

Great Hike

By

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***Free*editorial** 

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CHAPTER I.

THE TALK IN AN APPLE TREE.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then came a small fellow, Jasper Merriweather by name, whose one ambition it was to get out of the "runt" class. Jasper was never weary of asking some one to take his measure, and compare it with past records; but

thus far he had not made much progress toward reaching the ordinary height of a lad of fifteen. Still, he clung to hope and tried to fill his position as Number Four in the Beaver Patrol, to the best of his ability.

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

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

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

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

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

Of course he ran up against a snag in the beginning, for no boy with the loose principles Matt held at that time could ever be accepted as a scout.

He studied the matter, watched the Hickory Ridge lads some more, and then came the great awakening.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, George is a good one, all right," declared Landy. "Our family is noted for producing marvels. You just wait a little while longer, till I trim my weight down a few more pounds, and I'll show you something worth while. Huh, if there was a long-distance hike right now, d'ye know I'd be strongly tempted to enter. You never can tell. Appearances are sometimes mighty deceiving, boys."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's right, Jasper," said Landy, stretching around to pick several tempting yellow beauties that seemed just beyond the reach of his rather

short arm. "Tell us what you've been thinking about. Is it a big hike for the best walkers and runners of the celebrated Hickory Ridge troop?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Landy tried to wriggle himself back again, but his stretch had been fatal to all chances for maintaining his position. The top of the long ladder lost its grip in the swaying crotch and slid from under him. There was a rattle of apples thudding down on the ground twenty feet below; but Landy had, on the spur of the moment, seized hold of the outer branches, so that there he hung, swinging back and forth; afraid to let go, and yet incapable of long maintaining his frantic grip.

CHAPTER II.

JASPER'S IDEA TAKES ROOT.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But desperation gave Landy new abilities, and he managed by a violent effort to roll around to the outer side of the leaning ladder. Utterly

exhausted by the strain he had been under, the fat boy must have slipped helplessly down only that Elmer managed to clutch him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III.

AS THE CLOCK IN THE TOWER BOOMED SIX.

IT lacked but ten minutes of six.

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

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

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

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

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

The conditions were simple enough; Mr. Garrabrant had arranged with the scout master of the troop of Boy Scouts in Little Falls, and each of the rival contestants was supplied with a letter of greeting, which they were to hand to that gentleman upon arriving at the headquarters in Little Falls. This town being some forty-seven miles away from Hickory Ridge, as the crow

flies, it can be seen that a herculean task awaited the boys, in order to cover this distance inside of the twenty-four hours.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, that's left to them," answered the fat boy, frowning with disappointment over the failure of his attempt to rivet her attention on

himself. "They can stop and have a meal at any old tavern; but I reckon most of the fellows are wise to the fact that they must lose valuable time that way. I know George has a snack stowed away in his haversack right now. He's on to all the dodges, you know."

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, well, we just have to, you see, if we ever expect to make good scouts," he replied, thinking that after all Elsie was even a little prettier than her chum, when she chose to smile on a fellow that way. "And besides, we pick up a lot of information from our scout master, and Elmer, who knows all about woodcraft, because he lived out on the big plains. But it must be

getting near time for the start, because they're lining up now. Let's push ahead so we can see what happens."

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

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

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

"Good luck, Lil Artha!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

One minute of six!

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

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

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

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

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

It was time.

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

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

CHAPTER IV.

SIGNS OF TROUBLE.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The morning began to wear on.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Rats!" called out a third, scornfully. "The sly old fox is only doing that for fun. He's playing with the other fellows, believe me. When he gets good

and ready he'll pass the bunch, and leave 'em so far behind they'll forget their names. Oh, I know Lil Artha! Why, he even took his little camera along. Said he wanted to snap off a few pictures on the way, just to pass time, when he got too lonesome."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And he remembered something just then. Neither Nat nor Toby had been present to witness the start of the six who had entered for the race. The

scout master had appointed them, at their earnest request, as a committee to go over to Fairfield and watch the start of those scouts in the rival organization, so as to bring back a detailed account.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Have you just come from Fairfield, Number Four?" Elmer asked, turning first to Toby, who belonged to the Wolf Patrol, which was under his own particular care as patrol leader.

"Yes, sir; been there all day," replied Toby, who was breathing rather hard, as though he might have been having trouble with his machine on the road, and had found it necessary to do considerable wrestling with it in order to make the old tub behave.

"You were dispatched there by our scout master, in order to watch the start of the Fairfield scouts, and be able to give a detailed report of the same?" Elmer continued.

"Just what we were, sir; but that was not the whole extent of our instructions," Toby went on.

"I believe you were also told to stay around during the better part of the day, mingling with the boys of the town all you could, and learning if any underhand doings were being engineered among the tough element outside of the scouts?"

"That's what," replied Toby. "And just this afternoon we got on to something by accident that we thought ought to be reported to headquarters. Wanted to phone it, but they're repairing the wire between here and Fairfield, and we had to try another way. So we hit up a hot pace and came over direct on our machines; though of course we had trouble on the road."

"You did the right thing, Number Four," remarked Elmer. "And now, tell us what you learned. Is there any sign of treachery afoot?"

"Just that, as sure as you live!" cried Nat, unable to hold himself in longer, when he had as much right to be heard as his mate. "They're getting up a

scheme to upset all our plans. We didn't hear a breath about it till three, but the fellers in the game had started more'n an hour before."

"Meaning to waylay our boys, and put them out of the running?" asked Elmer, showing signs of anger, as well as an eagerness to be moving.

"Yes, but not exactly by what Mr. Garrabrant would call physical violence," Toby spoke up, pushing his comrade back at the same time. "Four fellows who don't belong to the scouts, I'm glad to say, started out in a car, with the intention of finding whether it seemed likely a Hickory Ridge scout was far in the lead, and if he was, then they meant to tempt him to ride with them for a mile or more, knowing that if he did this he would be disqualified in the race."

"And if he refused, what then?" asked Elmer, knowing what the answer would be.

"They mean to take him along against his will!" shouted Nat, triumphantly, before Toby could answer.

CHAPTER V.

THE MOTORCYCLE SQUAD.

NOBODY spoke for several seconds; but those of the scouts who were in the crowd looked at each other with gathering frowns. They saw instantly that, according to the rules of the game, if one of the contestants accepted a chance to ride, or even was induced against his will to be carried over a part of the course in an auto, a wagon, or any conveyance whatever, he would invalidate his chances.

"It's a rotten shame, that's what!" declared Larry Billings who belonged to the Beaver Patrol, and pinned his faith on either Matty Eggleston or Red Huggins carrying off the prize, for party faith was strong in the troop.

"Just what you might expect from Fairfield!" cried another disgusted one.

"Hold on, don't say that!" said Elmer, holding up his hand. "There are decent fellows over there, just as there are in Hickory Ridge; and in both places you can find some mean ones. Didn't you hear Toby and Nat say that this contemptible game didn't crop up in the ranks of the scouts of Fairfield, but some rank outsiders, who think they are doing their mates a good turn, when in fact it's the worst thing they could hatch up? Even if they win the prize it will always be tarnished; and people will say it would have come to Hickory Ridge troop only for foul play."

A clamor of many tongues broke loose. Everybody seemed to want to air his or her views; and the girls were just as indignant as any of the boys in denouncing the outrage.

"Here, you'll have to let up on that, friends, or else I'll take the boys inside the church to talk with them," called Elmer, waving his campaign hat with a show of authority.

"Keep still, everybody!"

"Give us a chance to think!"

"Let Elmer run it; he knows what to do!"

"Sure; and he'll do it, too, you bet. I'm sorry for them four Fairfield bullies. They're going to be up against it good and hard, right quick now!"

Gradually the racket ceased, and Elmer could talk again. Those who were close enough leaned forward to listen, eager to understand just what plan the young assistant scout master would engineer in the absence of Mr. Garrabrant, with the idea of frustrating the clever if unscrupulous scheme of the enemy.

It was a time that called for prompt action, as Elmer well understood. If one of the Hickory Ridge scouts was well in the lead, doubtless those four schemers in the automobile would, by the time night came on, start operations. Whether the victim was Lil Artha, or any one of the others, he could not successfully hold his own against four stout fellows. And having once dragged him into the car, they meant to carry him many miles along the route; dumping him out after they had "played hob," as Nat expressed it, with all his chances.

Elmer thought fast. He had his motorcycle ready, and knew that in all probability he could readily head off the game, unless it was rushed through without waiting for night to fall.

The only thing that bothered him was the fact that he would be just one against four; and in such a case he might suffer the same fate it was intended to mete out to the leader in the race.

If only the machines of Nat and Toby could be depended on now, there was nothing to prevent his taking the boys along; and he felt confident that both of them were in a humor to accept at the drop of the hat. Filled with indignation at the mean nature of the trick which those Fairfield fellows had up their sleeve, and which they doubtless considered smart, Toby and his mate would be only too glad of the chance to accompany the scout leader on his mission of rescue.

"How about your gas?" he asked, turning to the boys; and it would seem as if they understood just what the question implied, for a look of delight took the place of the frown that had marked both faces.

"Heaps!" cried Toby, grinning.

"Filled mine just this morning, enough for seventy miles, and I haven't gone more than thirteen!" declared Nat, also newly excited at the joyous prospect.

"Then let's get a start away from here," Elmer called, for the noise had begun again, and it was difficult to carry on any sort of a conversation with comfort. "Anyhow, we can drop out of town a few miles, and then stop to consult."

"Wow! That's the ticket, Elmer!" exclaimed Toby, making a rush for his machine.

"Bully! Bully all around! I'm on deck, Johnny on the spot. Won't we do 'em up brown though, if we only ketch 'em," cried Nat, rather forgetting that as a scout fighting was only to be resorted to as a last thing, and then in defense of another rather than himself.

When the crowd saw the three getting ready to mount, they went fairly wild; and every imaginable sort of exhortation was shouted. The news had circulated like wild-fire, and everyone knew in some sort of hazy way that the bullies of Fairfield were aiming to break up the great hike.

"Get 'em, Elmer!"

"Oh, you Fairfield crowd, we're sorry for you!"

"Pinch 'em, Elmer! Knock the skunks into the middle of next week!"

"You can do it, Elmer, we know you can! Give the rascals the best licking they ever had! It's been a long time coming; hand 'em the interest that's due!"

Evidently these last remarks did not come from any fellow in khaki, since they had been learning other things from the day they signed the roster of

the scouts. But even Elmer himself was thrilled with indignation; it seemed so mean and contemptible in those Fairfield boys to want to spoil the greatest hike contest that had ever been started.

The machine that had been loaned to him was in good trim; and, moreover, Elmer knew considerable about managing a motorcycle, though he had never as yet owned one.

He started his engine without the least difficulty, and then jumped into the saddle with the grace of one who had long since mastered the art. The crowd opened up before him, and Elmer sped along the road.

"Oh, you Indian, I bank on you!" called one of the enthusiastic town fellows.

"Hi! Get a move on you, Toby and Nat!"

"Give the old wrecks a poke in the slats, and make 'em be good!"

"There goes Toby! Good boy, you!"

"Now, Nat will you let that dare slip by? Hit her up, Nathan; that's the ticket!"

"Whoopla! We're all off!"

In this fashion did they call out, with other remarks which space would not admit of our printing. Nat had had a little trouble in making the start, since his engine must have cooled down more or less; but after a little fussing he managed to coax his battered old machine into emitting a few rattling volleys, and then suddenly launched forward.

Passing a mile or so down the road, Elmer threw up his hand in the way drivers have of telling that they mean to either turn aside or else stop, and which is a warning for those who may be following to look sharp.

Then, picking out a place where they could stand the heavy machines up against a rail fence, he came to a halt, stepped off, and awaited the coming of the others.

"What happened?" exclaimed Toby, as he, too, reached the spot and dismounted.

"Had a puncture, or spark gone back on you?" demanded Nat, when he, too, came booming along, to make a sudden halt and straddle his balky machine while he talked.

"Nothing happened," returned Elmer; "but before we start off we want to make sure it isn't going to be a wild-goose chase."

"But we heard that talk, and we don't think they could have been kidding; because you see none of 'em dreamed we were near by," Toby declared, vehemently.

"That may be all true enough," Elmer said, "and at the same time, unless we know just what we aim to do, we may make a bad mess of it. Now, did you learn anything that would tell just where they expected to hold our fellow up, in case he was in the lead?"

"Why, no, of course not, Elmer," replied Toby. "You see, that would have to depend altogether on how far the race had gone. It might be thirty miles away from the start, and it might be less."

"Right. And we'll have to follow along the course in order to get ahead. Here, we can put in a few minutes to good advantage studying my map. I've got an idea that by taking the Glenville short-cut road we can save five miles easy. Perhaps there may be some other ways of cutting the distance down. We looked after that when we arranged the stations."

"Look here, Elmer, don't you think it might be a good idea for us to go right along to the first station, and see if there has been any late news from the front?" asked Nat.

"Gee, that sounds like we were in a regular battle!" declared Toby, his face aglow with eagerness, as he awaited the scout leader's reply.

"A fine suggestion, Nat, and we'll do it, just as soon as we've glimpsed this map again," observed the one addressed, as he sat down by the roadside and drew a folded package from his pocket.

Elmer had made these road maps himself from one he found in the house. They were rather cleverly done, and showed every road, with the distances properly marked, all the way to Little Falls. Besides, they had the various taverns, where stations had been established, carefully marked in red ink, so that no one could complain that he lacked information.

Running a finger along the route, Elmer quickly showed where in two places they could, if they wanted, leave the main road and take advantage of short cuts that must save them quite a number of miles.

"But after all," he said, shaking his head, as he glanced at the motorcycles of his comrades, "it might be a case of saving at the spigot and wasting at the bung-hole."

"How's that, Elmer?" asked Toby, perplexed.

"Well, we don't know what shape these side roads may be in after that heavy rain night before last," he answered, folding up the map.

"That's a fact!" ejaculated Toby; "and neither of us thought about that for even a minute. Say, Nat, those roads are only dirt ones, and not macadamized a single bit. Perhaps we wouldn't have a warm old time jolting along over 'em, eh? I can just imagine your old omnibus going out of commission before you made a quarter of a mile."

"Well, I admit that's so; but that would be about twice as far as your rattlebox would carry you, Toby," the other remarked, with a sting in his words.

But, then, when together they usually occupied much of their time, when not engaged in waiting to make repairs, in poking fun at each other's motorcycle; so that there was little venom to the sting. It had all been threshed out time and time again.

"Do we tune up now, Elmer?" asked Toby, as he prepared for a flying start, that would make his companion turn green with envy.

For answer Elmer took hold of his machine, manipulated the lever, and as the engine started to throb, jumped into the saddle, much to the envy of both the others, who could never depend on doing anything as they planned.

However, they managed to get moving, though Elmer had to slow up at the next bend in order to let them come along. He believed he would need the assistance these two stout scouts were capable of affording; and but for that must have been tempted to put on speed and leave them far in the lurch to wrestle with their various troubles as best they might.

So they sped along. Now and then something would happen to one of the old machines and cause a delay. Thanks to the presence of Elmer, who knew more about machinery than either of the others, even though they had owned motorcycles for years, these troubles were adjusted in an unusually short time. Had it been otherwise, Elmer must have felt compelled to abandon his running mates, since minutes were valuable to him just then.

They presently came in sight of a road house, which Elmer understood was the first on the list of stations. He also remembered that one of the scouts had been detailed to remain at this place, to use the phone as a sort of relay station, and transmit any message from farther up the road.

