crowd. With the Fairfield rooters it signified despair; while those who were backing the other team expressed their relief that Elmer had managed to get out of a hole successfully.

"Now, fellows, it's time we did something," remarked Lil Artha, as the boys settled down on the ground, and Toby was selecting his bat, it being his turn to toe the rubber.

"Right you are, old hoss," remarked that worthy, grimly. "We've tried Matt Tubbs out, and got his wrinkles down pat. Just keep your eyes on me, and see if I don't flatten out one of his benders for keeps!"

"More power to your elbow, Toby," said Lil Artha. "Just get your base somehow, and depend on me to chase you in."

"And he can do it, Toby," declared Chatz, as the batter passed him.

"Yes, I've just got to, boys," chuckled the tall captain, as his eye roved out toward that particular place where Elmer had told him to aim; just as though he might be picking a good spot to land his ball.

CHAPTER XV.

LIL ARTHA PLANTS HIS GARDEN IN DEEP CENTER.

"CRACK!"

"He did it!" yelled the Hickory Ridge fellows, as Toby started on a run for the first sack, while Bastian was chasing the ball in short right.

"Bully boy, Toby! You're IT!" shrieked an excited rooter, jumping up and down as he swung his hat, and ending by dancing a hornpipe, to the amusement of some of the crowd, though a disgusted Cramertown fellow loudly advised him to "hire a hall."

"Now Lil Artha, you know what to do!" called a fellow near by.

"Does he!" echoed Larry Billings, waving his hand at the speaker. "Well, just keep your eye on him, that's all. Oh, it's good-by to that ball. It's going over into the next county!"

The tall captain of the Hickory Ridge nine stood at the plate in what some people considered a careless attitude.

"Why, he doesn't seem to care whether he hits the ball or not," they declared. "I think Matt Tubbs ought to have a snap with that bean pole!"

But every batter has his favorite way of waiting for the ball. Some swing their bats nervously, and often fail to recover in time; others stand there like statues, with every nerve contracted, and their eyes fixed on the pitcher.

Lil Artha did neither. He chopped at the tuft of short grass near the rubber, nodded at Tubbs, and then slouched there in his ungainly attitude. But Matt Tubbs was not deceived in the least. He knew that in Lil Artha he had the most dangerous batter in the entire nine to contend with. His movements were like lightning, once he started.

One, two, three balls followed in rapid succession.

"Hey, he's afraid of Lil Artha! he's goin' to give him his base!" arose the shout.

It looked very much that way, and Lil Artha himself feared that he was about to be cheated out of his chance for that little garden beyond right center. Those agile Fairfield fellows must be thinking that triple plays grow on bushes; and the pitcher was hoping to have another pulled off.

"Smash!"

"Oh, what a hit!"

"He leaned way out, and took a wide curve right on the nose!"

"Look at her go, would you!"

"A home run hit, fellows; bully for Lil Artha! He's all to the good!"

"What would he do if he was twice as tall, hey, tell me that?" demanded a disgusted Fairfield backer, as he watched the two figures careering around the circuit.

"Watch him run, boys! Why, he could get home ahead of Toby. There they come in, neck and neck!"

"But where's the ball?" demanded one fellow.

"McDowd is chasing it yet. He'll get it after a while. There never was such a long hit made on these grounds, that's dead sure. It was a peach!"

Two runs looked pretty big in such a bitterly contested game.

"Even if we don't get another, that ought to win, if Elmer can keep up his fine work," Mr. Garrabrant declared, as he sat in the midst of his boys, and shook hands with the tall panting first baseman as he dropped down.

"Then we've just got to work to hold them, see?" said Red, who was picking out a hat, as Chatz had stepped cut to the rubber.

"Oh, don't got that notion in your heads, boys," laughed Elmer. "Perhaps we can add a few more for good measure. Matt may be rattled after those two screamers. Try and hit her out, Red."

But Matt Tubbs instead of being upset by his misfortunes seemed better than ever. He easily disposed of Chatz; and while Red did get on first

through an error of the shortstop, who threw wide, he died there. Ty shot up a zigzag foul that Ballinger managed to just grasp, after staggering back and forth like a drunken man in the effort to judge its eccentric motions; and Matty's offering was taken by Cook in left field.

