

RALPH BARBOUR

FOUR IN CAMP: A STORY
OF SUMMER
ADVENTURES IN THE
NEW HAMPSHIRE
WOODS

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Summer Adventures in the
New Hampshire Woods**

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Four in Camp: A Story of Summer Adventures in the New Hampshire Woods

TO

THE CHIEF, COUNCILLORS AND

FELLOWS OF SHERWOOD

FOREST

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCES NELSON TILFORD, AND WITNESSES HIS ARRIVAL AT CAMP CHICORA

“That’s Chicora over there.”

The man at the wheel turned to the boy standing beside him and nodded his head at a landing toward which the nose of the big steam-launch was slowly turning. It lay less than an eighth of a mile away across the smooth waters of the lake, a good-sized wharf, a float, a pole from which a blue-and-gray flag hung lifeless, and a flotilla of various kinds of boats. Several figures stood upon the pier, and their voices came shrill and clear across the intervening space. From the shore, which here circled inward into a tiny cove, the hill swept up rather abruptly for three hundred feet or more, and a third of the way up the gleam of unpainted boards through the trees told Nelson Tilford of the location of the camp which was to be his home for the next two months. It was a pleasant, peaceful scene before him, but the shadow of the hill had already crept well into the lake, leaving the shore and wooded slope in twilight, and a slight qualm of loneliness stole over him for the instant.

He had left the Boston express at Warder, six miles away, at half past four, and had been rattled over a constantly turning road behind a pair of stout horses to Chicora Landing, where, followed by his trunk, he had boarded one of the several small steam-boats which lay at intervals up and down the long shed like horses in their stalls. A half a mile at slow speed through a winding river, scarcely wide enough in places for the boat to scrape through between the low banks, had brought them into Little Chicora, hardly more than a pond. Another and far shorter stretch of river followed, and then, with a warning blast, the steam-launch had thrust her bow into the broad waters of the big lake, spread out like a great mirror in the evening sunlight, dotted here and there with well-wooded islands, and guarded by gently rising hills covered with maples, pines, white and black birches, poplars, and many other trees whose names Nelson did not know. White farmhouses gleamed now and then from the shores, and slender purple ribbons of smoke, rising straight into the calm evening air, told of other dwellings, unseen for the thick foliage. They had made three stops on the south side of the lake, first at Chicora Inn Landing, from where the big hotel was plainly visible a quarter of a mile away, then at Squirrel Island and Plum Island. Nelson had been interested all the way, for he had never seen a New Hampshire lake before, and the glimpses he had obtained of the comfortable summer camps and their healthy, sun-browned inhabitants had pleased him hugely. But when Plum Island had been left behind and the boat had entered the shadowed margin of the lake his spirits began to sink. The water and the dim woods looked cold and inhospitable to the city-bred lad. He wondered what the fellows of Camp Chicora would be like, and wished that he had joined at the beginning of the season instead of a fortnight after it. Now that it was past, that week at the beach with a school friend had not been especially enjoyable after all; and the rôle of the new boy was not, he knew from experience, at all comfortable. He almost wished he had held out against his father’s desires and stayed snugly at home.

His rueful thoughts were abruptly interrupted by a shrill blast of the launch’s whistle. They were close to the landing, and Nelson picked up his suit-case and climbed to the deck. The bell tinkled, the churn of the propeller ceased, and the boat sidled up to the pier. Nelson stepped ashore into a group of half-a-dozen fellows and set his bag down, prepared to lend a hand to the landing of his trunk. But some one was before him, a man of twenty-three or four, who, when the trunk was safely ashore, turned to Nelson with outstretched hand and welcoming smile.

“This is Nelson Tilford, isn’t it?” he asked, as they shook hands. “Glad to see you. Mr. Clinton didn’t get your letter until this noon, so we couldn’t meet you at the station. Did you have any trouble finding your way to us?”

“No, sir,” said Nelson, “every one seemed to know all about the camp.”

