

ALAN DOUGLAS

FAST NINE: OR, A
CHALLENGE FROM
FAIRFIELD

Alan Douglas

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CHAPTER I.

ON THE WAY HOME FROM THE FISHING HOLE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Half past seven, fellows," he announced.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, shucks! it isn't worth it, Chatz, though I'm just as much obliged to you as if we went. It's an old cap, anyhow, and even if it went sailing down the Sunflower it wouldn't matter much. I've got another besides my campaign hat. And if it doesn't rain in the morning I may take a run over here on my wheel. Move along, fellows; I can just imagine I smell that bully good supper that's being kept for me at our house."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But lately Matt Tubbs had seen a new light. The organizing of the Hickory Ridge Troop of Boy Scouts had inspired him with a desire to follow suit. But while he could find plenty of material

in the two towns, the great difficulty seemed to be in subscribing to the twelve cardinal principles which every candidate has to profess before he can become even a tenderfoot scout.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And they need it, all right," declared Chatz, positively. "Why, suh, I'm told that during the last seven yeahs Fairfield, that used to be a model town, has become the toughest place in this part of the state. And the way Matt Tubbs led his gang has been the main cause. It was a rule or ruin policy. If they couldn't win a baseball game squarely they'd start a little riot, and have the umpire give it to 'em, nine to nothing."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II. A STARTLING ACCUSATION

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

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

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

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

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

"That's so, Elmer; will I ever forget what happened there, and how glad Colonel Hitchins was to get his tricky pet back, after he had robbed us of a lot of our good grub. But Sam White has started his horses this way. Let's wait here and see what he's got to say."

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

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

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

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

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

Mark glanced at his chum with raised eyebrows.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Um! makes a fellow's mouth water just to see 'em," declared Mark. "And there's Bruno chained up to his kennel back by the barns. What a big dog he is – a Siberian wolf hound the colonel calls him. I don't believe I'd like to meet Bruno on a dark night, and running loose."

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

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

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

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

Thus urged Elmer also jumped from the vehicle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, I will not detain you more than five or ten minutes at the most, I promise you, boys. By the way, I see that both of you have the habit of fastening your initials inside your caps. I suppose most boys do that because they are apt to get their head gear mixed when they wrestle and knock around; isn't that so, Mark?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III. WHEN THE CHALLENGE CAME

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

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

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

Mark shook his head slowly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So the two chums separated for the time being.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So together they presently went out, Mark having hastily donned his baseball suit. It was the regulation Hickory Ridge uniform, and had been carried by the players of the town for years past, long before such a thing as Boy Scouts had ever been thought of.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV. THE PRACTICE GAME WITH THE SCRUB TEAM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mr. Roderic Garrabrant, Scout Master,

"Boy Scouts Troop of Hickory Ridge.

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

"Signed by the Committee,

"Felix Wagner,

"Adrian Cook,

"John Bastian,

"Matthew Tubbs, Chairman."

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

Again did the scout master hold up his hand.

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

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

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

"Please remember," he said, pointedly, "this is a matter that concerns only the Boy Scouts. I expect every other fellow to keep the utmost silence while we talk it over. You are being handsomely

treated in being allowed the privilege of staying here and listening to what we have to say. Now, scouts, what is your pleasure about this courteous challenge?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Only this one game," replied the gentleman.

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

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

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

"I took the pains to ask the messenger about that," said Mr. Garrabrant, smiling, "for I realized that half of our trouble in the past has come from having a partisan umpire. But the messenger who carried the challenge said that Home-run Joe Mallon, who belongs to the Tri-State League, is home in Basking Ridge, waiting for a broken arm to heal, and that he'd gladly do the umpiring. You know he used to be an umpire long before he got to playing ball. So that question is fixed, too. Any more?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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