So the seventh began. The Fairfield rooters, faithful to their team, began to call out encouraging words, such as the "lucky seventh."

McDowd started out well. He drew a pass by refusing to try to take the slow one that just failed to cross over the rubber. Then he stole second, though Mark got the ball down to Red in good style; but a great slide saved the runner, according to the umpire, who was on the spot. There was no protest against the decision, even though most of the Hickory Ridge players thought the man was fairly out. They were much too game to show that they could not take their medicine when the decision went against their side.

Elmer put on a little more speed.

"Hey!" called out Mulligan as he stood there and heard a strike called: "what're ye thryin' to do wid me, Elmer? Sure that wan had whiskers on it: I heard 'em brush past me leg. Thry it again, me honey, and see what I do."

He tried to bunt the next one, but made a failure of the job; for Elmer had readily guessed that such must be his orders, with that man on second.

So Mulligan passed away, being fed one of the teasers that he tried to meet by stepping forward, but without the slightest success.

Next came Ballinger, the catcher. Like most men behind the bat, accustomed to seeing all manner of balls coming toward men throughout the whole game, Ballinger was a fairly good man with the stick. He believed he could pick out a good one, and do something worth while.

His best was a high fly that Ty gathered in away out in deep center; but after the ball settled in his hands McDowd managed to make third, again by a slide, at which he seemed particularly clever.

It was now up to Matt Tubbs. Adopting the tactics of his rival when Lil Artha was at bat, Elmer sought to pass the hard-hitting pitcher of the Fairfields. He had given two balls when Matt reached out, and took one that was intended as a wide curve.

It shot past Matty near second, and went buzzing out into the field. Even then it was tagged with so much speed that before it could be sent in home McDowd had scored, and Tubbs was nestled on the second bag.

Then arose a fearful roar. If only Wagner had found his batting eye he would surely send his captain home with the tying run.

"Lucky seven, Felix! You know what we want! Everybody holler!"

Such a terrible racket as ensued. Of course part of this came from excitement; but there was also a desire to put heart in the Fairfield players, as well as to rattle Elmer.

He showed no sign of going to pieces. His manner would indicate that he was as cool as a cucumber. Wagner was dancing around the home plate, trying to tantalize the opposing pitcher.

"Strike one!" called the umpire, as a good one whizzed past.

"Get up against it, Felix. Quit your kiddin', and do business. It only takes one to bring Matt in!" shouted a player.

Wagner now toed the mark, and prepared to strike. The shouts died away as quickly as they had sprung into existence. All eyes were on the pitcher, and the lad who stood there, lazily swinging his bat forward and back in regular rhythm, as he endeavored to gauge the coming delivery of the ball.

Judgment at such a critical time has to come with the rapidity of lightning. In the flash of an eye the batter has to decide whether it is a drop, an out curve, an inward shoot, a straight, swift one over the rubber, or a teaser that will apparently start out well, only to hold up in mid-air, and leave him to strike long before the ball gets within reaching distance.

Wagner waited and struck at a slow drop. What was more, he hit it, too, a vicious tap that electrified the entire crowd. Again those who were sitting down jumped up to see what had happened. They evidently expected to see one of the fielders running like mad after the ball. Nothing of the sort.

Red simply threw out, and touched Matt Tubbs as he tried to get back to second in great haste, after realizing that the ball had been shot straight into the hands of short.

It was, of course, a double play, unassisted. And tumultuous cheers followed as the Hickory Ridge boys came trotting in from the field. Nothing would do but that Red must take off his cap, and thus acknowledge the fact that the fickle populace wished to do him honor.

In their half of the seventh the Hickory Ridge fellows made another hard bid for a run. Elmer, the first man up, drove the first ball pitched out in right for a single. Mark duplicated the performance, only he seemed rather to fancy the left garden for his planting.

Two on bases, and none out! Catcalls and groans marked the disgust of the rooters who wanted to see Fairfield win, while loud cheers told the club at bat that their friends expected them to add to the score this inning.

But that wizard Tubbs was at it again. He mowed Ted down without mercy. The batter afterward declared that the ball went past him with wings on it; and that he couldn't make sure whether it passed over the rubber or two feet outside.