"We'll hold up here a little while, boys," he remarked, as he shut off power and prepared to bring his machine to a full stop. "Perhaps the news from up the road may be worth listening to. Pull in and jump off. There's Hen Condit in the doorway right now, beckoning to us."

CHAPTER VI.

GETTING IN A RUT.

"GREAT news, fellows!" called Hen Condit, as he gave the salute on seeing that the assistant scout master was with the party on motorcycles.

"What's that you say, Hen?" shouted Toby, making a flying jump from his saddle that caused him to land plump on hands and knees before the road house.

"Here, hold on, what d'ye think you're doing, Toby Jones?" called Nat, who was showing a little more deliberation in dismounting. "Guess you're dreaming about aeroplanes and all such tomfoolery. Think you can fly, eh? Well, grow a pair of real wings first!"

Toby's pet hobby lay in the line of aeronautics. He was forever studying up the mysteries of bird motion, and had the records of all the leading aeroplane drivers at his finger tips, so that he could tell instantly what was the highest point as yet reached by a bird-man; the fastest flight made singly and with a passenger; the longest distance traversed without alighting, and lots of other similar facts in which the average boy might not be greatly interested.

He had several times made a gallant attempt to fly, but thus far the machines he had constructed lacked some essential quality. At any rate Toby had suffered pretty much as did the Darius Green of whom we older fellows used to read in our earlier days; and perhaps can still remember declaiming the story of a vaulting ambition that took a tumble from the old barn roof.

Elmer gained the doorway where Hen Condit, one of the later recruits in the Hickory Ridge troop, awaited him. Hen had only received his new uniform on the preceding day, and hence he felt as proud as a peacock. His chest had never before been known to have anything like the fine appearance that it now presented. And only that morning his doting father had remarked that joining the scouts had done more for the Condit son and

heir than years of pleading and scolding had effected, in so far as making him stand up, and throw his shoulders back.

"Now, what's the news, Number Eight?" asked Elmer; for the boy in the doorway belonged to the Wolf Patrol, though a real tenderfoot, in that he had only qualified for the lowest rung in the ladder by learning how to tie a number of knots, learning what the requirements of a scout consist of, and similar things.

"I just had news from up the road, sir," said Hen, eagerly.

"Good news, or bad?" asked Elmer, just as if his eyes did not tell him that.

"Fine and dandy, sir," was the reply.

"Of course connected with the advance member of our immortal six?" Elmer continued.

"Sure." Hen forgot to add the term of respect now, for he was burning with impatience to disclose his knowledge.

"Where from?" asked the scout leader.

"Rockledge, which is, I find, about thirty-two miles from Hickory Ridge by the route marked out," answered Hen.

"That's right," muttered Toby, who had the map in his mind pretty accurately, because he and Nat had often scoured the country when their machines were newer and acted more decently.

"What was the report, Number Eight?" Elmer asked.

"One of our boys had just registered there. He was nearly half an hour ahead of the next contestant; though that one appeared to be Felix Wagner, the smart second baseman of the Fairfield nine!"

Elmer looked sober. He realized that the conditions seemed to be peculiarly fitted for the carrying out of the scheme which those four Fairfield plotters had arranged, and started up the road some time before to execute, if it was necessary, in order to help their man win.

A Hickory Ridge scout half an hour ahead of the fleetest of the rival organization! That would mean a Fairfield victory, providing the present leader could in some way be disqualified.

"Who was the first man?" he asked, feeling pretty confident as to what the answer would be.

"Lil Artha! He's doing the Hickory Ridge troop proud this day. We'll forgive a heap in the way of practical jokes if he only comes in away ahead of Felix," Hen observed, with the natural pride boys always take in their home-town doings.

"Hurrah for Lil Artha! Didn't I always say he would show them a clean pair of heels? Oh, he's a wonder at hiking and running! A three-bagger for most fellows lets Lil Artha score the circuit. Bully boy, Artha! Yes, we'll forgive everything if only he keeps this up and puts the Injun sign on Fairfield."

Somehow or other it seemed as though most of their concern lay in the possibility of the rival organization winning the laurels. No matter which of the six home scouts came in ahead, if only he could have the laugh on Fairfield!

"Half an hour ahead, you said, Number Eight?" Elmer pursued, as he turned the matter over in his mind and began to figure as to just how they should act in order to play the game right.

"That's what I got over the wire. If you want, you can call up Rockledge now, and perhaps they'll be able to give more information," Hen Condit answered.

"No need, I reckon. What we want to do now is to get busy," said Elmer.

His eye naturally turned toward the two old machines that were apt to prove so unreliable. And no doubt Elmer was compelled to once more debate within his mind whether it would be best for him to leave Nat and Toby far in the lurch, depending on his single arm to protect Lil Artha against the vandals who would ruin the great hike; or by suiting his pace to

their progress, accidents and all, and have comrades to depend on in an emergency.

He quickly made up his mind to stick to them, for a while at least. If things grew to be too bad, he could say good-bye and go whirling off at the rate of forty miles an hour.

Elmer was convinced that the fellows in the Fairfield car would hardly be likely to start doing things until darkness came. They would not want Lil Artha to see their faces, so that he could recognize them and later on accuse them when openly denouncing the miserable game.

"Send on the news to headquarters, Number Eight," he said, as he prepared to mount again; a movement that sent both Toby and Nat hurrying toward their machines, anxious to coax them into a fresh start.

"Shall I tell them that you were along, sir?" asked Hen, making the salute.

"Why, of course," said Elmer; "because they'll be anxious; you see, there's a nasty plot afoot to kidnap Lil Artha, and make him forfeit his place in the race, which would go to the next in line."

"And that happens to be Felix Wagner! Great governor! Now I know why you fellows are hitting up the pace! Give 'em one for me, Toby, won't you?" Hen bellowed after the three scouts; but they must have gone beyond earshot, for at least no one seemed to pay the slightest attention to his request.

It had been Elmer's first intention to make this trip on his wheel, like the other inspectors, even though his still sore foot would have rendered this a rather painful undertaking. Perhaps it was the knowledge of his disability that had caused the owner of the motorcycle to offer it to Elmer. At any rate the patrol leader was very glad to have it, since there was little labor needed in order to cover all the ground necessary.

Of course there was little chance for the trio of scouts to exchange words while they were spinning along on their motorcycles. The road was not all

that could be desired, the heavy rain of the recent storm had washed it badly in places, so that they had to keep a sharp lookout for ruts.

Possibly there is nothing more exasperating to anyone riding a motorcycle than to find that he is in a deep rut. For a brief time he may be able to keep his proper balance; but presently he leans a trifle too much one way, the heavy machine strikes the side of the rut, and as a consequence there is a sudden dismounting; so that he feels himself lucky if he alights anywhere but on his head.

Knowing this, and feeling that the wobbly machines of his comrades were doubly dangerous under such conditions, Elmer always slowed down when he struck a poor streak of road.

Even then their advance was not free from thrills. Toby was the first to take a little header, because of thinking he could push through a rut that somehow seemed to have drawn him as with a magnet, even when he was fully determined that he would give it a wide berth.

He came down with quite a hard bang; and Nat, hearing the noise, and being just a little in advance, tried to twist his head around in order to discover what had happened to his companion in misfortune, when he, too, turned a complete somersault and landed in the midst of a big clump of thorny bushes that grew alongside the thoroughfare.

Of course, Elmer immediately stopped, and leaving his motorcycle, ran back to see whether either of them could be seriously hurt. First of all he laid hold on Nat, who was kicking his legs vigorously in the air, and bleating like a calf. After a little pulling, and working the prisoner of the bush to and fro, he managed to set him free.

"No bones broken, I hope, Nat?" asked Elmer, as the other started to dance up and down, rubbing his elbows, his shins, and every part of his anatomy he could possibly reach.

"Oh, I guess not, Elmer; but ain't I just a sight though?" groaned the other. "My face feels like it was marked with scratches like a map; and here's a big tear in my trousers. Got a safety pin, Elmer? Oh, dear, won't I look terrible!"

"Don't worry over it so much, Nat. Be a scout and show your grit. Those are only little scratches and will be gone in a few days. They're bleeding some now, of course, and feel bad. Let me wash them with some water from this brook, to take any poison out. How is it with you, Toby?" and Elmer turned upon the other unfortunate who came limping along just then, trundling his heavy motorcycle.

"Nothing much, I reckon, Elmer; got a lump about as big as a pigeon's egg on top of my coco; but this ain't the first time by a long shot. I'll be satisfied if only the upset didn't put my old ice wagon here out of commission." And Toby bent over to test the sparking of his machine after dropping the rest to the road.

It started off at a rattling pace, which fact seemed to tickle the owner very much indeed.

"Say, blest if I don't think that tumble must have just knocked it back into its old shape again!" he exclaimed in glee. "Haven't heard her take the spark like that for a year and more. Hoopla! Nat, give yours a try. Hope the same good luck fell your way."

However, such was not the case. Indeed, Nat's machine utterly balked, and refused to do anything. Even after Elmer had spent as much as fifteen minutes puttering over it he could not make it behave.

"I'll give it just one more try, Nat," he declared finally, "and then if it won't work, I'm afraid Toby and myself will have to leave you here. We've just got to get along now, or it'll all be too late."

"That's right, Elmer," declared the scout, manfully. "I'm not the one to kick on account of being sacrificed for the good of the troop. Lil Artha must be protected against these Fairfield bullies. And if I have to hang out here till after dark, why I'll just feel that I'm doing my little part of the work. But I

hope you make it this time, Elmer, because I'd rather be along with you, and have an active share in the rush."

Once more did Elmer bend down over the motorcycle as it leaned against a tree. Two minutes later there suddenly broke forth a rattle of sharp reports and the rear wheel flew around at a dizzy pace.

"Good, good! You did it, Elmer! She's in the running again; and I won't have to camp out here on the road till some wagon comes along to pick me up." And filled with newborn pleasure, Nat proceeded to execute a hornpipe right then and there.

"Well, get along with you both, then; I'll overtake you in about three shakes of a lamb's tail," laughed Elmer, as he stepped off along the road to where he had left his motorcycle.

Ten seconds later the others, just about to start out, heard him calling aloud.

"He says, hurry, Nat," cried Toby, for a little bend in the road hid their chum from them; and not waiting to test their machines any further they were off.

They found Elmer running around, with his head bent low, as though he might be interested in the make of the roadbed.

"What is it, Elmer?" asked Toby, coming to a stop.

"My motorcycle has gone!" was the startling reply the scout leader made.

CHAPTER VII.

IN HOT PURSUIT.

TOBY and Nat stared, first at Elmer, and then at each other. Plainly they could not understand what he meant by these strange words.

"Er—d'ye mean you forget just where you left it, Elmer?" asked Toby.

"I tell you it's gone, vanished completely, disappeared!" said the scout leader, with a show of anger in his usually steady voice.

"Great goodness, Nat, he means somebody's swiped it!" ejaculated Toby, his mouth opening in his astonishment.

Nat looked all around him, and then, not seeing a single trace of the fine motorcycle, he began "barking," as Toby called it, after his own peculiar way.

"Gee, whiz, now what d'ye think of that for a hummer! The old story over again of the traveler on the highway falling among thieves. My stars, Elmer, now who under the sun do you think would be so mean as to run off with your machine!"

"I don't know—yet; but I'm going to find out," replied Elmer, setting his teeth in a way he had when greatly aroused.

They saw him bend down again, and start to examine the ground near a tree, against which he evidently had leaned the motorcycle at the time he hurried to the rescue of his comrades in distress.

"Get next to him, would you, Toby?" remarked Nat, as he watched the mysterious actions of the one who had been robbed.

"Why, sure, I can understand what he's doing easy enough," the other declared.

"Then for goodness' sake put me wise, won't you please?" cried Nat.

"He's examining the tracks left by the chap who got away with his machine while he was working with your old ice wagon!" observed Toby, proudly.

"Well, now, I guess that's just what he is doing, sure as you're born. And don't I just hope he gets on to him! How is it, Elmer?" as the scout leader started to move away.

Toby and Nat followed as close to his heels as they could, considering that he immediately moved into the woods; and they were compelled to trundle their heavy machines along, no easy task under the best of conditions.

"He went this way, all right. I only hope he won't think to smash the thing when he finds we're after him," said Elmer over his shoulder.

He was keeping his head bent low, and following the trail with apparent readiness. The lessons he had learned when on that ranch in the Canadian Northwest were undoubtedly coming in "pat" just now; though really the trail was so very plain that even a novice might have followed it.

"Who d'ye thing could have done it, Toby?" asked Nat, as he pushed his motorcycle through the scrub with a desperate intention not to be left behind.

"Well, Elmer hasn't said a thing yet; but all the same I can give a pretty good guess," returned the other.

"Go on and do it, then, for I'm all in the dark and up a stump. Put me wise, Toby."

"Huh, reckon you forget mighty soon!" grunted the other, who was struggling manfully to rush his heavy wheel along and did not have any spare breath, to tell the truth.

"Oh, slush, now I'm on!" cried Toby. "You mean them Fairfield chaps that came out here to break up Lil Artha's great winning streak?"

"Sure!" Toby grunted again, beginning to conserve his breath when possible.

"They flagged us, and saw a chance to put us on the blink!" exclaimed Nat who, like Lil Artha, was more or less addicted to present-day slang, though otherwise he was known to be a clean fellow, with no serious faults.

"That's it!" snapped Toby, gritting his teeth as though even the thought made him furious.

"It's a punk deal, that's what," Nat went on. "They just believe that if Elmer's out of the running the game is in their hands. But he can have my machine, if he wants to go ahead. If anybody can make it behave, Elmer can."

"Or mine either," declared Toby.

Now Elmer, of course, heard all this talk, even though he seemed to be devoting himself wholly to the business in hand. And at this juncture he beckoned to his comrades.

"He wants us to pick up, and get even with him," declared Toby.

"Sure thing. Guess Elmer is going to take us at our word, and borrow a mount," observed Nat, cheerfully.

Accordingly they put on an extra spurt, and managed to gain enough ground so as to come alongside.

"I heard what you were saying, boys," Elmer immediately remarked, as soon as he saw that they were up with him; "but you're away off in your calculations. It isn't one of those Fairfield fellows at all who's jumped my claim with that borrowed motorcycle!"

"W—w—what's that?" gasped Toby.

"I said that it wasn't a Fairfield fellow who ran off with my machine," repeated Elmer, more positively than before.

"Well, you make me feel like thirty cents," observed Nat; "now, what under the sun would one of our boys want with a motorcycle when, if he rides on it, for even a minute, he's disqualified in the race?"

"It wasn't one of our scouts either," said Elmer.

"Then for goodness' sake tell us who it could be, Elmer!" cried Toby.

"I haven't even glimpsed him once yet, though he's only a little way ahead of us right now," the scout leader said; "but judging from the fact that his shoes are all broken out, I'm almost dead sure he's some Wandering Willie."

"He means a hobo, a common tramp!" exclaimed Toby in astonishment.

"Tell me about that, will you!" cried Nat. "Just to think of a four flusher like that making off with Elmer's motorcycle, when he needs it the worst kind to block that nasty little game of the envious Fairfield dubs! Oh, it's a cruel world!"

"But we're goin' to get it back, don't you forget that!" Toby insinuated.

"You never spoke truer words, Toby," laughed Elmer; though there was little of mirth in the sound; for the boy was tremendously aroused by this new calamity that threatened to upset all his calculations.

"Hurry, hurry! I can go a bit faster, now that I know what's on!" declared Toby, although his manner of gasping belied his words.

"Oh, there he is right now! Look, look, Elmer!" cried Nat.

All of them caught a glimpse of some moving object that was pushing at top speed through the scrub ahead. Undoubtedly it was the party who had run away with Elmer's motorcycle. They had gained on him constantly, and were now surely overtaking the rascal.

