

Douglas Alan Captain

Storm-Bound: or, A Vacation Among the Snow Drifts



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Douglas A.

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	21

Captain Alan Douglas Storm-Bound; or, A Vacation Among the Snow Drifts

CHAPTER I ON THE WRONG TRACK

"Elmer, do you believe we're really on the right track, or have we lost our bearings in this everlasting snow forest?"

"Ask me something easy, please, Lil Artha!"

"Well, I didn't like the looks of that sassy kid who was so eager to have you make a map from what he told us."

"Struck me he grinned too much, boys, as sure as my name's George Robbins. I'm beginning to smell a rat, and think he played a low-down trick on us."

"That is, George, you mean he purposely gave us the wrong directions, and that instead of heading straight for the winter cabin of Toby's jolly Uncle Caleb we're away off our base?"

"Looks like it to me, that's all I've got to say," muttered the boy who had called himself George, at the same time glancing apprehensively at the snow-clad woods surrounding them on all sides.

"Me too!" added the fourth member of the little heavily-laden party, and whose good-natured face usually screwed itself up in an odd series of wrinkles whenever he spoke with such an effort.

"Well," remarked the boy called Elmer, whose last name was Chenowith, and upon whose decisions the others seemed to depend considerably, as though he might be a leader among them; "let's rest up a bit here, and look the matter squarely in the face. Perhaps we can figure out where we've gone wrong, and start on a new course."

These four well-grown lads were all dressed in the well-known khaki suits that designate Boy Scouts the wide world over. Of course they wore heavy woolen sweaters in addition, for the time was just after Christmas, and Old Winter had taken a notion to set in unusually early that year.

They belonged to the Hickory Ridge Troop of Boy Scouts, which lively town was situated many miles to the south of the place where we discover the quartette up against a puzzling question.

Toby Jones had an old uncle who was not only a scientific man, but who loved the Great Outdoors so much that of late he had come to spend most of his time at his lonely cabin in the forest. Here in the summer he studied, and experimented to his heart's content; while during the winter he set traps, and took wonderful photographs of the snowbound woods, as well as of the fur-bearing little animals that made their homes there.

The idea had struck Toby that with some of his best chums he surprise this jolly Uncle Caleb, who was a well-known professor among scientists. Many times the boy had received a warm invitation to run up and visit the old gentleman, as well as fetch a friend or two along, but until this winter Toby had somehow never entertained the idea of doing so.

Once it took hold of him, and he became wildly enthusiastic over it. When he mentioned the scheme to Elmer, as well as two other scouts, they fell in with it so quickly that the plans were soon arranged.

Accordingly, immediately after Christmas the four lads had taken a train for the north, and about noon dropped off at a lonely station, where the operator was a new hand, and had never even heard of Uncle Caleb, so that the boys hardly knew which way to turn. Just then they happened to run across a lanky boy with a grinning face, whom Elmer "pumped," with the result that they were

directed to follow certain landmarks, turn ever so many times until they came to a frozen creek, up which if they headed a mile they would discover the cabin they sought.

They had been following that same frozen stream more than two hours, and there was not the slightest sign of anything in the way of a shack or cabin. In fact, it looked as though they had managed to tramp into the very heart of what seemed to be a trackless forest. In every direction stretched that never ending array of tall and little trees, each snow splashed; for there were several inches of the white feathery covering on the ground, what Elmer called fine "tracking snow;" if only they had been hunting game instead of a shelter.

Though all of the scouts kept constantly on the alert they had failed to detect the first sign of human presence. Not a shout or a gunshot had they heard; in vain had they searched the snowy ground for the welcome trail of a trapper going to or coming home after visiting his line of snares.

No wonder then that some of the boys had begun to believe they were tricked by that glib-tongued native lad, who had chuckled so disagreeably as he accepted the silver quarter Elmer thrust in his grimy palm.

All of them bore heavy loads. For the most part these consisted of extra clothes of course for use in case of extreme cold weather; but two of them also carried guns; and Toby had strapped on his pack a pair of snow-shoes his uncle had once presented to him, but which the boy had never found a good chance to use, though he hoped the time had now arrived for putting them to some service.

"I've been trying to figure things out," Elmer told them, as they sat down on a log to rest, while trying to decide which way they should turn; "and while I'm liable to be mistaken just as much as anybody else, I really think we'd have a better chance to find that cabin, or run across some sign of Toby's uncle, if we quit following this creek bed, and turned sharply to the right."

Now Elmer was not only the leader of the Wolf Patrol when at home, but had long ago qualified for the position of assistant scout master of the troop. When the regular scout master, a young man named Mr. Roderic Garrabrant, chanced to be absent, which frequently happened, the boys looked to Elmer to guide and direct them.

Consequently the three who were now in his company had come to look for great things from their chum; and Elmer often found it a difficult task to satisfy their expectations. And so it was he had in the start given them to understand that he could make mistakes as well as the next one, and they must not think him infallible.

As usual everybody seemed ready to fall in with his suggestion but George, who had a contrary streak in his make-up, and was always ready with objections and questions and serious shakings of the head. They called him "Doubting George," but grown people would long ago have dubbed him a pessimist, because he was always seeing the gloomy side of things, and wanting to be doubly convinced.

"But it seems to me," he started to say, "that we may be jumping out of the fryingpan into the fire if we do that. How do we know the cabin lies to the right?"

"We don't," replied Elmer, without manifesting any feeling over his opinion being questioned, for he knew George of old, and in fact would have been considerably surprised if the other had not put up what Toby called a "kick."

"Would you like to direct us, George?" asked the tall scout, whose name was Arthur Stansbury, but whom his schoolmates had in a spirit of fun long ago dubbed "Lil Artha," which ridiculous nick-name clung to him like a leech to this day, although he was fully a head above any of the other fellows.