Toby had been fairly lucky in meeting the offerings of Matt; but he, too, fell a victim. Meanwhile the fellows on bases, much as they wanted to engineer a double steal, found not the slightest chance to do so, with this clockwork going on between the pitcher and catcher.

Lil Artha was up again.

Would he duplicate his previous performance, and send out a homer? McDowd evidently feared as much, to judge from the way he went back. But Lil Artha fooled them all, for he dropped a little one between first and

second, and while nobody got home on the hit, he managed to gain first through the fumble.

Chatz had a glorious opportunity presented to him. A hit would mean two more tallies. Chatz tried his best, and connected with a good one. With the crack of the bat the crowd uttered a thrilling shout. Then they saw Poole, playing just off first, gather the ball in with astonishing cleverness, and leap for his bag.

In the eighth it was just one, two, three for Fairfield. Elmer bad them guessing all the time with his curves, his change to a swift one, and then that terrible teaser that only one fellow had as yet managed to connect with, and that to his side's undoing.

Nor were the Hickory Ridge boys able to add more runs in their half, four batters only facing Tubbs.

The ninth opened. Unless Fairfield could score one run to tie, the game would end then and there, the Hickory Ridge fellows having no need to go in again.

It was a tense situation when, with one man on second, and but a single fellow out, Elmer stood up to his work, smiling, cool and satisfied that he could do it, with the fine assistance he was receiving from his backing.

In vain did the next batter try to connect. One little foul was the best he was able to do. That brought it to the last one, who chanced to be the hard-hitting catcher, Ballinger.

A dead silence fell upon the crowd as Elmer began to feed him slow ones. Once Ballinger struck, and was greeted by a whoop from the excited Hickory Ridge rooters, anxiously watching every move. The next one he declined to touch; and lo, it went over the plate for a second strike. Rendered desperate finally, and seeing still a third floater coming sailing wabblingly along, Ballinger stepped forward and made a vicious swing for it, only to have his bat pass through thin air.

Then arose a tumultuous whoop. The game was over, and the score stood two to one in favor of Hickory Ridge.

While the shouts of the multitude were still ringing out, Elmer made straight for the rival pitcher, and thrust out his hand.

"Bully for you, Matt," he said. "It was so even that one little thing settled it—that home run hit. And if you haven't won this game, Matt, it's plain to be seen you've won another that counts for much more. I say good luck to the scouts of Fairfield. They're going to make things hum around here, I guess."

"That's nice of you, Elmer," returned Matt, quietly, yet with a gleam of satisfaction in his eye. "Somebody's got to lose, and next time it may be you fellers. But I reckon as how Fairfield people knows by now that things has changed some since these here games used to break up in a row. Never again. We're in this scout business for keeps now, and you got to look out, Elmer, if you don't want us to beat you when the two troops get together for tests."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

"I WANT you to go over with me to Colonel Hitchins, Mark," said Elmer, on the morning after the great victory over the Fairfield scout nine.

"Oh, see here, has it anything to do with that mystery connected with my cap being found under those peach trees that were robbed?" demanded Mark, jumping up; for his chum had found him in his den, busily engaged.

"Perhaps," smiled the other. "And oh, by the way, Mark, perhaps you'd better be sure and wear the very cap that was found. I might want to show it to the colonel again for a purpose."

He declined to say anything more, even though Mark teased him as he got his own wheel out, and the two started forth.

"Just you hold your horses," he said, shaking his head stubbornly. "Sometimes it seems like a long night, but daylight always comes in the end."

"I take that to mean you've made some sort of discovery, then," declared Mark; "and honest, now, Elmer, I'll be mighty glad to know the truth. That thing has puzzled me a heap, I admit. Perhaps Phil Lally has confessed that he found my cap, and left it there when he robbed the trees, meaning to have me looked on as the thief."

"Shucks, Phil Lally never saw your cap; and even if he did he wouldn't know it from mine or some other fellow's.

"Wait, and don't get so impatient. Unless I miss my guess, it'll soon be old history," and Elmer led the way along the road at a hot pace.

They soon arrived at the place of Colonel Hitchins.

"There's Phil Lally working in the garden, and he looks satisfied with the way things have come out," remarked Elmer, as they passed toward the mansion.