"We're just bound to get him, fellows!" said Toby.

"That's so, Toby; it looks good to me," remarked Nat, as he strained every muscle to keep alongside the others.

Elmer, being free to make a sprint, since he had no machine to trundle along, suddenly left his chums in the lurch. They saw him leaping through the low underbrush as might a deer.

"Hurrah! He'll get him!" shouted Toby.

"Twenty-three for yours, Mr. Wandering Willie!" added Nat.

"Don't I wish Elmer would just hold him till we come up," added the other, with a threat in his manner that hardly became a scout; but then Toby had been a boy long before this scout movement was dreamed of, and the natural instinct is very hard to repress.

"Hey, do we drop our wheels, and make a spurt, so as to be in at the finish?" demanded Nat.

"You can, if you want to," replied his mate; "but something tells me a machine may come in handy yet, even if it is an old huckleberry makeshift like mine."

"Gee, yes! I didn't think of that," Nat muttered, still clinging to his motorcycle. "The hobo might strike the road again, you mean?"

"Yep, that's what, Nat."

"And go skeetering off on Elmer's wheel?"

"Just what I meant," replied Toby. "He's been making a sorter curve all along, like he wanted to strike the road; I noticed that, Nat."

"So did I. Don't like the job of pushing that machine through the scrub any too much, I reckon," Nat remarked, panting from his own exertions.

"And say, do you blame him?" Toby asked.

"Listen!" and Nat cocked his head as though he could hear better in that position.

"What was it? Did you catch a shout for help? Perhaps Elmer's caught up with him, Nat!"

"I thought I heard somebody call out, or laugh," Nat began, when he was interrupted by a shout.

"Toby – Nat, hurry along with your wheels!"

"That's Elmer!" gasped Toby, as he tried to add a little more speed to his forward progress.

"Perhaps he's got him under his knee, and is holding him for us," suggested Nat.

"That's silly," returned the other, immediately. "It won't hold water, Nat. Whatever would he tell us to bring our machines, if he had the hobo? Tell you what, I reckon he's made off along the road with Elmer's motorcycle, that's a fact!"

"And he wants one of ours to chase him with! Oh, I wish I could fly right now, so's to hurry!" Nat cried.

"A fine mess you'd make of it, if even a fellow like me, that's up to snuff, don't seem able to get it down pat," sneered Toby.

"I see Elmer, and he's waving his hand to us like fun!" exclaimed Nat, without appearing to take any notice of the slur cast upon his abilities in the line of aviation.

Elmer came bounding toward them just then, as though meaning to lend all the assistance in his power toward getting the machine he fancied, if there was any choice in the matter, to the road near by.

He clutched hold of Toby's motorcycle, possibly believing that its recent regeneration might prove fairly lasting.

So they came upon the edge of the road again, after making all that half circle through the woods and scrub.

Toby's first act was to stretch his neck, and stare along the road. A moving object caught his eye, which he had no difficulty in making out to be a motorcycle, upon which a ragged specimen of a tramp was seated, and which he was working at a great rate with his feet on the pedals!

"He don't know beans about how to run the engine!" Toby exclaimed, with sudden delight, as he saw this plain fact.

The road just there was as straight as a rule, for at least a couple of miles; and the fellow had not gotten more than a quarter of a mile away.

He happened to turn his head to look back just then, while the machine "yawed" at an alarming rate, threatening to dispose of the tramp in the bushes. To the indignation of Toby and Nat, the latter having also managed to reach the spot by this time, the Wandering Willie jauntily waved a hand toward them, as though bidding them a fond adieu.

There was a sudden sputter, and a rattling volley. Then away sped Elmer, mounted on Toby's old machine, which seemed about to redeem itself in this momentous crisis.

"Wow! Watch his smoke, will you!" shrieked Nat.

"Now will you be good, Mr. Hobo!" cried Toby; hoping in his heart that the pursuing machine might not take a notion to perform any of its frequent tricks and betray its new master.

The man on the stolen wheel must have heard that rattle as of artillery behind him, for Elmer never bothered using the hush pedal, such was his desire to speed up and overtake the thief who was running off with his mount.

They saw him look back over his shoulder as if in sudden alarm. Then his legs began to work faster than they could possibly have done in ten years, as he endeavored to pedal his stolen property at a rate of speed that would take him beyond reach of the relentless pursuer. But like a meteor shooting across the sky, Elmer bore down on the hobo motorcycle thief.

CHAPTER VIII.

TWENTY-SEVEN MILES FROM HICKORY RIDGE AND HOME.

"LOOK at the silly guy, will you! Thinks he can run away from a forty-mile-an-hour engine! I like his nerve, now!" exclaimed Nat.

"But Elmer's eating up the distance like fun!" cried Toby, dancing up and down in his great excitement. "Think of my old machine behaving so decent, would you! Why, she runs as smooth as grease—better than when she was new! There! He's closing in on him now like hot cakes. Watch what happens, Nat!"

They stood there in the road, with their eyes glued on the little comedy that was happening not a great distance away.

The tramp knew from the loudness of those rapid-fire explosions that the speeding motorcycle must be rapidly overhauling him. No need to turn his head any longer to size up the situation, which in his mind was becoming acute.

"He's going to skip out!" shrieked Nat, suddenly.

"Sure thing!" echoed Toby. "Look at him dragging his big trilbies along the road to slow up. Hope he don't run slap into a tree though, and bust things higher'n a kite!"

"There he goes! Hoopla!" shouted Nat.

They saw the tattered thief suddenly bring the motorcycle to a stop, or at least what looked like it from a distance. Then he fell over on the ground, and rolled into the bushes, as if only too anxious to get out of the reach of the owner, before he could lay hands on him.

Elmer shut off power and applied the brake, for he quickly came to a stop close by the spot where his machine lay.

"Chase after him, Elmer! Get him!" yelled Nat, as he and his comrade started to hasten along the road, Nat apparently forgetting that he might as well make use of his machine, if so be it would answer his demand.

But it looked as though wise Elmer saw no reason why he should get mixed up with a rough hobo, simply to satisfy his desire for revenge. He seemed to be bending over the motorcycle, as though investigating the extent of damages it might have sustained in being so hastily dropped on the hard road.

"Here, what's the reason we can't get along in style?" demanded Toby. "Hit up your old ice wagon, and I'll hitch on behind that far."

"Sure thing!" remarked Nat, as if the idea had never once occurred to him, he was so busy thinking of how he would like to lay hands on the thief.

After several attempts the machine decided to be good; and as it started, Toby managed to hang on in some fashion, until presently they arrived on the scene.

Elmer had raised his motorcycle and started the engine going, after dropping the rest at the rear, so that the back wheel could spin in the air.

"Seems to work all right!" declared Toby.

"Glad to say there's been no damage done, except a dent in the gas tank, and that can be easily pounded out later on," Elmer declared, as he heaved a sigh of relief.

"Are we going to let that hobo get off so easy; or do we chase after him?" asked Nat, glaring around at the neighboring woods, in the depths of which no doubt the object of his anger was snugly ensconced, watching to see what they would do.

"No use trying to get hold of him," remarked Elmer. "Forget it, and let's bump along the road. He just saw a chance to steal something that he really had no use for, and couldn't hold back. It's all right now, and no damage done. Get ready to start, fellows!"

In another minute they were speeding away, possibly much to the relief of the concealed tramp, who had begun to fear that he had stirred up a hornet's nest, and was likely to get stung pretty badly.

Ten minutes later, with all three machines humming merrily, they flitted past a roadside tavern.

"See that?" called Elmer over his shoulder to Toby, who was next in line.

"The road house, d'ye mean?" answered the other.

"Second signing station, fourteen miles, about, from Hickory Ridge," Elmer said.

"But you didn't make any move to stop," remarked Toby.

"No need," came the reply. "We wouldn't be apt to pick up any later news than what Hen Condit gave us. And we want to make all the time we can. Been enough delay already."

"But perhaps there won't be any more, from my machine anyhow, Elmer. She's going like a greased pig. That shake-up must have been just what the old buster needed." Toby bawled, knowing to what the other referred when he mentioned hold-ups.

Nat was trailing along in the rear, but coming apparently with no sign of another balk; although doubtless he lived in perpetual fear of something new springing a surprise on him. A motorcycle, once it gets to acting queer, can establish a reputation for opening up new avenues of trouble second to none.

"Hey, look ahead!" called Toby, presently, after they had covered another long distance of quite a number of miles.

Elmer, upon doing so, discovered that a couple of fellows occupied the middle of the road, and seemed to act as though they meant to stay there, no matter what came along.

As the motorcycle squad rushed toward them, Elmer had no great difficulty in recognizing Landy's cousin, George Robbins, and one of the Fairfield crowd, Angus McDowd.

They had their arms locked, and seemed on the best of terms with the world in general, though their steps had a tottery look, as Nat expressed it.

Finding themselves left far in the rear, these two had apparently made up their minds not to bother about who won the great hike; but to stick to each other, and take things as easy as they could.

Hearing the sputtering of the several machines, they looked back and waved their hands, evidently recognizing Elmer in the lead. Then they stepped to one side of the road so as to let the procession pass.

Elmer threw out his hand so as to warn Toby to slow up, as he meant to do that same, and did not wish to take the chances of being run down.

"How far are we from home?" shouted both the walkers, as Elmer came close.

"About twenty miles," he replied, for he had anticipated such a question, and prepared himself to meet it promptly.

"Is that all?" called Angus McDowd, who looked pretty much "all in."

"What's the news; who's ahead, Elmer?" called George, as the motorcycle passed.

"Lil Artha at last accounts, by a long lead!"

"Bully for Lil Artha!" both trampers shouted; for Angus was so tired himself that he really cared very little who won.

"How far ahead of us, hey?" shouted George.

"Only about thirteen miles, George," answered Toby as he flitted past with a fresh start.

"Oh, won't poor old Landy feel sore when he hears how the hope of the Philander Smiths has gone aglimmering!" mocked Nat, as he, too, went by.

George made a quick motion with his hand as though throwing something at his tormentor; then his care-free laugh floated after them.

About three miles farther along the road they discovered another sight.

"What's going on there?" shouted Toby, who again hung rather dangerously close in the rear of the leader, because he wanted a chance to exchange remarks from time to time.

"Looks like a breakdown, and that's a fact," Elmer replied.

"That's right," called Toby immediately. "It's Tom Cropsey, and he's trying to put a plug in his tire. He's got a puncture, and that ended his run as inspector."

The boy looked up as they drew near, and shook his head even as he grinned.

"All in, I reckon, Elmer, can't seem to fix her!" he called, as the scout leader flashed past.

Possibly he would have been glad if they had stopped in order to assist him repair the obstinate break; but Elmer had other fish to fry just then, and time was too valuable to waste in gaining a recruit who could never keep up with them for even half a mile.

So they presently saw the last of poor Tom, marooned so far away from home, and with night coming on apace.

Elmer knew that they might expect to overtake some of the others at any minute now, and every time he turned a bend he looked closely to see if there were not figures on the road ahead.

Nor was he mistaken.

A few more miles, and he saw a lone pedestrian manfully struggling onward, with a stout stick, which he had stopped to cut, assisting him. At first Elmer thought it was an old man hobbling along, until coming up on the party, the other wheeled.

"Hello, Jack, old fellow! making a game push for it, eh?" called Elmer, who had slowed down considerably, so as to give the contestant a cheeryword to encourage him in persisting.

"Wow, but I guess I'm pretty near the limit, Elmer," answered the other, who turned out to be Jack Armitage. "How far have I come since morning, hey?"

"About twenty-four miles," answered Elmer, as he passed.

"Gee, is that all? Thought it was near fifty!" lamented the scout, as he waved his cane at both Toby and Nat as they went by and doubtless cast an envious look at the machines that were carrying them over the ground so easily, while he was completely done up, and ready to cry quits.

"Next!" shouted Nat, who was really enjoying this thing of overhauling the various used-up walkers more than anything that had come his way for a long time; it is always so nice to spin along on a wheel, or a motorcycle, or in a car, and pity the poor fellows who have to walk!

"Well, there he is, right beyond," said Toby over his shoulder.

"Who under the sun is it?" demanded the rider in the rear, whose view was somewhat obstructed by his companions.

"Blest if I know; looks a little like our Ty Collins!" Toby shot back.

"It is Ty; anybody ought to recognize that old red sweater of his," Elmer announced; "and he's got a fine stone bruise on his foot, if that limp means anything!"

The contestant stepped out of the road as they drew near. He stiffened up to salute, game to the last, and chasing away the look of pain that had been on his boyish face.

One of his shoes was held in his hand, and he had been walking along in this way, determined not to give up until the last gasp.

"Better throw up the sponge, Ty," called Elmer, who had the authority to order anyone out of the race who in his judgment was unfit to continue further.

Ty's face told that he welcomed this command, as it released him from all further responsibility, and he could retire with good grace.

"What'd I better do, Elmer?" he called out.

"Station four just ahead; stay there to-night. Some one come for you in morning!" the scout leader shouted back.

"All right, I will. Hello! Toby, and you ditto, Nat. Who's winning? That fast Fairfield fellow, Wagner, passed me a long time ago, going strong."

"Oh, Lil Artha is miles ahead of him!" replied Nat.

"Hurrah for the pride of Hickory Ridge troop! Bully for Lil Artha!" they heard Jack whoop as they sped onward.

Thus one by one they were fast picking up the contestants who were spread out along the road to Little Falls, covering many miles from the leader to the fellow far in the rear, the Hope of the Philander Smiths.

"There's the other bicycle boy, Phil Dale!" shouted Toby a little later, after they had passed the tavern which had been selected as the fourth station.

"And he's near played out, too. Look at him wobble, would you! Wow, he can't do many more miles at that rate!" Nat yelled.

Elmer gave a salute to warn the rider they were coming and wanted half the road. As he swept past Phil called out something, but Elmer failed to catch what he said, the others also went whooping by, no one having thought to slow down.

And so both inspectors as well as a number of the played-out contestants had been overhauled. They were now fast coming to the point where a crisis would be waiting for them. Twenty-seven miles from Hickory Ridge and evening close at hand, when the miserable plot of the Fairfield schemers could be put into play!

CHAPTER IX.

NEARING THE CRISIS.

A SUDDEN howl arose from Nat in the rear.

Both Elmer and Toby knew what it meant. The tricky wheel of Nat had given signs of balking again, and they must make a stop in order to coax it to be good. Elmer seemed to have a "wheedling" way about him, both the others had confessed, when it came to patching up the peace with a mutinous motor. He seemed just naturally to know how to go about smoothing out difficulties in a way that told of his being a born mechanic, although as yet he had found but few chances to show his skill.

So Elmer, though not without considerable reluctance, threw up his hand as a signal that he meant to stop. Perhaps he might even have thought of leaving Nat, and taking only Toby with him; but after the other had stuck it out so valiantly all this while, it hardly seemed fair to abandon him on such a slight pretext.

So they were soon busy over the refractory motor, Elmer looking into the trouble with his customary skill.

"How many other fellows are there ahead of us?" asked Nat, who was hovering over the one who worked, eager to lend a hand if called upon.

"Quite a bunch," replied Toby. "Let's see, there ought to be Red, Matty, Lil Artha on our side, and from what we know about the Fairfield crowd we've still got to reckon with Henry Cobb and Felix Wagner."

"Just leave out Cobb, boys," remarked Elmer, as he worked rapidly.

"Why?" demanded Toby.

"Oh, he's all in, for a fact!" laughed the other.

"But say, we didn't pass Cobb; unless he was lying in the bushes along the side of the road. How d'ye know he's given up the fight, Elmer?" questioned Toby, bent on finding out.