"Oh! excuse me from taking that responsibility on my shoulders," George hastened to say, looking almost alarmed; "if I did, and happened to guess wrong, I'd never hear the end of it."

"So you admit that it'd have to be a *guess*, do you?" pursued Lil Artha mercilessly; "well, on the part of Elmer he's tried to reason the old thing out, and both Toby'n me feel that we can't do better than try what he says. I only hope the walking's better than it's been along this frozen

creek, where the ice is too slippery for us to make use of the same. Why didn't we think to fetch our skates along?"

"I did think of it," Toby told him; "but it meant more weight to our packs; and then from what Uncle Caleb's told me about the lay of the country up here, I couldn't figure out how we'd find any use for skates where there was only swamp, marsh, and mebbe a few little crooked creeks nearly always covered with a foot of snow. So I fetched these bully snow-shoes instead. Don't I hope I'll have a chance to skim over the snow on the same, if we're lucky enough to get a heavy fall while up here."

"Perhaps we may get a storm before we're ready for it," observed Elmer drily, as he shot a dubious glance up at the gray sky that had such an ominous look.

Lil Artha jumped to his feet, showing signs of some excitement.

"Hey! let's be on the hike, fellows!" he exclaimed; "if a storm dropped on top of us right now it wouldn't do a thing to us, p'raps. We haven't got only enough grub for a single day. I guess matches are about the only thing we're heavy on, because we expected to eat our meals in Uncle Caleb's cabin most of the time."

"Well, matches are good things to have up here in the snow woods," remarked Elmer, who was an exact contrast to George in that he always saw the silver lining of the cloud, whereas the other scout could not get beyond the pall.

"You bet they are," Lil Artha went on to say, as he shouldered his pack, which he had arranged in regular Adirondack fashion, with a band across his forehead to assist in sustaining the weight; "though for that matter, if we went shy of the same I reckon you could depend on me to get fire by making a little bow, and sawing the same on a pointed stick, South Sea Islander way. I've done it more'n once, though I never seem able to depend on my cunning. Something goes wrong so often; or else I'm in too big a hurry, and spoil everything. But if you're ready lead off, Elmer. We'll trip along in your tracks, and keep it up for another hour anyway. That rest did us all a heap of good."

The four scouts kept pushing on steadily. Elmer in the van continued to maintain a bright lookout for any sign of footprints in the snow that would give them encouragement, though as time passed, and he failed to find any such, the rosy hopes with which they had started began to gradually fade away.

Of course the others also kept their eyes about them, in hopes of sighting a lone cabin, or discovering smoke rising amidst the trees. Hope died hard, and only George grumbled when more than half an hour had crept on without their running upon the first sign that would mean success.

Once Elmer had pointed out to them the tracks of a fox, and of course being true scouts, they were all greatly interested in examining the trail, and speculating on whether it had been of the ordinary red variety, or a gray animal, perhaps one of those silver-black foxes, the pelt of which is often valued at as much as fifteen hundred dollars.

Elmer had settled this question by picking up a hair he found caught on the split end of a branch that grew low down, and which the body of the fox, as well as his brushy tail, must have scraped as he slipped past. It was plainly a red hair, and even George could not find any cause for disputing that evidence, though he was far from happy, and in a fit mood for argument if the occasion arose.

Several other times Elmer pointed to the unmistakable track of a bounding rabbit, and had they had more time at their disposal the boys would have liked nothing better than to follow these, so as to figure out what was chasing bunny to induce him to take such enormous jumps. But the fact of their being astray in that unknown forest, with night not far away, and a heavy snow-storm brooding over them, rather discouraged them from turning aside from the main thing that engaged their attention, which of course was the finding of the trapper's cabin.

Nobody paid the least attention to George when they heard him grunting away in the rear, because George would not have been happy unless he was miserable, strange though that may

sound. There is generally a boy built after that fashion in every crowd of scouts. As a rule he has some good qualities that make his friends forgive his bad ones, and finally they get so accustomed to his grumblings that they pay little attention to them. In fact George's complainings had little more effect on his boon companions than so much water poured on a duck's back would. It amused him to grunt and object, and hurt them very little, so what was the sense of making any trouble?

Another fifteen minutes crept along. There did not seem to be any particular change in things, except that the light was showing signs of failing, and perhaps George stumbled more frequently, for he was not as spry on his feet when carrying a pack as the other fellows.

"Don't seem to be over this way either, Elmer," suggested Lil Artha, finally.

"That's right, Uncle Caleb's cabin appears to be as hard to locate as a needle in a haystack," admitted the leader of the Wolf Patrol, cheerily; as though it would have to be something more than this to discourage him, because he had made it his business in life to always look at the bright side of things; and knew that no matter how gloomy the prospect might be it could seem much worse.

"That settles it!" came abruptly from George in the rear.

"What's the matter with you back there; stubbed your toe again? We'll have to make a scout litter and carry you the rest of the way, if you keep on falling over every old log there is," Lil Artha told him, severely.

"'Tain't that this time, mind you," the delinquent one answered back, with a triumphant grin; "but what's the use trying to poke along any further? Might as well be killed for a sheep as a lamb, any day. This place looks like it'd make a good camp for to-night."

"Camp?" echoed Toby.

"Sure thing!" snapped George. "We're all tuckered out, and as hungry as wolves in the dead of winter; night's comin' on right fast; and then if you take a look you'll see that it's begun to snow!" and as the others did glance hastily up they discovered the first few big flakes commence to sail lazily down!