“That’s good. Well, let’s go up.” He took Nelson’s suit-case, despite the latter’s remonstrances, and led the way along the pier to a well-worn path which wound up the hill. Nelson, sensible of the frankly curious regard of the other fellows, followed. A bugle sounded clear and musical from the camp, and Nelson’s companion turned and waited for him to range himself alongside. “There’s the first supper call, now,” he said. “I guess you’re a bit hungry, aren’t you? By the way, I’m Mr. Verder, one of the councilors. There are four of us besides Mr. Clinton. You’ll meet them when we get up there. The Chief’s away this evening, but he’ll be back in time for camp-fire. We’re going to put you in Maple Hall, where the seniors bunk. That’s where I am, so if you want anything to-night don’t hesitate to ask me.”

“Thank you,” answered Nelson gratefully. His companion chatted on while they climbed the path, which led by easy stages up the hill through a thin woods, and Nelson forgot his previous misgivings. If the fellows were as jolly as Mr. Verder, he reflected, he was pretty sure to get on. The man beside him seemed scarcely more than a big boy, and his sun-burned face was good to look at. He was dressed in a gray jersey bearing a blue C on the breast, gray trousers with a blue stripe down the seam, and brown canvas shoes. He wore no cap, and the warm tan extended well up into the somewhat curly hair. His arms were bare to the shoulders. Nelson concluded he was going to like Mr. Verder; he looked strong, alert, good-humored, and a gentleman.

Two minutes of up-hill work on the winding path brought them to the clearing. The five buildings were arranged in what was practically a semicircle facing the end of the path. Back of them on all sides rose the forest. In the clearing a few trees had been allowed to remain, spruce in most cases, and one tall sentinel, shorn closely of its branches, and standing guard at the head of the path to the lake, had become a flagpole from which, as Nelson came into sight, the Stars and Stripes was being lowered, its place to be taken by a lighted lantern. Boys were coming and going between the buildings, or were scattered in little groups at the doorways.

Near at hand, by the entrance of Birch Hall, a knot of three men were standing, and to them Nelson was conducted and introduced. There was Mr. Ellery, almost middle-aged, slight, rather frail-looking; Mr. Thorpe, small, rotund, jovial, with twinkling blue eyes; and Mr. Smith, just out of college, nervous-looking, with black hair and black eyes, the latter snapping behind a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. It was difficult to stand in awe of persons attired negligently in shirt and trousers alone; and, anyway, none of the four councilors seemed at all desirous of impressing the newcomer with their dignity or authority. They were a sunburned, clear-eyed lot, troubling themselves very little with such things, but brimming over with kindly good-nature. After the greetings Nelson was hurried away by Mr. Verder to the wash-room, from whence, having hastily splashed his face and hands with water from a tin basin, he was hustled to the dining-hall, just as the bugle was blaring the last call to supper and the hungry denizens of the camp were crowding and jostling into the building. Nelson followed Mr. Verder, stood while Mr. Ellery asked grace, and then pulled out his stool and took his place at table. Mr. Verder, who sat at the head of the table, was beside him. There were three other tables in the room, and all were filled.

There was very little ceremony about the meal. The clean white boards held huge pitchers of cocoa, milk, water, generous plates of biscuits and crackers and cake, saucers of wild raspberries and bowls of cereal, and to each table two boys were bringing plates of ham and eggs from the kitchen. Every one talked at once, and, as there were twenty-nine present, that meant lots of noise. At his own table there were ten boys besides himself, and Nelson looked them over as he ate. They seemed a very hungry, happy, and noisy lot; and at first glance they appeared to lack something of refinement and breeding, but he afterward found that it was necessary to make allowances for the freedom of camp life, and for the difference between ordinary attire and that worn at Chicora; gray jerseys and knee-trunks in conjunction with tanned bodies and tousled hair naturally lend an appearance of roughness. In ages the fellows varied from ten to seventeen, the most of them being apparently of about Nelson’s age, which was fifteen. In the end he decided they were a very decent-looking lot of fellows.