"I saw him sitting in that number four station, with one of his feet on a chair, and being bound up," replied the scout leader.

"Shucks, you don't say so!" exclaimed Nat. "Whatever in the wide world do you think can have happened to him?"

"Perhaps he's been bit by a mad dog!" suggested Toby.

"Might a' been a rattlesnake; I've heard tell about lots of the critters being found up this way. One man used to hunt 'em just for the skins and the rattlesnake oil he got. Some people say it's mighty fine for rheumatism; and athletes use it a heap. Say, Elmer, what d'ye think?" Nat went on.

"Oh, nothing like all that stuff," chuckled the other. "Henry has just sprained his ankle, I reckon, and is getting it bound up. That eliminates all the Fairfield contestants but one — Felix Wagner."

"And him the most dangerous of the bunch!" muttered Toby.

"How does it come on, Elmer; think you can get it fixed? Gee, I hope so, because I'd sure hate to drop out now!" said Nat.

"It's going to be all right; just give me three minutes more, and I'll have it in shape for a long run," came the reply.

"Oh, that sounds good to me!" declared Nat; "because I do want to be in at the finish"; and secretly behind Elmer's back he doubled up his fist, showed it to Toby and the two conspirators grinned and nodded, as though they had their minds fully made up as to what they meant to do if the chance opened.

Elmer knew what he was saying when he made that promise. By the time the three minutes were up he handed the motorcycle over to its owner.

"There you are, Nat; give the engine a tryout," he said.

And as the other did so, with the result that the explosions started off with a rush such as Nat had not been acquainted with of late, he gave a shout.

"Runs bully, Elmer, you're just a wiz, when it comes to tinkering with things. I bet you the old hippo runs like a scared dog now. Here goes, fellows!"

He jumped for the saddle, almost missed it, and managing to climb on, went along the road furiously, though quickly slackening his speed as Elmer called out.

"How is it?" asked the latter, as he overtook Nat.

"Just oh be joyful, that's what!" answered Nat, who seemed tickled at the way his rickety machine was now behaving. "Why, she answers to the least touch, and is as spry as a young colt. I'm almost afraid she'll take a sudden notion to run away with me yet, Elmer."

"There's Red, boys! He's still hitting up the pace; but it's only grit that carries him on now!" observed Elmer.

Red had always been known as the possessor of a stubborn will. Although he was dragging his feet after him when first the three on motorcycles discovered him, no sooner did he know of their coming than he braced up wonderfully and pretended to be as fresh as in the start.

Again were a few sentences exchanged as they drew past. But Red did not deign to ask how far he was from home. He gave a shout upon hearing that the long-legged Hickory Ridge scout was said to be well in the lead; as though his one thought was to have his troop win out.

"Ambulance be along later, Red!" shouted Nat, who could not resist the chance to get in another little dig; but Red put his hands up to his mouth to serve as a megaphone as he yelled after them:

"Not for me; I'm able to walk back home again, if I want to, understand!"

Now they kept a lookout for Matty, who could not be far beyond. They discovered him bending down at a running stream where he had evidently been slaking his thirst, and perhaps bathing his tired feet, for his shoes were both off.

Again did Elmer give the "high sign," and the others took heed. The three riders jumped to the ground. That clear water looked mighty enticing; and, besides, here was the last fellow whom they might expect to overtake, save Felix and Lil Artha; and a wide gap was believed to exist between them.

"Come on in, fellows, the water's fine," laughed Matty, whose face looked as if he had dipped it partly in the creek, for the dust was washed in streaks; but his smile was just as genial as ever.

The trio soon slaked their thirst.

"Where are we at?" demanded the leader of the Beaver Patrol, who had made a pretty good bid for the prize, considering that he was not gifted with such long legs as the two fellows ahead.

"I think about twenty-nine miles out," Elmer returned.

"And with just two fellows ahead; but I've got a poor chance to overhaul 'em, though I don't give up yet awhile. That's all, ain't it, Elmer, Lil Artha and that muscular Dutchman, Felix Wagner?"

"That's all," nodded Elmer. "Glad to find you so filled with pluck, Matty; though it looks as if Lil Artha would have to carry the colors of Hickory Ridge troop to the scout master of Little Falls."

"How does the game stand; is Felix overhauling our chum?" asked the other, as he started to put on his shoes, making a wry face while doing so, as if his feet might be more or less sore.

"Not that we know of; for at last accounts Lil Artha had a lead of some three miles, and was going strong," Elmer replied.

"Then what in the mischief do you fellows look so serious about, that's what I want to know?" demanded Matty, whose sharp eyes had read something in their manner that told him everything was not as serene as outward conditions would seem to imply.

"Listen, then, and I'll try to tell you as quickly as I can." And saying this, Elmer started to relate how word had come of the detestable scheme

engineered by some of the rougher element among the Fairfield boys, looking to rendering Lil Artha ineligible as a contestant, by either coaxing him to ride in their auto, or if he persistently declined, forcing him into doing so.

Matty's indignation was immediate.

"What a lot of scoundrels they are!" he declared, between his set teeth. "If I wasn't a scout right now, d'ye know what I'd say they deserved?"

"Well, never mind," laughed Elmer; "don't commit yourself, Matty. And now, boys, since we've refreshed ourselves, let's be moving. This is probably the last stop we'll make up to the time we overhaul our chum who is so gallantly carrying our colors to victory. Come along, both of you."

Elmer had thought they could spare the few minutes needed to get a drink, and give Matty some hints as to how things stood. The leader of the Beaver Patrol had made such a brave fight of it, in that he had covered nearly thirty miles of territory since morning, that really he deserved to be told.

Fortunately both of the older machines started in decent order. Doubtless Toby and Nat breathed sighs of relief when this fact became evident; for they had been having so much trouble of late that they distrusted the working capacity of the worn-out motors to rise to an occasion.

But everything seemed going along smoothly, and once more the three sped along, passing the fifth station, which was the same Rockledge from whence the news had come concerning Lil Artha some two hours and more before.

"How far d'ye think he could have gone in two hours, Elmer?" asked Toby, who, as usual, was making the leader a pacer for his own progress, as he hung dangerously close at the rear of Elmer's machine.

"Well, if he was fairly fresh Lil Artha might make eight miles, and think little of it," replied the other.

"But he must be tired by now, and say he's made six, wouldn't that about fill the bill, Elmer?"

"We'll call it six, just for fun, and let it go at that. Look out for Felix about this time. He ought to still be half an hour behind the leader."

"Unless the conditions have changed a whole lot, which I don't think has happened," Toby called.

Elmer had even considered dropping off while passing through Rockledge, just to find out when Felix entered his name and time of arrival. But on second thought he decided that it did not matter much anyway; since it was not the persistent work of Felix that bothered them half so much as what the plotters meant to do.

Thirty-two miles' walk was something worth while for boys who had never made any pretense of being skilled pedestrians; and even the slowest in the bunch, George and Angus McDowd, need not be ashamed, after having tramped over twenty miles since sunrise, without any previous experience and no preparation, such as old walkers of the Weston and O'Leary type practice before starting on a long hike.

A short time after leaving Rockledge, they believed that they must have reached the thirty-five-mile stage.

Elmer gave his horn a little toot, that being his way of signaling to his comrades that he had sighted something ahead.

"Is it Felix?" asked Toby, fearful lest the reply might indicate that Lil Artha had fallen back to second in the race, and the sturdy Dutchman beat him out.

"It isn't our chum, anyhow," Elmer answered; "because he lacks half a foot of being as tall. Yes, it must be Felix Wagner."

"He's walking strong, Elmer!" declared Toby, anxiously.

"So is Lil Artha, you'll find," the other flung back.

"Do you think he can be far ahead still?" Toby persisted, just as though the boy in the lead could tell everything.

"I reckon he's holding his own," answered Elmer. "When we last heard he was half an hour to the good. Then we'll likely run across him a few miles farther on."

"Say, it ain't far from dusk now, Elmer!" sang out Nat from the rear.

"Oh, we know that easy enough," called Toby. "Just you keep your machine in good temper, Nat, and everything'll be lovely, with the goose hanging high."

So they flew past the Fairfield walker in rapid style.

After that little exchange of opinions the trio relapsed into silence for a brief time. The motors kept humming away as though out for business, and the regular music that his machine was giving forth seemed especially pleasing to Nat. Why, he was that delighted he could not bear to hush matters in the least by using the muffler! Who cared for the noise anyway; this was no crowded town for the police to interfere.

And now Elmer began to grow anxious. Felix had waved his hand to them in passing, and they had answered in a friendly way, Felix was not supposed to know anything about the mean plan on foot to further his interests at the expense of the one whose fine work entitled him thus far to the lead.

How would they find Lil Artha? Was the pride of the khaki troop holding out all right, or would they discover that he showed signs of weakening when that sturdy and persistent Dutchman in the rear would soon pass him by?

CHAPTER X.

FOUND AT LAST.

ELMER was thinking about the car that had started from Fairfield an hour before Toby and Nat learned about the scheme to waylay the leader in the great hike, in case he proved to be a representative of Hickory Ridge, and prevent him from carrying out his intentions not to ride a foot of the way to Little Falls.

It could have easily overtaken Lil Artha long before this. Possibly the four reckless young fellows in the car may have gone on ahead, to pick out a favorable place for the ambush, from which they meant to pounce on the walking Lil Artha and play their mean game.

He was looking on either side of the road as he went, as though the thought had come to him that perhaps he might discover the car in hiding; the plotters having decided to wait until dark before overtaking the leader.

Then another idea flashed across Elmer's mind, and he no longer bothered looking either to the right or the left. Instead his eyes sought the road in front of his motorcycle.

It was now beginning to grow a trifle like twilight. The glowing sun had sunk in the west, and left a legacy of red and gold to paint a few fleecy clouds that hovered there in the heavens.

So it was not as easy as one might wish, to discover signs on the road, especially when going at the pace they held. But here and there the conditions became a little more favorable. Perhaps it was because the trees were farther back, allowing more of that glow from the west to reach them; or else the shading branches had prevented the sun from drying the mud entirely, so that such a broad mark as that made by a poorly inflated automobile tire might be detected.

And this was just what Elmer was looking for. He found it presently, too; and was even able to tell that the car had been going at a pretty good clip in the same direction in which they were even then headed. This he did by

noting that the mud had been splashed forward, so that it struck trees ahead of where it had formerly rested on the roadbed. And the distance it had been thrown was proof of considerable speed on the part of the passing car.

So Elmer constantly found his previous experience in following a trail of considerable benefit when filling the position of a scout leader. Little things that others would have neglected to notice, or which, if seen, might be looked upon as mere nothings, assumed an importance in his eyes just as they would to an Indian born to reading signs when following a trail in forest or on the desert.

There was no especial need of shouting all this out for the information of the two fellows following after him. They were quite satisfied to leave the arrangement of things in his hands. All Toby and Nat wanted was a chance to have a say in the wind-up; and if the opportunity arose, to put in a good lick for Hickory Ridge.

All the while Elmer was trying to figure distances. He had taken note of the cyclometer at the time he passed Felix Wagner. It stood at just thirty-five miles then. And if, as they suspected, Lil Artha, the gallant Hickory Ridge representative, was some three or four miles ahead of his closest rival, it was now about time they were sighting the long-legged boy pedestrian.

Indeed, unless they soon came upon him, Elmer would begin to worry, lest those reckless blades in the Fairfield car had declined to wait for darkness to come in order to hide their actions, and had already carried their plan into execution.

It was therefore with a purpose that Elmer shaded his speed down until they were not moving along much more than twice as fast as a walker would go.

"Keep tabs on the road to the left, boys, as we go," he called back.

"What for?" demanded Toby, eager to do whatever the leader wished, and yet not able to see for himself.

"Notice any signs that might stand for a struggle," Elmer went on.

"Good gracious! Elmer, do you think they've jumped Lil Artha already?" demanded Toby; and from the rear Nat called out:

"Didn't you say you thought they'd hold over till it got dark enough so he couldn't recognize 'em, Elmer?"

"That's right, I did; and I still believe so," replied the leader, confidently.

"When I ask you to help me look for any signs of a free-for-all scrap, I don't believe we'll find such a thing; but I'm just insuring the correctness of my ideas."

"Oh, that's it, eh?" said Toby; though from the manner in which he uttered the words it could be plainly seen that he failed to fully grasp Elmer's true meaning.

But with three pairs of young eyes on the watch, it was not very likely that anything in the nature of marks indicating a scrimmage would escape. A lot of boys engaged in a wrestling match would be apt to leave many traces on the road; for knowing Lil Artha as they did, the three chums felt sure he could not be hauled into that Fairfield auto without a desperate resistance.

Once Nat sang out something that sounded as though he had made a discovery; and instantly Elmer gave the signal for a stop. With his heart beating like a trip hammer he dropped his machine and hurried back.

"Where is it, Nat?" he asked, eagerly, ready to attempt the reading of such signs as might be found on the dirt of the road.

Nat's eyes opened wide.

"Where's what?" he asked, as if astonished.

"Didn't you sing out that you'd seen something that ought to be investigated?" asked Elmer.

"Why, not that I know of," replied Nat, seeming rather confused.

"But you did call out something?" went on the other, hardly knowing whether to feel provoked or to laugh.

"Sure I did; but it was only to tell you I was feeling as empty as a sugar barrel that's been scraped clean. When do we get a snack, I'd like to know?" Nat replied, rubbing the pit of his stomach as if to indicate its state of emptiness.

"Well, if that ain't the worst cheek I ever struck," growled Toby; "to stop us just when my machine had got into its best stride, and was humming most beautifully!"

"Oh, come off your perch!" cried Nat. "I didn't stop you — never dreamed of such a thing. It was an accident, that's all."

"Never mind," remarked Elmer, as he prepared to mount again. "Not much time lost, and I've made sure that Lil Artha has gone along here, with the car in front of him!"

"What's that?" asked Toby, hardly understanding.

"Why, I've seen a place where our chum's footprint is marked in the tread the automobile tire made in the half-hard mud. That tells as plain as print the car must have passed him back here a little; for if he was not coming after it he could not have stepped in the trail left by the tire," Elmer went on, calmly.

"Oh, yes, I see now what you mean, Elmer; and as sure as you live it's a mighty clever idea. Takes you to think up all those things. That's what you learned when you were out there on the plains, didn't you?" Toby remarked.

"Of course," was all the scout leader replied; but he could not help thinking that in the case of some fellows it would be necessary for them to have about fifty years' experience out West before they could grasp the true meaning of clews and trails and such things.

"Is there any need now for us to look out, and try to find traces of a scrap?" asked Nat, as he balanced his machine and prepared to start.

"You might as well keep it up," came the answer.

"But if those chaps have gone ahead, what's the use?" demanded Nat.

"Because, don't you see," put in Toby, anxious to air his knowledge, "what's going to hinder them lying in wait, and jumping out on Lil Artha. Shall we keep tabs of the left side as before, Elmer?"

"The left—yes; but I imagine we're going to come upon our chum mighty soon now. That track was fresh, and I've an idea it wasn't made more than ten minutes ago, at the most fifteen."

Both the other lads looked admiringly at the one who was able so confidently to say such a positive thing. They could not imagine how it was done; and as their glances met they shook their heads, as though condoling with each other on their mutual ignorance.

Then pop-pop-pop, and they were all off in a line, with Nat, as usual bringing up the rear, and Elmer in the van.

Ahead of them, about half a mile away, there seemed to be some sort of a bend; although the shadows played around the spot so densely that even the sharp eyesight of Elmer failed to make sure just what sort of a curve the road took there.