CHAPTER II

A STRANGE PLACE TO CAMP

"I'm surprised at you saying it's going to snow, George," Lil Artha remarked, as he turned on the doubting scout; "because it'd be more like you to tell us ten flakes didn't make a storm, and that anyway there was always a chance of it giving us the go-by. Guess you're tired, and want to snuggle down close to a warm fire, which would explain why you give in so easy-like."

"Just as you please, so long as we do camp," replied the other, as he began to undo the straps that secured his hamper to his back.

"Keep still, fellows!" said Elmer, in a husky whisper; "I honestly believe I saw a bevy of partridges fly up in a tree over yonder," and as he dropped his pack lightly to the ground, he gripped the trusty little twelve-bore Marlin double-barreled shot-gun which he had owned for a number of years, and occasionally found a use for.

"Oh! partridges, fat partridges, and me as hungry as a bear!" gasped Toby; but Elmer had already quitted his chums, and was making his way toward the point he had indicated with his hand.

They watched him with considerable eagerness, and waited to see what luck attended his stalking action.

"Since it looks like we'd have to spend a night here, like the Babes in the Wood," Lil Artha was saying in a whisper, "it'd be real nice if Elmer could only bag four plump birds for our supper! Let's hope he gets a string of the same in range, and makes a double with each shot."

"Honest Injun! I think I could devour four myself, without half trying," Toby assured them, rubbing the pit of his stomach as though to call their attention to the fact that it was an aching void.

"Huh! you mightn't even get the smell of a single one cooking," George warned him; "because I've been told partridges are wary old birds, even up here, where they light in the trees after being flushed, instead of going off with a whirr of their wings, like they do down our way."

"There, he's going to let drive!" said Lil Artha, who, being something of a hunter himself, had been closely observing the progress of Elmer all this time.

"Good luck to his pot-shot!" muttered Toby.

Two reports were heard in quick succession. Then Elmer was seen to hastily run forward, at the same time managing to reload his gun.

"He got one, anyhow!" cried Toby, exultantly; "that fixes *me* all right. There, he has grabbed another up off the ground. Bully for Elmer! He knows how to work the game, all right. What! another bird? Oh! George, if only he had killed four you might have had one, the same as the rest of us!"

"Well, I like your nerve," said George, indignantly; "why should I be singled out to get left, tell me that, Toby?"

"Keep quiet, George, and don't get riled so easy," Lil Artha told him, "because, as sure as you live he's hurrying over to pick a fourth bird up. What d'ye think of that for great luck, now? Four hungry scouts, and a fat partridge for each. I think it's a splendid introduction to Uncle Caleb's pet game preserve, don't you all?"

"He must have knocked over three with that right barrel," ventured Toby; "like as not they were all sitting along a limb when he fired, and then he picked that last one when they were on the wing, remembering that George would have to go hungry, or only suck the racks, if he didn't get another."

When Elmer rejoined them he was wearing a smile of contentment such as usually adorns the face of a successful sportsman.

"Couldn't have been better any way you fixed it, fellows," he told them. "There they sat, in a row, and you never saw a prettier sight. I just hated to do such a thing, but even scouts can be forgiven for shooting game when they're adrift in an unknown snow forest, and hungry in the bargain."

"I should say they could," Lil Artha added, forcibly, "and lots of other times in the bargain. But these birds are as plump as any I've ever seen. Just feel of the fat breasts, will you? Makes my mouth water, thinking how fine they'll go with our coffee and crackers. How fortunate we thought to bring a few things along in case Uncle Caleb might run short on rations. Plenty of coffee, a little tea, some sugar, a can of condensed milk, crackers, cheese, a pound of bacon, and a package of self-raising flour for flapjacks. We ought to subsist for a whole day on that bill of fare, don't you think?"

"And as we've got our guns along," interposed Lil Artha, "with more or less of game around us, what's the use of worrying? For one I'm meaning to take things as they come, and squeeze what fun I can out of the same."

"That's the stuff!" said Toby, and Elmer nodded his approval; only skeptical George remained silent, for he was feeling of his partridge and with a frown on his brow that made Toby hasten to assure him the bird was a real one, and not such as he may have seen in his dreams.

Already Elmer was casting about to see where they had better locate their camp. It was easy to say this would be for only one night, but how did they know? The threatening storm might swoop down with such force that it would virtually imprison them for a much longer stay. And so he considered it worth while to do the best possible while they had any choice of situation.

Elmer had had considerable experience, having spent a year up on a Canadian cattle ranch and wheat farm owned by an uncle, Elmer's father having been given charge of the property. There the boy had learned dozens of things that were apt to prove valuable to any one in the woods. Besides, he had made it a practice to pick up information wherever he went by asking questions, investigating for himself, and constantly increasing his stock of knowledge.

Looking in every quarter he presently decided that since they carried no tent, and it would be no easy task to make a brush shelter, their best move was to settle down in the lee of one of those cavities formed when a hurricane had toppled a number of giant trees over, with their roots, and the earth attached to the same, standing fully eight feet in the air.

There was a little choice about the matter, and Elmer picked out the one best suited to screen them from the northwest wind. The snow would surely come from that direction, and having a windbreak might mean considerable.

"Drop everything here, boys, and let's hustle to collect all the wood we can find. Don't stop short of darkness, because maybe we'll have to keep a fire going for several days. Just drag it handy, so we'll know where to find it, even if the snow comes two feet deep!"

"Whew! I sure hope it don't get us that way to start with," said Toby; "and us not knowing whether Uncle Caleb's shack is to the north, east or west. Don't I wish we'd run across him in the woods, and were toasting our shins alongside a fire in his comfy little place right now! Um! But the snow's coming faster than she was, fellows!"

"The more reason we should get busy," Elmer told him.