"Why shouldn't he be?" argued Mark. "If Phil had his deserts, he'd be on the way to a ten-year sentence at the penitentiary right now. But the old gentleman knew what he was doing when he gave him this last chance; and I really believe the fellow will make good now."

"I'm dead sure of it," Elmer added. "He's had his eyes opened, and the thought of his old and fond mother is going to keep him on the narrow path. But say, turn aside here, and let's take a peep at the tool house, where I had that little rumpus Saturday night."

"I'd like to see it," remarked the other, eagerly; for by this time he knew all the particulars of his chum's exciting adventure, and was deeply interested in everything that pertained to it.

So they walked around the tool house, and even stepped inside, while Elmer proceeded to once more relate how he had managed to fasten the two men in, after they had entered in search of kerosene.

"Hello!" remarked Elmer, finally, "there's Bruno wagging his tail at us; he knows me by now, and we are pretty good friends; but, all the same, I don't mean to get too close to him when his master isn't around."

"He's a fine looking dog, as sure as anything," observed Mark.

"He sure is," Elmer went on, and then added: "see him shake that old shoe he has in his mouth! Just imagine it to be some other dog that Bruno is fighting with. I'd hate to have those teeth set in my leg, wouldn't you, Mark?"

"Well, rather," came the ready reply. "But look there, do they give him old shoes and such things to play with; I can count three close by his kennel right now? Perhaps it's the right thing for a dog's teeth, to chew on old leather."

Elmer laughed out loud at the suggestion.

"That's a new one on me," he declared; "but here comes Phil Lally from the garden. Let's put it up to him. He's been with the Colonel some time, and ought to be on to some of the tricks of Bruno."

Phil Lally smiled at seeing Elmer. He had taken a great liking to the boy; and no doubt had heard some things in connection with him from his employer at the time they talked matters over.

"Glad to see yuh here this fine morning, Elmer," he remarked. "And they tell me yuh knocked the Fairfield team out yesterday, good and hard. The kunnel says it was the best game he ever saw, barring none, and he's an old hand, yuh know."

"We all thought it a dandy," laughed Elmer; "and every fellow deserved a share of the glory. I pitched my best; but where would we have been if it hadn't happened that Lil Artha drove out that homer, fetching a run in ahead of him? But Mark here was wondering if you fed Bruno on old shoes; or gave them to him to keep his teeth in good condition, because there are just three around here. We don't happen to be from Missouri, Phil, but we want to know."

The man laughed loudly.

"Well, after all, it looks that ways, Elmer," he said. "But the fact is, nobody wants to make Bruno mad by takin' away his playthings. I tried it once, and would yuh believe it, the critter made a jump for me, and growled so ugly that after that I jest vowed he could keep piling 'em up, for all of me."

"Oh, I see; then you don't toss them to him?" said Mark, while his chum smiled, as though fairly well satisfied with the way the conversation had turned.

"Who, me, give Bruno them old shoes?" ejaculated Phil Lally. "Well, I guess not. He gets 'em all hisself. It's an old trick of Bruno's. There have been times when he's had as much as seven old shoes layin' around here at one time. When I gets a chanct I sneaks 'em away an' buries the same. Got a regular cemetery fur old shoes back o' the stable."

"But where does he get them, if he's chained up here all the time?" asked Mark.

"What, him?" echoed the gardener. "Oh, nobody don't seem able to keep that slick customer chained up no great time at a stretch. Sometimes I've knowed him to slip his collar as many as four nights a week."

"You mean he gets away?" asked Elmer, helping things along; for he began to see Mark casting eyes at him suspiciously.

"Always that. Bruno, he's a wanderer. He's got the habit bad; and as soon as he gets loose it's hike for him. But I will say he always knows when to come home, and in the morning we find him in his kennel, tuckered out mebbe, but happy."

"But do you mean he brings one of those old shoes home with him every time?" demanded Mark.

"He jest wont come home without something like that in his mouth," continued the gardener. "I've seen him adoin' of the same, and had to laugh at the critter. Once it was a lady's hat. We reckoned that it must a' blew off when she was goin' past in a car at a fast clip, and they couldn't find it. But Bruno lighted on it, easy like."

"A lady's hat!" muttered Mark, and then he faced his chum, adding: "Look here now, Elmer, you didn't come back to see Bruno just by accident. You had a reason for doing it? Own up now!"