He had what he called a "hunch" that once around this they would be apt to sight the one in whose fortunes they were so vitally interested. So away they tore, letting the engines out for all they were worth; and Nat, as before, utterly ignoring the fact that he had a muffler connected with his metal steed.

And as Elmer whirled around the curve he looked eagerly ahead. At first he saw nothing save a long stretch of road that seemed to mellow as it dropped a little in the distance. Was it possible that Lil Artha could have passed beyond the extreme limit of observation? If so, then the deduction

he had made as to the length of time elapsing since that footprint was made could not have been the true one.

Ah, what was that moving there under the trees about half a mile ahead, and just before the road took its slight downward pitch? Surely he had seen something rise and fall with regularity; and it could hardly be a branch.

The object caught his eye again. It was red, and Elmer suddenly remembered that Lil Artha always made it a point to carry a couple of big red bandana handkerchiefs along with him when about to indulge in any game, whether baseball, football or a fishing excursion that entailed a long walk.

Yes, surely that must be their comrade, who, hearing the familiar explosion of the motorcycle engines, and possibly guessing that some of the Hickory Ridge boys were following on his trail, had stepped aside to let them pass. And that waving of the red flag was not intended as a signal of warning, but simply Lil Artha's method of greeting his mates as they flew by.

He could see the tall figure plainly now, and even note how he carried his khaki jacket over his left arm, as the evening was anything but cool.

And Elmer felt a thrill of satisfaction as he realized that after all their troubles on the way they had finally come to the point where they were about to join forces with the gallant fellow who was on his thirty-sixth mile and still set upon arriving at Little Falls long before dawn closed the contest.

Lil Artha stood at attention. He had recognized in the leading figure the assistant scout master of the troop, and, like a good scout, believed in paying him the respect due his office. Under ordinary circumstances they were chums and ready to indulge in any sort of rough-and-tumble boyish wrestle, but when on duty it must always be a different thing.

So, as his hand came up in the regular scout salute, Lil Artha was surprised to see that the other was bringing his motorcycle to a slow down, as were also those in the rear, whom he now recognized as Toby and Nat.

Apparently, then, they intended to stop and speak with him, perhaps with the idea of giving him fresh courage to plod along over the ten miles or so that still remained between himself and his destination.

Nothing averse to having a little chat with his chums as he walked along, the tall scout stepped out from under the overshadowing branches of the tree.

"Hello, fellows!" he remarked. "Say, this is mighty nice in you, hunting me up just to say howdy and wish me luck. What's the news back along the line?"

"All pins down in this alley but one other besides you, Lil Artha," said Toby, quickly.

"And I bet you I know who that chap is—he comes from Fairfield and his name is Felix Wagner. How'd I get on to that? Why, what's the use of telephones if you don't use 'em? I called up and found out, you see. But don't you worry one minute. Why, I ain't near played out. Fact is, fellows, I'm getting my second wind, and right now I'm good for another thirty without stopping."

"Gee, you are a wonder, all right!" exclaimed Nat, admiringly.

"But listen, Lil Artha," said Elmer as they walked on in company, those who had motorcycles trundling them along; "we've followed you all the way from Hickory Ridge, which we left at four to-day, just to warn you that you're in danger of being kidnaped!"

"What!" exclaimed the tall scout, evidently astounded. "Say that again, won't you, Elmer? Me kidnaped! Say, are you joshing me now or what? Open up and tell me."

CHAPTER XI.

THE HOWL OF THE WOLF SIGNAL.

"WELL, I like that, now!" burst out Toby. "He thinks we've run all the way from good old Hickory Ridge, thirty-five miles away and more, just to hand him a string."

"And me taking all the dreadful chances of breaking my neck with this cranky machine that's got into its second childhood!" echoed Nat, indignantly.

Elmer paid no attention to these side remarks. He could easily understand just how Lil Artha looked at things. Not having the slightest suspicion concerning any crooked work in connection with the great hike, he could not comprehend what was meant by "kidnaping" him.

"Just what we're here for, old fellow," he remarked. "In the first place, perhaps you know it, and again you may not; but Mr. Garrabrant sent these two good scouts over to Fairfield on their motorcycles to take notes of the start made by the three fellows who meant to compete with us in this event."

"Yes, I knew about that," muttered Lil Artha.

"All right," Elmer continued. "They performed their duties, and then, according to orders, hung around to find out whether there might be any talk about some of those famous tricks that used to be played when Matt Tubbs was running things with a high hand over there."

"But hasn't Matt turned over a new leaf; did Mr. Garrabrant expect that it was all a make believe with him?" asked the other, quickly.

"No," said the scout leader; "so far as we can tell, Matt is in dead earnest about doing the right thing from now on. I reckon he'd be as mad as hops if he heard what some of his old mates have arranged."

"Well, hurry on and tell me, please, Elmer; I'm as curious as any old woman you ever ran across," and Lil Artha laughed as he said this.

"Late in the afternoon they happened to overhear a talk between two Fairfield boys, and then and there learned about the scheme. It seems that four fellows in a car had already been gone an hour. They were to run up to the head of the line, and find out just how things lay. If a Fairfield competitor was running in the lead, of course nothing would happen; but in case it proved to be a Hickory Ridge scout they had their orders."

"But see here, Elmer, wouldn't that knock them out of the organization. The rules of the scouts wouldn't stand for such an outrage," protested Lil Artha.

"Hold on, Lil Artha," interrupted Elmer. "You don't seem to get on to the real facts. Nobody said a word about any scouts being connected with this thing."

"Outsiders, then, you mean, Elmer?"

"Yes, some of the crowd that used to run with Matt Tubbs when he was the terror of the county. You know they broke with him at the time he saw a great light. Some of the best in the bunch followed him into the Fairfield troop. Others laughed at the idea of turning over a new leaf. And they say there's a new bully cropped up in Fairfield, a fellow who used to sneeze in the old days every time Matt took snuff."

"Yes," said Lil Artha, "I know — Eddie Johnston; and a bad egg he is, too."

"Well," went on Elmer; "he's engineering this deal. The idea is that these four fellows will try to coax you to enter their ear for a lift, promising that nobody will ever hear about it, you see."

"But they ought to know I'd laugh at 'em. I'm good for the rest of the hike, and could put on fresh speed if I sighted any feller coming along to bother me," the tall scout declared.

"Well, in that case they had orders to jump you, get you in the car by force, and carry you off, to drop you ten miles away, perhaps at Little Falls. In that way, you see, Lil Artha, you would be eliminated from the game, because you had entered a vehicle, which is against the rules. And the second one in the race would win. That must be Felix Wagner."

"Does he know about this?" demanded the excited scout, frowning.

"Of course," answered Elmer, "we don't feel sure about it; but the chances are he doesn't. No fellow who has his heart in the true principles the scout movement stands for, could take a hand in such a nasty game. And I'm hoping that if Felix learned what has been done he'd be the very first to declare that he wouldn't accept a tainted title!"

"Good for you, Elmer! I don't know Felix very well myself, but I want to think of him in that way, because he's a fellow scout. But look here. I guess I saw the bunch you speak of pass me by only a little while back."

"Yes, I knew they had gone on ahead, because I saw that in several places your footprint was plainly marked in the tread of the auto tire in the mud," said the scout leader, quietly.

"Well, I declare now, if you don't beat anything in finding out them tricks!" remarked Lil Artha, who frequently forgot there was such a thing as grammar in the wide world. "Nobody else'd think of that way. The rest of us have got heaps to learn. But I only saw two fellers in the car, Elmer."

"Oh, well, perhaps the others were hiding low down for a purpose," returned the one who observed things closely and figured out results. "If they all showed themselves you would be apt to know them later when they started in with their rough-house business."

"Then what d'ye think they mean to do?" asked the tall scout, anxiously; at the same time Toby and Nat noticed that his hands were doubling up into fists, as if the old spirit of self-defense had begun to run riot within him.

"They've gone down the road a few miles to some place that looks good to them. Then, I reckon, the bunch will pile out and hide till you come along. And while they're about it, they may disguise their faces in some way with handkerchiefs. When fellows are in for something that won't bear the light of day, they nearly always do that, don't you know, Lil Artha?"

"Sure I do," nodded the tall scout, promptly. "More'n a few times I've done the same myself, and so has Toby here. But all the same it's a mean dodge

to try and cheat me out of my honest dues. What're we goin' to do about it, Elmer?"

"It stands to reason that we don't mean to let the game go through," replied the one addressed, frowning. "I'm as much opposed to violence as any fellow could be; but there may come times when even the scout is justified in using his fists. Mr. Garrabrant says so; and if he was here, even if he is a man of peace, he'd say the same."

"That's right Elmer; I've heard him say that myself, and he'd laugh right out when he declared that he was a man of peace, and that he was bound to have peace even if he had to fight to get it," chuckled Toby.

"All right," snapped Elmer. "We must remember that we're up against a condition that can only be met by standing up for our rights. If those four rascals from Fairfield tried to push Lil Artha into their car against his will, he'd be justified in kicking and striking out in defense of his liberty, wouldn't he, scout law or not? And on the same ground, we, as his comrades, have the right to defend him."

"And by ginger we will!" burst out Toby, triumphantly.

"Make your mind easy on that, Lil Artha," declared Nat; "we haven't run all the way from Hickory Ridge to see our chum badly treated without putting in a few good licks for him. Gee, it will seem like old times! My style is getting rusty, and will need some sandpapering, I guess."

"Of course, talk won't amount to a row of pins," said Elmer.

"Not with that kind of skunks it won't," observed Lil Artha.

"As Mr. Garrabrant isn't here, and I stand in his place, I'll have to try and do what I think he'd commend," Elmer went on.

"About that peace racket, even if you have to fight to get it, eh?" laughed Nat.

"Wait and see," replied the scout leader, nodding his head, and giving the other a significant, look that made Nat's heart glad; for, like Red Huggins,

Nat had always had something of a reputation as a fighter, and found it most difficult to repress this pugnacious spirit after he joined the scouts.

"Lay out the programme, Elmer, won't you, please?" begged Lil Artha.

"Yes, tell us just what each fellow must do," added Toby.

"Well, I've been thinking it over as we came along," remarked the one to whom these appeals were addressed; "and this is the plan I settled on as promising the best results. In the first place, as these chaps want darkness before they show their hand, so that Lil Artha won't be apt to recognize them, the chances are they've gone several miles farther on before running the car in among the trees at a likely spot. Do you agree on that, boys?"

"Sounds good to me, Elmer; please go on and roll your hoop," said Nat.

"Beats all how you can hit things so close," remarked Toby; "because, now that you've mentioned it, I c'n see how they'd be apt to do just that very thing."

"I'm agreein' with the rest, so keep moving, Elmer," Lil Artha observed, deeply interested in the results, as he had a right to be.

"Well, then, suppose now we ride on behind Lil Artha for another mile. Then he can hold up when I give a little whistle, or he hears the faint howl of a wolf in the distance. The three of us will then proceed to hide our motorcycles somewhere in the woods, marking the place at the roadside so we can find 'em again easy later on to-night. After that we'll haul upon our chum, and keep a little distance behind him as he tramps on toward Little Falls."

"Bully idea!" declared the object of all this attention, shaking the hand of the one who had suggested it. "And a feller don't have to have more'n two eyes, with a mite of common sense back of 'em, to know what's goin' to happen when the Fairfield bullies jump out on me."

"Whack! whack! that's two down; one with the right, and t'other with the left duke, leaving only two for you three boys," declared Nat, making a

violent lunge in either direction, as though getting in trim after these months of idleness, when following the mild paths of peace.

Toby laughed.

"Say, what d'ye suppose we'll be doing all that while?" he demanded.

"Don't be so greedy, Nathan. It's one apiece all around. Nothin' could be fairer than that, and I put it up to Elmer here. Who wants to get cheated out of his share, tell me that!"

"I reckon that ought to be understood in the beginning," remarked Elmer, dryly. "Get this notion out of your heads, fellows. All we want is to protect Lil Artha. If talking would do it I'd say leave it to me entirely; but we all know it needs something stronger. So let each fellow try to capture one of the bunch in ambush and hold him. Perhaps they'll skedaddle as soon as they see us coming, and the job will be done without one blow."

"But if they do resist when we're trying to defend our chum, what then?" asked Nat, with the most agonizing appeal in his voice, as though he saw his dearest hopes fading, fading gradually away.

"Oh, that goes without saying," chuckled Elmer. "I don't think there's any real need of my giving you fellows orders along that line, because you know what the only remedy is. Only, please don't forget for one minute that you are scouts, and as such should hold your hand the instant the white flag goes up."

"Sure we will, Elmer, if we see it!" chuckled Nat. "You make me happy again. Gee! I was afraid you might say that under no circumstances was a poor fellow allowed to defend himself—that, like a lot of old women, all we could do was to grab an enemy and hold on, no matter how he scratched and bit and gouged. It's all right. We've got our orders, fellows. Nuff said."

All this time they had been walking at a rather stiff pace along the road that led in the direction of Little Falls, distant something like nine miles. When Lil Artha had said that he believed he was in possession of his

second wind, he evidently knew what he was talking about. At least the others were hard pushed to keep up with the long-legged contestant, hampered as they were by their heavy machines, which had to be trundled along with considerable effort.

"Fall back and mount, fellows," said Elmer; "and you, Lil Artha, keep listening for the signal to wait for us. Only a mile do we dare keep going; to get closer to the place of ambush might betray us, as they would hear the explosions from one of these machines, the muffler of which never works decently. Get that?"

"It's as plain as the nose on my face, and nobody can miss that," replied the other, as he started off along the road.

Elmer cautioned his comrades to make as little racket as possible, and presently they followed on their motorcycles.

About ten minutes later a low, weird sound floated through the air. To most persons it would have meant that some farmer's watchdog was uneasy, and baying at the stars; but Lil Artha knew better.

It was intended for the howl of the wolf, the sign of his patrol!

CHAPTER XII.

THE AMBUSH.

"I SEE him, Elmer," whispered Toby.

"Couldn't be anybody else," chuckled Nat, "because Lil Artha is as tall as a house, you know."

The contestant representing the Hickory Ridge scouts was standing there in the middle of the road, waiting for them to come up.

"Is it time, Elmer?" he asked, anxiously, as the other three joined him.

The gloaming was about them; indeed, since the heavens were beginning to be overshadowed by clouds, the dusk had already commenced to settle, earlier than usual in the end of August.

It had been a pretty fair day, but there was no telling what the night might bring forth; and Lil Artha, wisely looking ahead to a possible thunderstorm about midnight, was determined to complete his long hike as early as possible.

"Yes," replied the leader of the Wolf Patrol, quietly. "We're going to hide our machines somewhere about here, where we can find them when we need them a little later."

"And you want me to hold up till you're ready?" asked Lil Artha.

"That's the programme," came the reply. "You see, we expect that the four hold-up fellows must be hidden only a little farther along; and we want to have our part of the game fixed. Just sit down here, Lil Artha, and we'll be back again in a jiffy."

"Well, if it's all the same to you, Elmer, I think I'll keep on standing," replied the tall boy, with a chuckle.

"Oh, all right," replied Elmer; "you're the doctor, and ought to know what's best for your own case. Just wait for us here. Come along, fellows, and bring your motorcycles with you."

Of course there was no mystery about the refusal of Lil Artha to sit down. He knew from past experiences how difficult it is to get in working order again at such a stage in a long hike should he give way to the temptation and drop upon the ground. It was better to keep moving, and not allow any of his muscles to get stiffened.

Following Elmer, the others pushed into the woods on the right, where the scout leader seemed to think the conditions looked best for the hiding of the three machines.

It was not a hard task to secrete them in the bushes.