At that they started energetically to "make hay while the sun shone," as Lil Artha said, though he must himself have been convinced that the comparison was hardly a good one, judging from the grimace he gave when casting his eyes upward toward the leaden sky that frowned down upon them like a dome.

Fortunately there was no lack of wood handy. This had doubtless been one reason why Elmer had decided on pitching the camp where he did. Those fallen trees had in crashing to the ground broken many large limbs off, and all that was necessary for the campers to do was to drag these, one after another, to a convenient striking distance from the hole in which they intended spending the night.

All around it they banked up the loose wood, until Toby declared they had fully enough to do an army.

"Don't you believe it," said Lil Artha, an authority on fires among his fellow scouts; "you'd be s'prised to see what an enormous amount of wood a fire eats up in a single night; and like as not we may have to hold the fort a week, just as Elmer said. Keep on fetching it a little while longer, boys."

"You're on the safe side there, Lil Artha," the cautious scout master decided; "we can't have too much burning wood, with that sky threatening us. And to run out, with the snow piled up hip-high over everything wouldn't be the nicest job in the world. Let's work at it for another ten minutes. By then it will be so near dark that we can lay off, and get our camp fixed."

So they labored on industriously until Elmer called a halt. George was a good enough worker, and usually did his share when the necessity arose. His grumbling really sprang more from force of habit than a desire to make himself disagreeable. Sometimes Elmer seriously considered whether it would pay them to try and cure George of his fault-finding, and then as often decided that, given time, it must surely die out. Things of that sort generally thrive on opposition.

To Lil Artha was given over the task of making the fire. It was lucky indeed in this pinch that Elmer had thought to bring his pet camp hatchet along. Though its weight had added to his weariness on the march, he had had what he called a "hunch" that it might come in handy, though hardly expecting to be compelled to fall back on the little tool the first thing in order to supply fuel for a camp.

So the tall scout began to hack at a couple of promising fragments of thick limbs which would make good sides for the cooking fire, and upon which their coffeepot could rest; for they had such a thing along, as well as a skillet, both made of aluminum, and weighing next to nothing.

Elmer, assisted by George and Toby, meanwhile started to see how some sort of shelter could be arranged with the four rubber ponchos which they carried. He knew how soldiers on the march are in the habit of fastening two of these together by means of the grummet holes along the edges, forming a little shelter called a "dog-tent," under which the pair can at least keep the upper halves of their bodies from the rain.

By skillful work they managed to cover the cavity behind the upturned roots of the fallen forest monarch in such a fashion that it would shed most of the snow, even though some might drift through the cracks.

"A pretty good job!" Lil Artha told them, as he suspended operations in connection with his fire, which was by now sending out a grateful warmth, and much good cheer in addition.

"Next thing is to get the birds plucked, and ready for the spit," announced Toby, as he took up the one that had been apportioned to him.

George followed suit, but was evidently a poor hand at stripping the feathers off, to judge by the gingerly way he went at it. Lil Artha had to show him just how to grip hold, and make things fly; but even then George looked anything but happy.

"And I'd feel safe in wagering," said Toby, with a laugh, as he held up his partridge, beautifully cleaned, and ready to be broiled before the fire, after he had split it down the back, "that if we were anywhere near home George would be willing to spend his last dime in bribing some boy to finish his job; but that don't go here; no work no pay. Those who expect to dine on partridge must prepare the same. You hear me speaking, George. But I don't mind showing you again how I do it, which according to my notion is a better way than Lil Artha has."

And as George, seeing his opportunity, commenced to compliment Toby, and engage his attention, the result was that he got his partridge not only completely denuded down to the last pinfeather, but split along the back in the bargain.

After that a busy scene that glowing, snapping fire saw, with the coffeepot sending out a delightful aroma, and the four hungry boys each holding out his game near the flames, turning it

often in order to allow every part to receive an equal share of the intense heat that was browning the outside so beautifully.

Finally Toby gave a groan.

"Can't stand for it any longer, and that's a fact, fellows!" he announced; "please fill my cup with coffee, Elmer, and let me get started or I'll cave in. George, pass that package of crackers, will you; and, Lil Artha, I'd like to sample that cheese if you don't mind!"

"For goodness' sake everybody wait on Toby, and get him shut off, or he'll give us no peace!" exclaimed Lil Artha, though he had already put his own teeth into one half of his sizzling partridge, to find that it was as tender as could be, and perfectly delicious.

In another minute or two all of them were busily engaged. It was such a pleasant duty, partaking of this forest meal, and amidst such romantic surroundings, that for the time being they forgot all the dismal prospects ahead of them, and were quite merry. Toby joked, and Lil Artha laughed aloud, while Elmer joined them, and even George, placated by having his gnawing pains satisfied, for the time being looked contented with the world. He would not have made any objection had he been offered a second edition of that game supper; for when his bird had been reduced to a mere lot of well-picked bones his taste for broiled partridge seemed as keen as ever.

Possessed of hearty boyish appetites it can readily be understood that they had made a pretty good hole in their limited supplies by the time all of them admitted that they were satisfied. Toby professed to be greatly concerned because of this growing scarcity of rations, and as for George, his gloom had returned, since he was already talking of the time, near at hand most likely, when the cupboard would be as bare as it was when Old Mother Hubbard went to get her dog a bone.

"Gee! whiz! look at it coming down, would you!" burst out Lil Artha, as having finished attending to that clamorous appetite, he thought it worth while to take an observation, in order to learn what the weather might be.

"Never saw it snow harder," admitted Toby.

"Be over our heads by morning, see if 'tain't," George prophesied.