Elmer nodded his head and snickered.

"Let me take that cap of yours, Mark," he said, and the article in question was eagerly handed over to him. "Look here, Phil, this cap was found under those peach trees you've heard about, and on the morning the colonel discovered they had been raided. Luckily my chum was able to prove that he couldn't have been here; and a lot of us knew that he had lost this cap a mile away on the bank of the Sunflower, just as evening set in. But it's been a dark mystery how it got here."

Phil had turned red at mention of the peach trees. Then his glance went past Elmer to the big Siberian wolf hound.

"I reckon it must be up to Bruno, then," he remarked. "Let's see—yes, he was off that night, else I'd never dared do what I did."

"And if you examine the inside of the cap," Elmer went on, steadily, "you'll find the lining all torn, as if he had been shaking it like he did that old shoe just now. The marks look to me like teeth had torn the lining. And when the colonel handed it to me, I could feel that it seemed to be more or less wet inside."

"Proven beyond the least doubt!" cried Mark, smiling broadly. "Bruno came on my cap while he was scouring the country. He fetched it home, as he does other things that have belonged to people. And when he was going past those peach trees he got scent of the fact that some one had been there during his absence. So perhaps he laid the cap down, to nose all around, and forgot to pick it up again!"

"That's just my theory to a dot," laughed Elmer; "so on the whole, I guess, Mark, you'd better call it solved, and let the matter drop."

"I'm only too willing," replied the other, nodding. "But don't you think we owe it to the colonel to take him into the secret?"

"I sure do," replied Elmer; "because he was puzzled as much as we were. Still, you remember he was ready to own up that he couldn't believe you guilty; no matter if a dozen caps bearing your initials were found under his trees."

"That shows what it means tuh have a good reputation," remarked Phil Lally between his set teeth. "But, boys, never again for me. I've seen what a fool road I was trampin' with that habit of mine, and I've changed my course. I'm goin' tuh make good this time, or bust a b'iler tryin'."

"You'll make it, never fear, Phil, with such a good friend to help you as the gentleman you work for. I believe in you," said Elmer, thrusting out his

hand; for something told him that the young fellow needed all the encouragement possible at this critical stage in his uplifting.

So they did go in to see the colonel, who was deeply interested in the theory. Elmer had to explain how his chum's cap chanced to be found that morning under the raided trees, when it was lost the evening previous away over on the bank of the little Sunflower River.

"No doubt of it, Elmer," he declared immediately. "You've proved it beyond the shadow of a doubt. If Bruno had put his visiting card inside the lining he couldn't have done more when he made these tears with his sharp teeth. Seems to me as if I can see where every tooth went in. But let's forget all about that matter now, and talk about your magnificent victory of yesterday."

"We may have beaten the Fairfield team by the narrow margin of one run, sir," remarked Elmer, "but there was one fellow against us who did a heap more than that, I give it to you straight."

"Who was that, Elmer, and what did he do that was so great? I'm sure, after seeing the game I fail to catch your meaning," remarked the gentleman.

"It was Matt Tubbs, sir; and he won a victory over himself which I take it counts for more than just a single little tally in a baseball game. If that had been the same old Matt Tubbs of old, we'd never have finished that game, for he'd have ended it in a row. As it was, he shook hands with every Hickory Ridge player, and complimented them on the fierce fight they put up. It was just fine! And they used to say Matt Tubbs was a rowdy who could never be made to see how he was wronging his family, all Fairfield, and himself worst of all, by his ugly ways. Don't tell me, anybody, that this Boy Scout movement isn't working wonders in lots of cases."

"I believe you, Elmer," replied the colonel, softly. "I have been pretty much a gruff old soldier myself, and often scorned such an idea as gaining anything worth while without a fight for it; but I'm beginning to look at things in another light, boys, another light. Peace has its victories as well as

war; and they count most in the long run, I reckon. I'm going to take more interest in these boys than ever I did before, because I'm learning something in my old age."

But the great victory over Fairfield was not the only event that marked the closing days of that summer vacation, and in another volume we shall have something to say about an occurrence which the Hickory Ridge Boy Scouts were inclined to set down in their troop log-book as a matter of history never to be forgotten.

THE END.

Freeditorial 