"Hope it don't rain before we come back again," remarked Toby, as he came out from the thicket where he had placed his motorcycle as carefully as though it were a brand-new one; for on account of its recent fairly decent performances the boy began to feel a return of his former affection for the wheel.

"We'll have to take the chances on that," replied Elmer. "These clouds may not stand for anything, after all."

"Often tries a big bluff like that," remarked Nat; "so we ain't going to worry about it. Besides, if the little circus is soon over, we can come here to get the bunch before long."

"Back to the road then, fellows," Toby observed, leading off with confidence.

A minute later Nat broke out again:

"Say, what d'ye know about this?" he remarked. "Don't seem a bit familiar to me along here. What're you laughing at, Elmer? Has Toby led us the wrong way?"

"Rats!" exclaimed that worthy, bristling up in indignation. "Don't you suppose I know what I'm about? Of course this is the right way to the road, ain't it, Elmer?"

"You might get there, if you kept on long enough!" admitted the other.

"But how far would we have to go?" demanded the incredulous Nat.

"Oh, about twenty-five thousand miles, more or less," chuckled Elmer.

"Gee, he's turned right around and is heading away from the road, that's what," declared Nat, laughing softly. "A nice guide you'd be, Toby, old chum. Think of us floundering deeper and deeper into these blessed old woods, when every minute is worth a heap to us right now!"

"But what did you let me do it for, Elmer?" complained the culprit.

"Well, you started off as if you wanted to show us what you know about woodcraft; and I thought the chance to open your eyes a little too good to be lost," Elmer replied.

"But we've wasted time by it," declared Toby, feeling disheartened.

"Only a minute or two, and that doesn't count much beside the lesson it may be to a couple of scouts I know," said Elmer.

"Tell us just how you know which way the road lies," said Nat.

"Oh, that is as easy as falling off a log," came the crushing reply. "I just kept my eyes about me when we were coming in, and noted that we were moving due east at the time, with the breeze exactly on our right, and you remember it was coming out of the south a bit ago. If it had been daylight I'd have known the points of the compass from the direction of the sun; or, that failing, by the moss that nearly always grows on the north side of the trunks of forest trees. There are many ways for a wide-awake boy to find out these things; but only when he keeps his wits about him all the time, and his eyes and ears open."

"I guess you're right, Elmer," grunted Toby. "Time I woke up and began to do some tall thinking, if ever I'm going to get out of the greenhorn class."

While the three were talking after this fashion, in low, cautious tones, Elmer had been leading the way in a confident fashion through the gloomy woods.

Both the others were now more than a little curious to ascertain just how near the point where they had left Lil Artha their guide would fetch up. So far as they themselves were concerned it was by this time all a confused jumble. If asked to point out the proper direction neither could have done better than shut his eyes and thrust out a hand at random; for they were very much turned around, now that the clouds had rendered it impossible for them to even decide which direction was west.

"Well, I declare!" ejaculated Toby, presently, "here's the bally old road, as sure as you're born, Nat!"

"Elmer!" said a low voice, as some object moved near by.

"And better still, here's Lil Artha!" declared Nat, lost in wonder as to how Elmer could have done such a remarkable stunt, and with hardly an effort, too.

"Sure," came in the same low tone. "Where else should he be but here just where you left him? But say, Elmer, you were gone a long time."

"Not a bit over five or six minutes," replied the leader, immediately; "and even then, we've had quite a lesson in woodcraft. Besides, Felix is half an hour behind, and there's little danger of his catching up, yet awhile."

"Do we start on again now?" asked Nat, who was opening and shutting his hands nervously in a way that might have excited the scout leader's suspicions had he been able to notice the movement.

"Yes, we're going to set the stage now for the last little scene in this act of the drama entitled the Great Hike Conspiracy," chuckled Elmer.

"That sounds good to me," murmured Nat.

"Go on, Elmer, and tell us just what you want us all to do," urged Lil Artha.

"First of all, you are to start on again, just as before, Lil Artha."

"Yes, I get that all right," replied the tall lad.

"And the rest of us will shadow you," Elmer continued.

"I don't quite understand what you mean, Elmer; will you keep a certain distance behind me all the time?" Lil Artha asked.

"You can make up your mind that we'll be close enough every minute to hear you whistle steadily as you trudge along," came the reassuring reply.

"And that means you'll get on to what they say to me when they show their hand: eh, Elmer?"

"Just what it does, Lil Artha," the leader answered.

"Fact is, I want to hear that little dialogue or conversation the worst way. Because, you see, we may have to repeat this story a few times later on, and we'd like to be able to have it all down pat."

"Well, what happens then after they show their teeth?" questioned the tall boy.

"You make up your mind which one of the lot you like best, and hang on to him with tooth and nail, as if you thought he was your long-lost brother. Get that, Lil Artha?" Elmer continued.

"I understand," came the reply. "You want me to count for one hold-up, so as to leave the other three to you fellows?"

"Well, you wouldn't be greedy, would you, and cheat us out of all the fun, after we've come all this long way, and risked breaking out necks time and time again?" remarked Nat, reproachfully.

"He understands, Nat," remarked Elmer, pouring oil on the troubled waters as he frequently did when little frictions arose in the khaki troop. "And there's no need of wasting any more time. Be off, Lil Artha, and success to you."

"Same here, fellows," came the merry reply; "and more power to your elbow, Nat"; from which last remark it was very evident that Lil Artha knew full well the impulsive character of the Scott boy, and how his desire to engage in "scraps" had not as yet been wholly tamed down by his becoming a scout in good standing.

Nat's father was the principal of the public schools in Hickory Ridge; and from the time that Nat started to attend he had possibly given the professor as much trouble as any lad in the whole town. Not that Nat was naturally bad, but his quick temper, and readiness to use his fists to settle argument, had drawn him into innumerable scrapes.

Accordingly, Lil Artha once more started along the darkening road, swinging out with those long strides which his length made possible.

Elmer calculated to a nicety just how far they ought to allow their chum to get before starting to follow. It was important that they should be concealed from the eyes of the four in ambush; and yet, on the other hand, he did not want to drop back to such a distance that they might be cheated out of hearing what happened when the surprise came.

In order to maintain a certain distance in the rear he had instructed the one ahead to keep up a steady whistle. Lil Artha was known to be a whistler, and often amused his chums by his accomplishment in this line. It was a gift, such as an occasional boy finds himself in possession of. And more than once had Elmer told his friend that he would make a good woodsman if only he turned his talent toward imitating the various clear sweet notes of wild birds.

They could hear him easily now, and Elmer fixed the sound in his mind. As he had cautioned Lil Artha to keep up a steady flow, it would become apparent that they were either diminishing the distance or adding to it, if that whistle became louder or softer in volume.

Five minutes passed.

Elmer caught a big sigh close beside him, which he knew must proceed from the impetuous Nat. Doubtless every sixty seconds that dragged by seemed like an age to the Scott boy; who fancied that after all their trouble perhaps they were going to be cheated out of their fun, and that the plotters had weakened at the last round.

Not so Elmer, who estimated things at their true value, and not by the rapid pulsations of an excited heart.

"Cheer up, Nat," he whispered in the ear of the other; "it's going to come pretty soon now."

"Oh, I hope so!" sighed the one who loved action above all things.

"He's stopped whistling, Elmer!" whispered Toby, excitedly.

"No, there he starts again," replied the leader, who in truth suspected what the little break in Lil Artha's melody might signify.

Possibly he had caught some suspicious rustling sound, and unconsciously held his breath for just five seconds in order to listen better.

Was it a false alarm, or would the music begin immediately? Warned by this suggestive hint, Elmer waited, fully expecting to hear a loud voice suddenly break forth from some point ahead. Since this was not "Out West" where lawless desperadoes held sway, it would hardly come in a hoarse demand to "throw up your hands," but in some milder fashion.

And presently Elmer realized that his guess had hit the mark. The whistle suddenly ceased. Then they heard a voice call out in the most familiar way possible:

"Hello, there, Lil Artha! Hold up a bit, won't you?"

CHAPTER XIII.

FRIENDS IN TIME OF NEED.

A NERVOUS hand gripped the sleeve of Elmer's jacket.

Nat was trembling with suspense; and doubtless Toby, on the other hand, was almost as badly off. Elmer had come to a halt as the sound of that voice reached them; but it was for only a fraction of a minute. He knew that it was policy on their part to creep up, foot by foot; because, when Lil Artha wanted help he would need it in a hurry. If they were too far away perhaps those energetic Fairfield plotters might be able to throw the tall lad into the car, and start going; when, as Nat might have expressed it, "the fat would be in the fire."

"Why, hello! Who's that?" they heard Lil Artha reply, in the most natural tone any fellow could display.

Of course he ought to show surprise at being suddenly hailed from the bushes so far away from home, and by some one familiar with his name.

Evidently the quartette at that came out of hiding and surrounded the tall lad; for his next exclamation seemed to announce this fact.

"Four of you, hey? Well, this is nice of you, boys, to come all this way just to give me a good word of cheer!" he remarked.

"Hold up, don't be in such a hurry to get along, Lil Artha," said one who seemed to be the leader of the lot.

"But how do I know how close some other fellow may be on my heels!" remarked the tall lad; although he evidently did not make any further attempt to brush past them.

"Say, that's just it!" declared the unknown, who, no doubt, had his hat pulled down over his face, and depended on this, as well as the gathering gloom of approaching night, to conceal his identity. "There is a Fairfield fellow hot on your trail, and he's bound to beat you out, because he's got his second wind."

"Yes," spoke up another, quickly, chuckling at the same time; "that's what we're bothered about, Lil Artha. We just can't bear the idea of you being beat to a frazzle by Felix Wagner."

"But I don't mean to be, you know, boys," expostulated the tall boy. "Little Falls ain't mor'n nine miles ahead; and if Felix has got his second wind, I'm in the same boat myself. Count on me to get there ahead of him, fellows!"

"But you might have an accident, stub your toe or something like that," declared the leader of the opposition.

"So might Felix," remarked Lil Artha, cheerfully.

"Yes, that's so," came the reply; "but you don't know the luck of that Dutchman. Everything comes his way, Lil Artha."

"Well, this hike won't, bet you a cookey!" remarked the other, stubbornly.

"He's right behind you, and coming like a house afire."

"Then what in the dickens are you keeping me waiting here for?" demanded Lil Artha, indignantly.

"I'll tell you," replied the leader of the four, mysteriously.

"Hurry up, then, and let me go ahead," ordered the tall lad.

"We've been talking it over, you see," began the other.

"It's plain enough that talking is something in your trade," commented Lil Artha, bitterly; and Elmer heard Toby alongside him chuckle softly, as though he might be enjoying these caustic remarks of their tall chum mightily.

"And we've come to a conclusion, Lil Artha," went on the other, as though he was not to be moved by any thrusts from the tongue of the contestant.

"All right. Glad you've come to something. Hurry up and spit it out, and then give me a clear road, won't you?" the one who was being held up remarked, sharply.

"The honor of good old Hickory Ridge is at stake," continued the unknown, in a solemn tone that suggested graveyards and all that sort of thing, Chatz Maxfield would have declared.

"Sure it is, and if you don't let up on this business it'll go aglimmering. I want to walk, I tell you," declared Lil Artha.

"Hold on, now. Easy, Lil Artha. We represent a committee of the Hickory Ridge boys, and have been sent out to make dead sure that you win this big hike; d'ye get on to that, now?"

"Well, it sounds all right, but for the life of me I can't place you among all the fellows I know," returned Lil Artha, suspiciously.

"Never mind about that; it don't cut any figure in the matter at all. Fact is, none of us want you to know us. Then you won't be able to give the game away."

"Game? What's that mean?" demanded the other. "Open up here, and show your hand, won't you?"

"We want to help you on your weary way, Lil Artha."

"With cheery words and all that?" queried the one addressed, with something of a sneer showing in his tone.

"Shucks! Something that counts better than cheery words. We've got a bully old car right here, Lil Artha. You can see it if you look."

"Well, I see it all right," returned the Hickory Ridge scout; "but what's that got to do with a fellow that's on a long walk, and anxious to get to the end of his journey, tell me that?"

"Huh, a heap, Lil Artha; and you must be silly not to see through a grindstone that's got such a big hole in it. What's a car made for, anyway?" demanded the leader of the ambushing party, while his comrades laughed harshly.

"Look here, what're you hinting at?" asked Lil Artha. "You don't want me to get in there with you, I hope?"

"Plenty of room for six, and there's only four along, Lil Artha."

"But I don't need any help that way," protested the tall boy, angrily. "I tell you I'm good for hours of hard grind yet. Not one chance in sixty of me losing out to that Felix Wagner. I don't care what sort of a hustle he's got on him. Just you clear the track, and watch my smoke, that's all."

"But we fellows of Hickory Ridge don't want to take the chances. Here's a bully opening for you to be carried along five miles in as many minutes. Then we'll set you down, and you can finish the hike into Little Falls as fresh as a daisy. You'll do it, Lil Artha, of course you will?"

"Of course I won't, and you hear me warble at that!" roared the tall boy, furiously. "What's more, I don't believe a single one of you live in Hickory Ridge. Just let me strike a match and have a look at your faces. Then perhaps I'll believe you mean honest, even if I can't take up your offer."

There was a slight scuffle at this. Evidently Lil Artha had attempted to put his suggestion into practice; but a ready hand had knocked the match out of his grasp just as he struck it. There was a sudden gleam of light, and then darkness again.

"No, you don't, old fellow," said a voice that was now tinged with anger. "None of that funny business goes with us, does it, boys?"

"Nixey, not this time," replied one.

"Quit kidding, and make him be good," growled another, who plainly had tired of the game as far as it had gone and wanted to be on the move.

"What's this mean?" demanded Lil Artha, just as though he could not as yet get the true facts through his fuddled brain.

"The bird that can sing and won't, must be made to sing, they say," growled the fellow who seemed to take the lead in the abduction game.

"Grab him, boys, and jam him in the car; that's the only way!" burst out a second of the quartette.

"Hold on here, do you know what this means?" asked the one who was being threatened in this fashion. "It's an outrage to stop me like this. And when you say you're from Hickory Ridge, you lie, that's what! You're a bunch of Fairfield cowards, and you're only trying to make me break the rules of the game so that I can't win! I'm on to your dodge, and don't you forget it!"

A series of scornful laughs greeted these words. Evidently the hold-up fellows felt so very sure that they had things in their hands that they could afford to delay a little; just as the cat, not feeling particularly hungry, will play with the mouse that has been maimed.

"Listen to him, will you?" jeered one.

"He's on, all right, fellows," exclaimed another; "he sees through the dodge, does Lil Artha. Oh, ain't it a great thing to be a scout, and use your brains! But all the same, we don't expect to let our big friend have his way, do we, boys?"

Of course they were clustered around the Hickory Ridge scout, cutting off all avenues of escape, even if Lil Artha should conceive the idea of running away.

"Not much, we don't," echoed another.

"Keep your hands off me now, I warn you all!" shouted the tall boy, aggressively; but in reality his words were intended to inform Elmer, Toby and Nat just how far events had progressed, so that they might arrange their movements accordingly.

"Are you going to get aboard?" demanded the leader, harshly.

"You mean of my own free will?" asked Lil Artha, fighting for a little time, so that he could make sure of having his chums come up for the crisis.

"Yes, climb in, Lil Artha!"

"I refuse; and defy the whole bunch of you. I'm going to stick to the rules of the game; and you can't make me change my mind. Bah!" the tall scout shouted.

"Tackle him, and if he fights back, don't be too gentle with the big cub. He's going to be carried five miles and more, whether he wants to go or not!"