"Well, p'raps you may have a chance to use those snow-shoes sooner'n you thought you would, Toby," ventured Lil Artha, as they all crouched there, staring out at the dark forest, and watching the myriads of big flakes steadily falling, as though a storm of the greatest magnitude had come down from the far northwest, where the weather man keeps this brand of thing in tap for scouts who are incautious enough to be caught napping, away off in a strange woods, and with only rations for one day in their haversacks.

CHAPTER III

THE LONG NIGHT

"Let me tell you this is going to be the queerest old camp any of us ever found ourselves stuck in," Toby ventured to remark, some time later.

"I should say it was," grumbled George, as he rubbed his ears, and then held both hands out toward the fire to warm them again.

"I know one thing we ought to do right away," said Elmer, "and that's get out those warm skating tuques; they'll keep the air off our heads, and can be drawn down to protect our ears."

"That's a good idea, Elmer," Lil Artha told him, "because I don't want to have one of my wigwags frozen off. You see, I'm so much taller than the rest of you it takes harder work for my poor heart to pump warm blood all the way up; and so I'm likely to suffer from cold extremities. Seems like that off ear is frosted right now."

"If it is," cried George, hurriedly, as though he thought Lil Artha meant all he said, "take my advice, and rub it hard with a lot of snow. That'll take the frost out, and start circulation again. Brr! but this is going to be a tough night, when you think of it."

"I don't know," Elmer told him; "seems to me we've got a whole lot to be thankful for, with this fine fire, and a protection against the storm. Perhaps we may run up against something harder than this before we're done."

"But we haven't got a tent, and our grub is pretty skimpy, say what you will," the grumbler went on to protest.

"Yes, that's all very true," continued Elmer, "but how wise we were to fetch our blankets along, for fear that Toby's uncle mightn't have enough in stock to go around. They felt pretty heavy when we carried them, soldier fashion, around one shoulder, and tied them under the other arm; but here's where they come in dandy."

"Well, believe me, it was the smartest trick we ever did," Lil Artha hastened to comment, "and if we'd only glimpsed this sort of box ahead, so as to lay in three times as much grub, it'd be all right."

"It is all right as it stands," the leader went on to say, "and we'll show how scouts can take things as they come, without making mouths. So let's see how we're going to fix ourselves for the night."

"Guess none of us care much to sit up late, and gabble over the fire," suggested Toby; "though it seems a fellow can't get enough of that heat in him."

"I want to shut out the whole business," affirmed George, in sheer disgust, "and I hope that after my eyes close I won't know a blooming thing till morning."

George was a good sleeper as a rule, and his troubles seldom kept him from getting a fair share of rest. Nor was he like his cousin, Philander Smith, also a member of the Wolf Patrol, and who had been known to walk in his sleep; George, once he snuggled down, with his blanket tucked all around him, was like a regular Indian mummy. The others, knowing this from past experiences, paid little attention to his complaints concerning a disturbed night, because they knew it never had any real basis of fact.

For some little time the four boys busied themselves getting "fixed." George was as hard to suit as any old maid. He found something wrong with every corner of the depression that he tried; here it was a root that jabbed him in the ribs; in another place the point of a big stone made it impossible for him to curl up, and maintain a comfortable attitude.

After he had made the complete round, the others allowing him his choice, he was finally compelled to accept the first position he had tested.

"Now let's hope we've heard the last kick from you, George," Lil Artha told him, severely, after submitting to all this fussing; "I don't see what you've got to complain about after all. Your bones are well covered with a pad, while mine stick out like the joints of a scarecrow. And say, don't you think I'm going to have a tough time of it stowing these long legs of mine away? Chances are they'll push out in the night, and when I wake up again I'll find the lower part of poor Lil Artha as stiff as a board. Subside, George! Give the rest of us a chance to get settled down. If we all took as long as you did it'd be near morning before we fixed things."

Finally, however, they seemed to have made the best of a bad bargain. Taking Elmer's advice they all kept as close together as possible. In this way perhaps they might not secure a great abundance of decent sleep, but the fact of their being in touch with each other would add to their comfort in the way of warmth.

Elmer, with characteristic generosity, had chosen last, and hence he lay nearer the outside of the shelter than any of his mates. But having known what it was to be exposed to the rigors of a cold storm, since he had braved a Canadian winter while up on that ranch, the young scout master also knew how to make use of his blanket as though it were a sleeping bag.

The hours dragged slowly along.

Afterwards they would always look back, and shudder as they remembered how terribly long that night did seem. And yet none of them really suffered, save that it was impossible to sleep, only in snatches.

This was on account of several things. In the first place, they were jammed together in a way to which they were wholly unaccustomed; and when one stirred on becoming cramped it aroused all the others in turn. Then their strange surroundings had more or less influence upon them. Not that there was any furious noise, such as would have accompanied a summer gale; but the weird moaning of the wintry wind through the leafless branches of the oaks, and the bending tops of the pines, made a music that kept them thinking they heard human voices calling for help.

Another reason why Elmer had chosen the outside place when lying down was his desire to keep watch upon the fire.

It was his intention to keep this going as long as possible, though a fellow built on the order of George would have complained bitterly had he been compelled to crawl out of his snug nest several times in order to face that pitiless storm, and pile more fuel on the smouldering logs.

Elmer was one of those boys who, knowing his duty, always went about it without any brag or bluster, and could be depended on to sacrifice his own comfort in order that his chums might benefit. In other words Elmer was what you might call an ideal scout. He seldom had any trouble about practicing those twelve cardinal principles that govern the working day of a scout – to be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent. They came naturally to him.

Three times did he perform this fire-building act. The last occasion must have been well on toward the hour of three in the morning, as he judged from certain conditions, though he could not bother looking at his little silver watch.

At that time the storm was keeping it up just as wildly as ever, and there was much more than a foot of snow on the ground, where it had not drifted; with any quantity still to come down.

After that Elmer must have secured better sleep, for he did not wake up again until a movement accompanied by a voice aroused him.

"Great Scott! let me tell you the bottom's dropped out of the mercury tube this time, boys!" the voice went on to bellow, and he recognized the tones as belonging to George, who had not been heard from ever since he first curled up in the folds of his warm blanket.

He was raising his head now, and observing his breath as it congealed in the frosty air. Elmer knew that the time to sleep had passed, because it was daylight.

"How about that snow, has it stopped?" asked another voice, as Toby sat up, and began to stretch his arms upon which he may have been lying so that they felt more or less numb.

"Still coming down as hard as ever," Elmer told him, shaking quite a lot of the feathery stuff out of the folds of his blanket; and then struggling to his feet.

There was no lounging around that morning. It was so cold that every fellow was glad to get into action immediately he came out of his blanket. George begged to be allowed to lie there until the fire got good and warm. He urged every plea he could think of, saying they would only get in each others' way by crowding; and that too many cooks always spoiled the broth, anyway; but Toby and Lil Artha declared they had no use for a shirker; and if he did nothing else he could stand up and serve as a windbreak for the "willing workers."

The fire had gone completely out, and several inches of snow covered the spot; but wise, long-headed Elmer had provided against such a contingency on the evening before, for he had a handful of fine wood, light and dry, handy, with which to make a fresh start.

After things got to moving it was not so bad. The scouts soon felt even a little cheerful over the situation, because a crackling fire is one of the greatest inducements to raising one's spirits ever discovered. When shivering with the cold, and hungry as well, the world looks pretty blue to any one; but let that same person come in close contact with a fire that warms him up, and things quickly take on quite a different hue.

Then there was that fragrant odor of coffee and bacon cooking on the fire that tickled the noses of the boys; nothing could beat that for good cheer – "if only they had more of the same," as George constantly reminded them, even when enjoying his share.

"Strikes me this is a mighty slim breakfast," he remarked, as he found that he had already caused more than half that was on his pannikin to vanish, and yet his appetite seemed as sharp as ever.

"You never spoke truer words, George," said Toby, soberly, "but when you stop to think what a small amount of stuff we've got along with us, and the bad fix we're in, you can understand that we've got to cut the allowance down."

"Yes," added Lil Artha, "of course you've heard of shipwrecked mariners being in a boat, and drifting around on the big ocean for days and days. Well, they always have to go on half rations, both with food and fresh drinking water. Anyhow we won't have to bother our poor heads about that last, because all we have to do is to melt snow and get what we want."

"Hang it, I wish we could melt all the old white stuff; I hate it!" George continued, being a poor loser.

"And yet I've heard you fairly raving over the beautiful snow," chuckled Lil Artha, "but then that was when you were out sleigh riding with Polly Brett. Makes considerable difference what your condition is, how you look at things. For my part I don't hanker after snow one bit right now. Seen all I want to of it to last me all winter; but then what's the use bothering your head about things that can't be changed. It's a condition, not a theory, that confronts us, and what we want to do is to set our minds to work wrestling with the question of how we're going to crawl out of this difficulty and find Uncle Caleb's shack."

"Whew! mebbe I don't wish we were there now, snug under his roof, and telling him all about our adventure, as well as how Elmer here found a way to pull his chums out of a hole, like he always does," and Toby, while saying this, gave the scout master a sly look, as though begging him to tell them some hopeful news that would buoy their sinking spirits up.

"I wish I had as much confidence in myself as you seem to feel in me, Toby," was what Elmer told him, "but I couldn't say the storm is nearly over, because it's coming down as hard as ever, and goodness knows when it means to let up. But we're a lively bunch, you know, and we're bound to find some way of getting out of this scrape."

"We've been in others just as tough, remember," Lil Artha declared, "and always did get to the top of the heap in the end."

"That's the way to talk," Elmer continued; "confidence is always one half of the battle. We've proved that on many a hard-fought field, baseball, football and hockey as well. If you can force yourself to believe you will win, the chances are improved three-fold."

"Well," said George, drily, as he stared very hard at his now empty platter, "I'm doing my level best to force myself to believe this pannikin is heaped high with beefsteak and fried onions and fried potatoes; now if I've got a third of a chance to get what I'm wishing for, even that much would fill a long-felt want. But say, none of you see any grub coming along on my dish do you? Well, wishing don't seem to do any good. I'm as hungry as ever, too, worse luck. Even speaking of such splendid eatings seems to make my mouth water."

"Then stop it!" cried Toby; "think all you want to, but the rest of us have feelings as well as you, and it's cruelty to animals to even mention such things as –"

"Hold on there! don't you aggravate things by mentioning that list again, or I'll proceed to roll you out of this hole into the snow drifts!" threatened Lil Artha, pretending to make a threatening gesture, while Toby threw up both hands in token of abject surrender.

"I'm dumb as an oyster, Lil Artha," he protested. "I haven't got another word to say; but if there's got to be any ejecting done let's grab the right party, and see that he gets his full dose."

George had meanwhile managed to pick up a couple of extra crackers, and having his mouth full did not make any reply. Lil Artha deftly snatched the box away from him, and closing it, calmly placed it out of reach.

"No hogging, now, George," he went on to say; "share and share alike is the rule we've got to go by from now on. If there's any hungry feeling swinging around, it's going to be no one-sided game. Others can feel empty as well as the Robbins family pet. But let's hope that before another night we'll all be sitting around a table in Uncle Caleb's shack, as warm and cozy as four bugs in a rug."