As the leader snapped this out there were heard sounds of a scuffle. No need of daylight to tell those who were crouching so close at hand what was taking place.

Grunts and low exclamations told that Lil Artha was doing his level best to resist the onslaught of the four Fairfield rowdies.

Still, the tall scout from the Ridge was only a boy after all; and if those opposed to him were less lengthy, that was no reason they lacked in physical powers. And left to himself, there could have been no doubt in the world but that after a gallant resistance Lil Artha would have found himself bundled into the car, possibly bearing numerous cuts and contusions on his body as mute witnesses to the fight he had put up.

And once they had him in the tonneau, three could hold him tight while the other fellow started the machine. After that it would have been "one, two, three," in the language of Lil Artha himself, so far as his right to claim the prize of the great hike was concerned.

There could be no doubt but that the boy who was thus attacked was following out the suggestions given by his patrol leader. This was made evident by the loud cries of the fellow whose voice proclaimed him as being the leader of the attacking squad.

"Pull him off, there, can't you?" he yelled. "He's hugging me like fun, and got his long arms twisted around my neck. Hi, there! somebody give him a jerk before he chokes me! Knock him in the ribs, and make him let go, fellows!"

Nothing could hold Nat Scott back after that. The sound of battle acted on him just as the smoke of burnt powder is said to affect a horse that is accustomed to the roar of mighty conflict.

Nor did Elmer have the slightest idea of trying to keep either of his chums in restraint longer. The crisis had arrived, and Lil Artha needed their help, lest he be bodily kidnaped and carried away in that car.

So they swiftly bore down upon the scene of the fracas. In the gathering darkness they could just manage to distinguish a group of wildly struggling figures; for Lil Artha had one of the ambushing party in his embrace, and the other three were vainly endeavoring to make him break his hold.

"Remember, one apiece!" Elmer said, as they arrived on the spot.

Up to that second none of the Fairfield fellows had the slightest suspicion that their miserable game had reached a snag. One happened to discover the coming of a single figure, and apparently the only thought that flashed through his mind was that the next nearest contestant had somehow managed to arrive on the spot ahead of scheduled time; for he immediately began to shout aloud:

"Keep your hands off, Felix; this is our job, and you don't want to know anything about it. Go right along the road now, and close your eyes and ears. You've got a snap, and a soft one at that. Here, let go of me, you fool! We're your friends, d'ye hear! Quit it, I tell you! Wow! What's this mean, fellows?" And the one who was making all this outcry suddenly changed his tune from indignation to fright, as he noticed other vigorous forms attacking his companions.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THE PLOT FAILED.

"HELP, help! he's choking me! Pull him off, you fools, can't you?" shouted the valiant leader of the four, who had planned to have all this fun with Lil Artha, and now found that the shoe was on the other foot, since it seemed to be the tall scout who was enjoying a monopoly of the sport.

But instead of his mates obeying, he found that they had suddenly ceased in what efforts they were putting forth. The mystery was not difficult to solve, because every fellow had enough to do defending himself against an assailant who had apparently sprung from the darkness.

It was a lively scene for a short time. The Fairfield fellows understood that in some miserable way their scheme must have become known to the Hickory Ridge scouts. Perhaps they heard Toby call out the name of Elmer when asking what he was to do with the fellow on whose back he had lodged with the tenacity that the Old Man of the Sea exhibited when he refused to let Sinbad the Sailor put him down.

They struggled hard, but it was no longer with the idea of completing their cowardly plan. All thought of carrying Lil Artha off in the car was now abandoned, and each and every Fairfield fellow only considered his individual chances for making what Nat called a "get-away."

Speaking of Nat, that worthy was really and truly happy. Old times had come back again, and once more were his muscles being allowed to play their part in a struggle for the mastery.

He had early picked out the victim whom he felt called upon to punish. If pugnacious Nat could only have had his sweet way about the matter, that party would undoubtedly have been the leader of the four Fairfield schemers; but since Lil Artha already had that worthy "in chancery," as it is called when one gets his opponent's head under his arm and in a position of abject helplessness, Nat had to content himself with selecting a less prominent foeman.

What happened just then and there it would be hardly fair to state, because of the fact that Nat was a scout in good standing. But there were several loud thumps heard, and somebody seemed to pick himself up from the road twice, only to suddenly sit down again, with more grunts and finally decline to get up at all. Upon which Nat danced around him, making threatening gestures, and actually daring the alarmed plotter to try and get on his feet again.

Elmer, on his part, had happened to lay hold of a very slippery customer. The Hickory Ridge scout did not want to hurt the fellow any more than he could help; but at the same time he was bound to do all in his power to hold him; for he meant to take a look at every one of their faces, so that he could tell them again.

Twice the other had come close to slipping out of his clutches, despite the grip Elmer had upon him. The second occasion was when with some sort of movement, which he had possibly practiced until he had it down fine, the boy suddenly drew his arms out of the sleeves of his coat, and was in the act of darting away when Elmer threw out a foot and tripped him.

Again he pounced on the other, and this time managed to get a good grip, so as to be able to exert himself. The consequence was that he spun the Fairfield chap around on his back and was able to place a knee on his chest.

"Now, lie still, you, unless you want to get hurt!" Elmer exclaimed; and being by this time of the opinion that he had run up against a buzz-saw in action, the panting and defeated plotter gave in.

The clamor had for the most part ceased. Only Nat seemed to be doing an Indian war dance around his prostrate foeman and shaking his fist every little while in the fellow's face.

"Don't hit me!" yelled the alarmed one. "I'm all in, don't you see? I cave! I'm a prisoner, and scouts don't dare hit a defenseless fellow, do they?"

"Aw, you make me think of a coward that would hide behind a woman's skirts!" declared Nat, in disgust, because his enjoyment had been so

suddenly cut short by the collapse of his opponent. "Why don't you stand up and take your medicine like a little man? Just because I belong to the scouts I ain't allowed to hand you what you'd give me if you had the upper hand. It's tough, that's what."

Possibly Nat might have been tempted beyond his powers of resistance but for the fact of the patrol leader's presence.

"Hold up there, Nat, Toby, Lil Artha!" called out Elmer just then. "How is the world treating you, fellows?"

"All to the good here," chuckled Toby, who was still clinging to the back of his capture and showed no inclination to let go.

"My pig looks like thirty cents!" said the tall scout who, left to himself, had speedily reduced his opponent.

"And mine is on the blink, too," declared Nat.

"Shucks, I ain't had hardly a mite of fun out of it all! He laid down on me, that's what he did, Elmer."

"Taint so," bawled the fellow, indignantly. "He just went and knocked me down two times, and here he goes now waving his old fist under my nose like he wanted to do it some more. Call him off, Elmer, the game's all up and we cave!"

"All right, boys, glad to hear it," sang out the patrol leader; "but before we let you go we're bound to have a look at every one of your faces, so we can know you again."

There was more or less muttering at this, for the Fairfield boys began to see that they were doubtless in for considerable unenviable publicity on account of the affair. But beggars can seldom be choosers. They found themselves helpless in the hands of their enemies, and must do exactly what they were told.

So Elmer took out his match-safe and prepared to strike a light.

"See if you know the fellow you've got hold of, boys," he called.

Then the little illumination flared up.

"I know this duck all right!" called out Toby. "He's Dick Rawlings who used to play center field on the Fairfield nine."

"And I've got Eddie Johnston, just as I expected!" announced Lil Artha who, it will be remembered, had seized upon the leader of the quartette by whom he had been stopped on the road with the demand that he ride, whether he wanted to do so or not.

"I don't seem to know this cowardly cub," declared Nat, who had lighted a match on his own account, and bent low over his prisoner. "He makes the worst faces you ever saw, just to keep me from knowing him again. Here, stop your throwing your head around that way, or else you'll get burned! Hey! what did I tell you? Got a little dose of it then, did you? And one of your eyebrows singed right off! Well, you will be a beaut for a while now, and I reckon I can put my finger on you any time I want."

"You did that apurpose!" shouted the fellow on the ground, glaring at the grinning Nat. "You just wanted to mark me, that's what!"

"Oh, rats! Close your trap now and see how you can run," laughed Nat, as he took a firm grip on the collar of the other, and started to drag him up off the ground, the fellow whimpering all the while as though he really expected that he was going to be badly treated.

"Who's your bug, Elmer?" cried Lil Artha.

"I think his name is Sandy Coons; anyhow he's got cross-eyes and that ought to mark him, if ever we want to prove that he was here," replied the patrol leader, as he assisted the fellow to get up.

"That's O. K., Elmer," declared Lil Artha. "Sandy Coons has got a pair of the crookedest eyes ever; and if you look close you'll see he's got a notch in his right ear. I remember when he got that, too; a fellow he was with pinned his ear to a tree with an arrow he fired, when they were playing Buffalo Bill's Wild West, and when Sandy tore loose it left a dent. Is it there, Elmer?"

"Sure as you live," laughed the other, as he looked.

"Then we know the whole cahoot of 'em," declared Lil Artha, "And now, please hurry up and get 'em on the jump, Elmer, because it's time I was hiking out again, you understand."

"What're you going to do with us, fellows?" asked the leader, as they were being ranged in line.

"We're going to start you down the road to meet Felix and tell him the game's all up," said Toby, who seemed to believe the Fairfield competitor must be aware of the scheme by means of which he was to be benefited; though Elmer on his part thought better of the rival scout.

"But—our car is here," expostulated one of the prisoners.

"Then come back and get it later on; we don't mean to run away with it. But if you take my advice, you'll cut for home right away, because this thing has gone to the limit. And anyone trying to hamper Lil Artha any further is liable to get himself seriously hurt. Understand that, all?" and Elmer allowed his voice to express the indignation that surged through his soul.

"Aw, let us loose! You know we've thrown up the sponge, and it's to the tall timber for the lot," grumbled the leader.

Nat suddenly made a rapid movement. There was a cry, and then a fellow started at a rapid pace along the road. Nat, unable to hold in any longer, had given his prisoner the start he promised, which, of course, meant a hearty kick.

Elmer let his captive go scot-free, which fact so aroused the indignation of Nat that he darted after the fleeing Sandy Coons, and by rapid work succeeded in placing his number seven in the place where it would do the most good. At least the others judged this from the agonized shriek that floated back to their ears.

Lil Artha was quick to see a good thing and show his appreciation. In his mind imitation was the sincerest flattery; and accordingly the successor in

the bully line to Matt Tubbs was heard to loudly declare that he would never, never cease to remember the long-legged scout; but upon hearing the aggressive Nat making in his direction he, too, faded away.

That left only one to be treated, and this the chap whom Toby had been riding as he might a horse. This fellow, understanding that he was in for a good dose of the same kind of medicine, began struggling again, hoping to upset his captor and in some way make off without submitting to that humiliating experience.

It was of no use, however. Lil Artha took hold of him, and then told Toby to let go. There was some little confusion, and then the fellow galloped madly up the road, bellowing as though in pain.

"Did you get him?" asked Toby, eagerly.

"Well, I nearly broke my toe, because you see I'm wearing light walking shoes on this hike. And how about you, Toby?" laughed the tall one.

"Dick Rawlings won't play ball for a little while; till he gets over his limp, anyway," answered the other.

"Field's clear now, Elmer, ain't it?" asked Lil Artha, turning to the patrol leader for further orders.

"Yes, and the sooner you're off again the better, Lil Artha," replied Elmer. "You see, that Felix has been coming along all this while, and perhaps he may be nearer than we think. How is it with you now; ready to put in your best licks on the home stretch?"

"I'm just feeling as fresh as a daisy, Elmer," replied the other. "This little business seems to have given me a new appetite. You watch me just eat up the miles. Nine of 'em, do you say? Shucks, I'll be in Little Falls before two hours!"

"Bully for Lil Artha!" exclaimed Nat, clapping his hands.

"Well, we'll put it out of the power of these fellows to pursue you any farther, by taking their spark plug along. Ten to one they haven't got an

extra plug with them. And, Toby, Nat, we mustn't forget that we've got machines a ways back here."

"That's right, Elmer. Do we get a move on us, and go for 'em now?" asked Nat.

Lil Artha had already waved his hand at them, and started off along the road at a stiff pace, which seemed to emphasize the truth of what he had just said about feeling as "fresh as a daisy."

"That's just what we're going to do," replied the other; "so come along boys."

"Gee! I hope we happen to run foul of one of them fellers again," laughed Nat.

"Don't be a hog, Nat," admonished Toby. "You had ought to remember that now you belong to the scouts you've got to be merciful."

"Ain't I?" protested the pugnacious one. "Didn't I just kick that feller with the singed eyebrow, when I might have punched his head? Guess I know my duty, Toby Jones!"

CHAPTER XV.

VICTORY – SISS! BOOM! HURRAH!

ELMER was as good as his word. He knew how to cripple the car, and in almost no time he had secured the vital plug without which the machine was valueless for following after Lil Artha, and making him any more trouble.

Then he and his two chums hurried back along the road, meaning to look up their motorcycles; and once mounted upon these they could speedily overtake Lil Artha; to form a guard of honor about him while he covered the last few miles of his long and adventurous hike, that was to bring new glory to the khaki troop of Hickory Ridge.

Nat ran on ahead. They knew full well that it was not any eagerness to be the first to discover the marked spot near which the machines had been secreted that influenced him to do this, but some other motive, possibly not quite so worthy of commendation.

But even Elmer did not say a word. In the first place he did not think Nat would be successful in overtaking one of the Fairfield schemers; and then again, Elmer was not feeling any too kindly toward fellows who could try to put through such a mean plot for defeating the ambitions of the leader in the great hike.

"Hold on, there; come back, Nat!" called Toby, presently. "You've gone and overrun the place. It's lucky Elmer here took note of this big oak tree; or a pretty time we'd have finding our wheels again."

Nat did return, but with a bad grace. He was mumbling something about "hard lines when everything goes against a fellow," and all that sort of stuff; but no one appeared to pay any attention to his complaint.

They quickly found the three motorcycles, just as they had left them; and again Toby started out to lead the way, only to make a mess of it.

"What's wrong this time, Elmer?" he asked, when the patrol leader gave him to understand that they would be a long time getting out of the woods if they kept on the route he, Toby, had started to follow. "I made sure to notice that the wind was on the same side as when you led us out before."

"Yes, but since then the wind's taken a sudden shift. You should have paid attention to that just when we left the road," remarked the other. "A woodsman never goes by what it was a while ago. He knows changes are liable to come around most any old time; and that's what happened here. Wind whipped around about ten degrees, and is heading from the southwest quarter now. That may mean rain before long, boys."

"Let her come if she wants," declared Toby, who was something of a philosopher at times. "Can't do any more than soak us through, and at this time of year that's nothing. I've fallen into a pond more times than I've got fingers on both hands. They just can't drown me, and that goes, boys."

"So long as Lil Artha comes in well to the front, and the Hickory Ridge scouts win the big hike, what do we care?" Nat spoke up. "Besides, we've had a little mite of fun, you know, fellows."

"Fun for the boys, but how about the frogs?" laughed Elmer, as he pushed his machine through the low brush, heading for the road again.

"Let the bullfrogs look out for themselves, that's all," declared Nat. "Any silly gump who will duck his head about, when a feller's holdin' a lighted match close to his nose, just ought to get burnt. Say, think of that guy minus one of his eyebrows; and he's got big ones too, at that! Won't he be the sight, though!"

So, joking and laughing, they pushed on. Presently the road being reached, they proceeded to get a start. Fortunately the incline was downhill, if anything, which promised to make it easier for a mount. Had the opposite been the case one or more of the boys might have had some difficulty in getting started.