The mere thought of having to spend a second night amidst those enormous snow drifts gave the boys an unpleasant feeling. They turned and looked out from under their rude shelter. The fire itself was cheery; but beyond this lay the piles of snow, the grim trees with their white arms extended like monuments in the burying ground at Hickory Ridge, and with the air full of still rapidly falling flakes, as though the weather man up aloft had an unlimited supply of white geese to pluck on this special occasion.

For a short time no one said a word. They were all busy with thoughts, perhaps connected with their happy homes, so far removed; or it might be trying to picture the cheery scene Lil Artha had spoken of when he mentioned that cabin of Uncle Caleb, the man of science, and the small animal photographer and trapper.

CHAPTER IV SNOW-BOUND

"I don't believe there ever was such a furious snow-storm as this before!" Toby remarked, after a while, with a little pensive sigh, as though he had already begun to repent having conceived that brilliant idea, in the following out of which they had fallen into their present serious predicament.

"Oh! that's because the wish is father to the thought, Toby," Elmer told him. "We all like to stand up ahead of the other fellows. If you were home right now I reckon you'd just say that it was a pretty decent sort of a storm; but being cooped up here in the woods makes things look different."

"How deep do you think she is on the level, Elmer?" asked Lil Artha; "as much as three feet?"

"Nothing like that," replied the other, quickly; "you mustn't judge by seeing what's piled up there. That's a drift, and the eddies of wind have been piling it up all night long. You see the snow is as dry almost as powder, owing to the cold. It's quit falling in big flakes, and is sifting down now in fine stuff."

"Yes, and it gets down your back every time, if you don't look out," complained George. "This beats my time all hollow. I wonder how it'll end."

Elmer purposely made out to mistake the croaker's meaning; he knew that George was thinking of the dismal outlook by which they were confronted, but chose to pretend it was something else that was intended.

"What, this storm, George?" he said, cheerily; "oh! it'll wind up before a great while. They all have their innings, you know, some longer than others."

"I should say this was one of the longest, then," George affirmed.

"But after it does stop we can make up our plans, and start to carry the same out," Elmer continued, knowing that if he kept the minds of his companions employed in some fashion they would not find much time to worry. "I'm going to settle down pretty soon by the fire here, and figure things out again. This time we want to make a sure job of it. I know the wiggly route we've taken to get here, following that little creek, and I've settled it in my mind just which way we ought to go to remedy our blunder."

"It wasn't so much a mistake as false tips we received, you remember, Elmer," Lil Artha was quick to say.

"Yes, that skunk told us wrong just to have what he thought would be a silly joke on scouts," Toby added. "Guess he thought we considered ourselves some punkins because we wore khaki suits, and he was mean enough to want to take us down a peg. I'd like to see that same chap again. What I wouldn't do to him wouldn't be worth telling."

"At any rate he's forced us to have a novel experience," Elmer told them. "Only for his sending us on a false scent we wouldn't have had the chance to know what scouts can do when storm-bound in a snow forest. Some time, when it's all away back in the past, and you can sit and think of it without getting furious, perhaps none of us may feel quite so hard about that young scamp's work."

"Huh! about that time begin to feel of your shoulders," grunted George, "because I reckon the wings will have started to sprout. If I had *my* way I'd condemn that rascal to spend a whole week in a snow camp, with only six matches along, and just enough grub to keep him from starving. Half rations and George Robbins don't seem to agree very well."

"Nothing seems to agree well with you this morning, George," remarked Lil Artha; "I hope it don't turn out to be catching."

"What do you mean by saying that, Lil Artha?" demanded the other, suspiciously.

The tall scout shrugged his shoulders as he went on to cautiously explain.

"Why, you know we were talking about shipwrecked sailors a while back, and how they often had to go on half rations because they carried so little in the boat with them?"

"Yes, go on," urged George.

"Once in a while it gets even worse than that," Lil Artha continued, gravely, "and they have to draw lots to see who will be sacrificed, so that the rest of the bunch can live."

"Aw! come off, and quit that!" cried George; "you're just trying to scare me, and it don't go worth a cent. Nobody is going to starve here in the woods where we can find some sort of meat to eat, even crow, if we have to come to it, or perhaps muskrat. That's a mighty poor joke, Lil Artha, let me tell you."

"Well, of course I'm hoping myself that things'll never get *just* that bad," the tall scout went on to say, "but only supposin' they did, and the choice fell on you, I'm wondering if ever afterwards the three of us would have to go around all our lives finding fault with everything. I wouldn't like that, George."

"But what about yourself?" demanded the other; "you might happen to be the first victim after all, Lil Artha."

"That makes me smile," he was informed, coolly; "d'ye think now anybody with eyes in his head would be so silly as to pick out a bony scarecrow like *me* when they could settle on a nice plump chicken of your build?" and he playfully dug his fingers in George's ribs as he said this.

"Let's change the subject," Toby broke in with; "this always talking of eatin' seems to jar on my nerves. It sets me to thinkin', and that empty larder stares me in the face. Something's got to be done about it."

"Sure it has," echoed Lil Artha, eying George closer so that the other squirmed uneasily, and edged further away from him.

"If we stay right where we are nothing will come to us, will there, Elmer?" Toby pursued.

"If you mean anything in the way of game we could hardly expect it," replied the scout master. "The fellow who generally gets there is the one who goes out and finds what he wants, and doesn't hang around home waiting for something to turn up. That's what wideawake scouts believe in."

"Hurrah! that's the ticket! And when can we make a start?" demanded Toby.

"If there's any sign of the storm letting up by noon, we'll clear out and take our chances of finding Uncle Caleb's shack before night-time," he was told.