Elmer was away first, with a merry splutter of explosive sounds; but he quickly shut off most of his power in order to wait for the others. Toby came along after two efforts at mounting; but Nat seemed to be having one of his old troubles. This time, however, the fault apparently lay in Nat, and not in his motor, for they could hear the racket the engine kept up.

"Here he comes like a skyrocket!" announced Toby, as the character of the sounds from the rear changed; and sure enough they quickly heard Nat whooping it up.

"Clear the track, there! Get out of the road everybody, and give me room. Hi! My old ice wagon's taken the bitt in her mouth; she's running away with me, Elmer! Look out there!"

Luckily Elmer had insisted that each of them light the acetylene gas lamps belonging to their motorcycles before attempting to make a start. Hence they were able to see Nat bearing down upon them with a rush, and get to one side of the road in a hurry.

He went whizzing past amid a rattle and confusion, for, as usual, Nat had paid no attention to his muffler.

"Somebody head me off!" came floating back, as the runaway machine went whirling along the road leading to Little Falls.

"Good gracious! What can we do?" gasped Toby.

"You stick by Lil Artha!"

Even as he shouted these words Elmer was giving his machine its head, and quickly he vanished from the view of the other around a bend.

It was no easy task that now presented itself to the young patrol leader. Had it been a runaway horse there might have been some hope of the rider controlling it; but with a motorcycle that took what seemed to be a fiendish pleasure in doing just the things its owner did not want done, the case was a different matter.

Something had become jammed, so that poor Nat, having opened his engine up wide on starting, was unable to shut off power. And there he was, rushing along at a reckless speed, headed for Little Falls by the most direct route.

Somebody shouted out something as Elmer sped along. He guessed it must be Lil Artha, who had discreetly sought the side of the road upon seeing that fierce light bearing down upon him. But Elmer could not find time to reply. Besides, there was Toby, who would be along presently, and in a condition to tell the tall scout just what was taking place.

Elmer was keeping a bright lookout ahead. He knew that, given a fair field, he could easily overtake the runaway motorcycle; but this thing of rushing along in the darkness was no child's play. At any second he might bang into some obstacle that would give him a nasty tumble.

Besides, he had to keep watch over the leading machine, so that he might not run into Nat; which would be the worst sort of calamity that could happen to them both.

At least he was gaining fast now; he could tell that by the glow from the other lamp which lighted up the road ahead.

Presently he found himself within speaking distance. He could just barely see Nat humped there in his saddle, giving his entire attention to keeping his runaway machine in the road.

"Hello, Nat ahoy!" he called aloud, so that the sound of his voice might reach the other above the clattering of his "cantankerous" motor, as Nat himself was fond of calling his engine, which was now on such a wild plunge.

"Hey, that you, Elmer?" came back to him; and the patrol leader imagined there was a trace of alarm as well as vexation in the voice.

"Yes, can't you keep over on the left side of the road? I want to come closer to you so we can talk," Elmer called.

"All right. Half is good enough for me; so come right along, Elmer."

In another minute they were nearly abreast, each striving to keep to his side of the thoroughfare as best he could.

"Steady, now, Nat," said Elmer. "Be careful how you let her yaw this way, for I'm only a length behind you; and a mix-up wouldn't be the nicest thing going."

"I'm holding her steady, Elmer. Now, tell me how I'm going to get the curb on her, won't you?"

So Elmer began by asking questions concerning what seemed to have become jammed; and in this way he quickly understood the situation. A few suggestions followed, which, upon being put into practice, brought forth a loud cheer from the relieved owner of the runaway motorcycle.

"It's all right now, Elmer! That last move did the business for her! She minds her head now; see, I can slow down just as I please. But, wow, that was a lively dash as long as it lasted. I sure began to think I'd bump into Little Falls like a falling comet, and run up against a stone wall; when good-bye to my neck."

"Well, suppose then we turn around, and see if we can pick up the others. Try it first, and see if things work smooth," and Elmer jumped from his saddle as he said this, assisting Nat make the test.

Having made sure of this they returned along the road, though at a much less rapid pace than they had recently shown in covering it. The light from Toby's lamp told them when they were nearing the walking Lil Artha; and presently the four Hickory Ridge scouts were together.

"I tell you what," remarked Toby, heaving a sigh, "I'll be awful glad to get you safe back home again, Nat Scott. What you haven't tried the last few hours ain't worth telling. And now that your old huckleberry of a machine has taken to cutting up monkey shines a feller's life ain't safe nohow."

Lil Artha seemed to be in the best of humor. Things were, as he himself remarked, "breaking all right for a fellow of his size," and he had no cause for complaint.

"Just a few little incidents to liven up the last quarter of a pokey hike, boys," he observed, as he strode along, with those lengthy legs covering a yard at each and every step. "Why, I'll be entering Little Falls like a conquering hero, with a guard of honor around me. Shouldn't wonder but what we'll run across Mr. Garrabrant there, keeping company with the other scout master."

"That's just what you'll do," remarked Elmer over his shoulder as he rode slowly along in the van of the procession; "because he went ahead with that idea in view, to be on hand to receive the first contestant who showed up."

They enlivened the journey with all sorts of conversation and jokes. Wearied as Lil Artha must certainly be, after coming all these long miles since sunup, his chums sought to make him forget the fact by keeping him in high spirits.

Nothing happened to interfere with their plans. Those who were inclined to act ugly toward the possible winner were a long way in the rear, and only concerned about getting home again with the car that belonged to the father of one of the quartette.

It was not a great while after nine o'clock when the lights ahead told that they were approaching a town.

"That's Little Falls, brother!" called Elmer, cheerily.

"Well, honest now, I ain't sorry to know it," declared Lil Artha; "though, if I had to do it, I reckon I could crawl along a little farther, p'raps a dozen or two miles. If anything's won this walk for me, fellows, it's just been pluck. You can tell me all you want to about athletes and such, but in my opinion that's what counts above condition and everything else. As long as you keep up heart you've got a look-in; but when the sinking spell comes, good-by."

Ten minutes later they entered among the houses. Immediately some boys in khaki who were posted along the road as a sort of vedette corps, began to call out to one another, uttering cries like the fox and the bear, which doubtless denoted the nature of their patrols.

Presently there was quite a crowd accompanying Lil Artha as he headed for the church where the local troop of Boy Scouts had their headquarters.

Here there were many lights, and a lot of people assembled. When Lil Artha passed through the open doorway a tremendous outburst of applause greeted his appearance. He doubtless felt something of the thrill of victory that used to come to the Grecian victor in those old days of the Marathon races.

Mr. Garrabrant beamed with pleasure when he saw that it was a Hickory Ridge boy who had come in first. Heartily did he shake hands with Lil Artha and congratulate him on his pluck in making the entire distance with hours to spare.

And when a little later on, while waiting to see if Felix came in before the storm broke, the scout master listened with the greatest possible interest while Elmer related what was known about the evil intentions of those four scheming lads from Fairfield; and also laughed when he heard how their designs had been signally defeated by the bravery and intelligence of Lil Artha's faithful chums.

CHAPTER XVI.

"THE FINEST THING THAT EVER HAPPENED TO FAIRFIELD!"

AFTER the second in the race, Felix Wagner, had come in, one of the first things the boy from Fairfield did was to hunt out Lil Artha, shake hands with him heartily, and congratulate him.

"I'd like to have beat you, all right," he said with a whimsical grimace; "but I take it no fellow had need of feeling ashamed about playing second fiddle to such a giant on a hike as you, Lil Artha. And that goes."

Elmer had watched this meeting with eagerness; and he immediately turned to Mr. Garrabrant.

"That settles one thing I've been worrying about," he declared, emphatically.

"Meaning that this Fairfield lad has had no knowledge of the miserable game that some of his misguided friends were engineering in his behalf; is that it, Elmer?" remarked the gentleman, understanding what he had in mind.

"Yes, sir," came the reply. "You see, from all accounts, in the old days this same Felix Wagner was one of the right bowers of Matt Tubbs. And somehow I seemed to be making up my mind that if he had a hand in this ugly deal, there was a screw loose somewhere in this reformation business over there."

"But now?" asked Mr. Garrabrant, smiling.

"It looks good to me, as Lil Artha would say," replied Elmer. "If ever a fellow seemed in earnest, Felix was when he said those words just now. And I feel positive that when he hears the story of how some of his friends tried to make Lil Artha ride, so as to knock him out of the race, Felix will be furious."

Which prediction proved to be the case a little later; but we cannot afford either the time or space to go into particulars with regard to this.

"Now we have another job before us," remarked Mr. Garrabrant, when ten o'clock had arrived.

"You mean looking up the cripples—those who are ready to admit that their hope of reaching Little Falls within the required time has died out; and who will be only too willing to get a lift back home?" Elmer suggested.

"Why, yes, some of them must be in a pretty bad way; and as it still threatens rain we must look them all up. I have three cars here that can be used for the job. Would you care to run ahead, and try to hunt them up, Elmer?"

"Yes, on one condition," came the reply.

"Oh, you can consider that it is granted before you ask; but what is its nature?" Mr. Garrabrant inquired, laughingly.

"That I ride alone," answered the boy.

"Oh, I see," the scout master went on, nodding his head wisely; "you dread having Toby and Nat along with their decrepit wheels to add to your troubles."

"Yes," said Elmer, seriously; "because I can make much better time alone, rain or not. Besides, I think the boys ought to have a rest; and it would really be better if they put up here in Little Falls with some Boy Scout friends until to-morrow, when they can come home."

"All right; I shall so advise them; though if they choose to leave their motorcycles here until some future day, they can just as well ride back in a car."

Both Toby and Nat, however, had friends in the town, and concluded to stay over. Their machines had taken on a new life apparently, since their association with Elmer and they were much encouraged.

Accordingly, the leader of the Wolf Patrol started out. Fifty miles or so does not amount to a great deal when mounted on a good motorcycle; and if

that threatened storm would only hold off a few hours, Elmer felt that he would have little cause for complaint.

As he rode along the thoroughfare he frequently sounded his horn in such a way that any stragglers would know it was meant for a signal to show themselves. It was to be Elmer's duty to warn them that the cars would soon be along, and that they could get back to Hickory Ridge in that way if they preferred.

About five miles out he heard a shout, and some one who was standing alongside the road waved his hat. It was Matty, the leader of the Beaver Patrol.

Elmer immediately jumped off his machine and put the question up to his fellow scout. But he really knew what the answer would be before the other opened his mouth.

"What, me give up, when I'm within smelling distance of my goal?" declared the determined Matty. "Not for Joseph! I'm going on and report to the headquarters of the Little Falls troop; and get back home to-morrow someway or other. But I'm glad Lil Artha got the prize. He's a dandy on a hike, I tell you; and Hickory Ridge is proud of him, sure as you're born! So long, Elmer; get word to my folks, if you can; though I warned 'em not to look for me to-night."

Then Matty strode off bravely, though Elmer detected a slight limp which even his game qualities could not entirely conceal.

A little later on he picked up Red Huggins and Phil Dale, the latter having given up, as he was utterly worn out. They had started a fire alongside the road and were preparing to pass the remainder of the night after the fashion of true scouts. In view of the possibility of rain the boys were even then starting to make some sort of shelter from branches and such stuff as they could find.

Of course they received the good news with tremendous satisfaction; and declared that they would be only too delighted to get a chance of a lift back home.

"Hope they'll let me fasten my old wheel behind, somehow?" remarked Phil; and Elmer assured him that that had all been arranged for.

So leaving them, with an exchange of cheers, Elmer rode on.

One by one he came across Jack, Ty, George, and the Fairfield fellow, Angus McDowd, the latter still in company with young Robbins. And every one of them expressed the greatest satisfaction when they heard how Mr. Garrabrant did not mean that they should spend the night away from home but would speedily be along with a number of cars calculated to carry them back to Hickory Ridge.

Even Tom Cropsey was located, he having taken refuge in the branches of a tree, because of a farmer's vicious dog that kept barking savagely not far away; and Tom happened to be particularly timid about strange dogs. His wheel being useless, and himself too cramped for walking, he had "camped" after his own fashion.

Thus all were restored to their homes that night save the other Fairfield boy who had sprained his ankle and was in bed at the tavern; Matty, who declined to be brought back until he had finished his task; and Elmer's two companions, Toby and Nat, with their unreliable motorcycles.

Of course it was well along into the morning before the last automobile reached Hickory Ridge with the balance of the contestants; and as nearly everybody had long before gone to bed, the victor was not received with any great acclaim; at least the factory whistles were not blown, nor the church bells rung. But a few of the faithful scouts, who were bound to make a night of it, had waited up at headquarters; and these fellows gave three hearty cheers when they saw the long-legged Lil Artha step stiffly from the leading car.

When, on the following night, a regular meeting of the troop was held, every fellow made sure to be in attendance; for it had been announced that the several contestants in the great hike, as well as the five who had gone forth on bicycles and motorcycles, intended giving a detailed report of what adventures had happened on the way; and it was expected that there would be some stories worth listening to.

The indignation of the boys was intense when they heard how those Fairfield four had tried to block Lil Artha's game and, by forcing him to ride, render his claim to be a contestant under the rules null and void.

"But listen, fellows," said Elmer, who presided in place of the scout master, called out of town on sudden business; "don't be too quick to blame the Boy Scouts of Fairfield for that rascally piece of business. Matt Tubbs called me up on the phone this afternoon and wanted me to express the indignation of himself and his comrades over the matter. He declared that they had not the faintest indication of the affair; and that it was engineered entirely by some 'outcasts,' who, having declined to subscribe to the twelve cardinal principles of the new movement, were doing everything in their power to wreck the troop over there."

"Well, they won't succeed, that's all," declared Lil Artha, confidently; "because my father says he knows that the best people of both Fairfield and Cramertown are just daft over the change that has taken place among the boys there ever since the scouts were organized, and that they mean to stand back of the movement through thick and thin. They say the organization of the scouts was the finest thing that ever happened to Fairfield."

"And, fellows," continued Elmer, "I think that on the strength of this, not to speak of Felix saying he would have refused to accept a tainted title if he had won after Lil Artha was kidnaped, we ought to give our fellow scouts over there a cheer. Yes, and send them a letter congratulating them on the new spirit of fairness that has sprung up among them."

It was put in the form of a motion, and carried unanimously. So three cheers and a tiger were given with a will; and later on the letter was written, which Elmer himself promised to deliver to Matt Tubbs, the loan of that fine motorcycle still holding good.

And this, then, was the way the great hike went through. Lil Artha, of course, was the pride of the troop for his fine work; but the other fellows who had done the best they knew how were not forgotten in the chronicles of the event, as written in the log book of the secretary.

The only serious accident of the affair was the sprain which Henry Cobb had been unfortunate enough to receive, and which was likely to make him limp for many weeks. But it had afforded a tremendous amount of fun, and at the same time proved that the fact of a boy belonging to the scouts need not detract in the least from his manly qualities.

Vacation was now nearly at an end, and presently the scouts would be taking up their school duties for the new year.

The summer that had passed had really been the most delightful one in all their experience; and they looked forward hopefully to other good times ahead, when, as scouts, they might be given the privilege of learning many of the secrets of Nature and of building up sturdy and manly characters under the influence of the splendid rules governing the organization.

But there was one grumbler out of the number starting out for Little Falls, and this was Nat.

He never could get entirely over the cruel fate that had allowed those trapped plotters to get off "so easy" and was often heard to mutter that if Elmer had not happened to be along there might have been a different story to tell.

But like a lot of fellows, Nat's "bark was more savage than his bite," and perhaps, after all, had he been allowed his own sweet way,

he might have remembered how he had faithfully promised not to harbor the spirit of revenge when he signed the roster of the Hickory Ridge Boy Scouts' troop.