"And as the snow's so deep," Toby rattled on, "what's to hinder me from trying my bully snow-shoes?"

"Nothing that I know of," Elmer remarked; "only I'm afraid you won't find the going as easy as you expect."

"I won't, eh? What's the reason?" asked Toby, who always wanted to be shown.

"You're a new beginner, in the first place, and a knowledge of how to walk on snow-shoes is something that's got to be gained by experience. I've been on them up in Canada; and they had to dig me out lots of times before I learned how to stand straight. If once you slip it's good-bye to you. Down your head goes, and you can't get up alone because of the clumsy big shoes. They always carry a long stick to keep from taking these headers, especially when going it alone."

"Anything else?" asked the aspiring one, as he took up the pair of splendid snow-shoes Uncle Caleb had sent him, and made as if to secure his toe in place with the thong intended for that purpose.

"Yes, there's another thing that will make it doubly hard," Elmer informed him. "Dry snow like this is the toughest kind to walk over. When hunters go after deer or moose on snow-shoes they always pick a time after a thaw, when a return of the cold has frozen the wet surface of the deep snow. Over this thin ice they can run three times as fast as the poor deer, which breaks through with every jump, and flounders almost helplessly."

"That sounds almost like plain murder, do you know," Lil Artha vehemently declared, frowning at the idea.

"Well, if you were hungry, and that was the only way to get near a venison mebbe you wouldn't feel so particular," George told him. "I know right now that I wish a splendid buck was doing some of that same floundering near us, and Elmer had a chance to settle his hash for him. It'd sure do me a heap of good just to know we had enough grub for a week, and then some."

"That's a forbidden subject, George," remonstrated Elmer, who wanted to get the minds of his chums directed in more pleasant channels; "let's all get together and compare notes about direction. I said I had a plan, but then I might be off my base, and some of you could correct me. Four heads are better than one all the time."

His scheme succeeded, for presently he had managed to get them deeply interested in the subject of location, so that one after another put forward some plan.

It was about all they could do, under the circumstances, that and keeping the fire burning. Even George so far forgot his troubles as to suggest several things that were well weighed before being rejected.

As it turned out, after the conference, Elmer had changed his figures a little, and the latest plan was to head a point south of northwest when they started forth in hopes of finding shelter from the storm.

No one knew the grim necessity for action better than Elmer. While he tried to assume a pleasant face in order to keep the courage of the others up, he understood the serious character of their condition far more than he was willing to openly admit.

They could not expect any one to come and find them, if they continued to stay where they were; and besides the scantiness of their provisions entailed the necessity for doing some sort of hunting in the snow forest in hopes of securing a new supply.

As the morning dragged on many anxious glances were cast out to where that fine powdery substance was showering steadily down, adding to the tremendous quantity that was already on the ground. If it would only begin to slacken how thankful they would be.

On several occasions some one would exclaim that it looked as though the snow might be coming down in lessened quantities, but no sooner did they begin to pay close attention than the storm seemed to start in again as furiously as ever.

So the time drew near the middle of the day, and as yet they could not say that there was any hopeful sign.

"If it gets along past noon we're in for another night here, I'm afraid," Lil Artha argued, "because, you remember the old saying, 'between eleven and two, it'll tell you what's it's going to do.' Needn't chuckle that way, George, because I've often seen that proved. Seems like that's a turning point most times, if there's going to be any change."

"All silly bosh!" George went on to say, for at least he was not given to believing in "signs" and such things; "haven't I many a time seen a storm go on past noon, and look as black as a pocket, only to clear handsomely about four or five, with the grandest rainbow in the west you ever saw? Those sayings are all bunco, Lil Artha. I'm surprised at as sensible a scout as you admitting that you believe in any of the same. I'm not superstitious, whatever else I may be."

"Oh! well, it doesn't matter which one's right," the tall scout observed; "the thing is there's always a fair chance of its breaking around noon; and let's hope it'll be kind enough to do that same to-day. I know Elmer wants to make a move as much as any of us, don't you, Elmer?"

"Yes, and I don't care how soon it comes along, either," he was told without the slightest hesitation.

"There's one comfort we've got," said Toby.

"I'd like to hear it, then," George muttered, disconsolately, eying the other half suspiciously, as though he feared another trap intended for his unwary feet.

"We've got stacks of coffee along, and can always have a cup to cheer us up. I think that counts a lot. It not only warms you inside, but gives you courage to face your troubles like a true scout."

"And yet some scouts are never allowed to drink tea or coffee," suggested George.

"I'm sorry for them, that's all," Toby continued; "we don't happen to fall in that class, do we, fellows? My folks let me have one cup every morning; and when I'm in camp I c'n drink all I want. There, look and tell me if you don't think it seems to be lightening in the northwest, Elmer; because that's where all this awful snow is coming from."

"It does look a little better, for a fact!" admitted the scout master, after he had taken a critical observation; "of course I'm not a weather-sharp; and my prediction may not be worth a pinch of salt; but if you asked me I'd like as not say I really believe it was going to break."

"Hurrah!" shouted both Lil Artha and Toby in concert; for this was the first time Elmer had committed himself to saying what he thought about a possible change in the weather.

More anxiously than ever they waited and watched. The snow did not come down quite so heavily, and was constantly lessening in force. A stiff wind had arisen that cut like a knife; they hoped this was blowing the gray clouds away, and that soon the cheery face of the sun would peep forth through a gap in the curtain overhead. All of them stood ready to greet his advent with a rousing cheer.

"Here, let's get our coffee started, so we can move out right away, if things look good to us!" Elmer told them; and it seemed as though there were four times as many cooks as the supply of food warranted, because every one wanted to have a hand in preparing their scanty lunch.

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