Naturally Nelson didn't do all the examining. At some time or other during the meal every lad there who could get a glimpse of the newcomer looked him over and formed his opinion of him. Most, if not all, liked what they saw. Nelson Tilford was slim without being thin, of medium height for his years, rather broad across the shoulders and chest, brown of hair and eyes, with good features, and a somewhat quiet and thoughtful expression. A big, red-haired, blue-eyed youth at the farther end of the table confided to his left-hand neighbor that "the new chap looked to him like a bit of a snob." But the other shook his head.

"I don't think so, Dan," he answered, between mouthfuls of chocolate cake; "I bet he'll turn out to be a swell chap."

Nelson's appetite failed him long before those of his companions – for perhaps the only time that summer – and he took note of the room. It was about forty feet long by thirty broad. There were no windows, but along both sides and at one end wooden shutters opened upward and inward and were hooked to the ceiling, allowing great square openings, through which the darkening forest was visible, and through which eager yellow-jackets came and went seeking the sugar-bowls or flying homeward with their booty. At one end a door gave into the kitchen, and by it was a window like that of a ticket-office, through which the food was passed to the waiters. At the other end, in the corner away from the door, was a railed enclosure containing a roll-top desk and chairs, which Nelson rightly presumed to be Mr. Clinton's office. Presently the signal was given allowing them to rise. He rescued his suit-case from where he had left it inside the door and turned to find Mr. Verder. At that moment a brown hand was thrust in front of him, and a pair of excited gray eyes challenged his.

"Hello, Ti-ti-ti-Tilford!" cried the owner of the hand, "what the di-di-dickens you du-du-doing up here?"

CHAPTER II

TELLS OF A TALK BY THE CAMP-FIRE AND OF HAPPENINGS IN A DORMITORY

An hour later, having discarded some of the garb of civilization for more comfortable attire, Nelson lay stretched out on a carpet of sweet-smelling pine-needles. Above him were motionless branches of hemlock and beech and pine, with the white stars twinkling through. Before him was a monster camp-fire of branches and saplings built into the form of an Indian tepee, which roared and crackled and lighted up the space in front of Maple Hall until the faces of the assembled campers were recognizable across the clearing. A steady stream of flaring sparks rushed upward, to be lost amid the higher branches of the illumined trees. Beside him was the boy with the gray eyes, who, having recovered from his temporary excitement, no longer stammered. Sitting cross-legged in the full radiance of the fire, Tom Ferris looked not unlike a fat, good-natured Indian idol. Not that he was as ugly of countenance as those objects usually are; what similarity existed was due rather to his position and a certain expression of grinning contentment. He really wasn't a bad-looking chap; rather heavy-featured, to be sure, and showing too much flesh about cheeks and chin to be handsome. He was only fourteen years old, and weighed something over a hundred and thirty pounds. He had a rather stubby nose, tow-colored hair, very pale gray eyes, and exceedingly red cheeks. He was good-natured, kind-hearted, eager in the search for fun, and possessed a positive genius for getting into trouble. Like Nelson, he was a student at Hillton Academy, but whereas Nelson was in the upper middle class, Tom Ferris was still a lower-middler, having failed the month before to satisfy the powers as to his qualifications to advance. Nelson and he had not seen much of each other at school, but this evening they had met quite as though they had been the closest of chums for years. Nelson had already learned a good deal about Camp Chicora and its customs, and was still learning.

"The Chief's a dandy fellow," Tom was saying. "We call him 'Clint' for short. Carter called him 'Clint' to his face the other day, and he just smiled, and said, '*Mister* Clint, Carter; I must insist on being addressed respectfully.'"

"He looks like a bully sort," answered Nelson, turning his eyes to where the Director-in-Chief, the center of a merry group of boys, was sitting at a little distance. Mr. Clinton looked to be about thirty-five years old. A few years before he had been an assistant professor in a New England college, but the confinement of lecture-room and study had threatened his health. He had a natural love of the outdoor life, and in the end he had broken away from the college, built his camp in the half-wilderness, and had regained his health and prospered financially. Camp Chicora had been in existence but three years, and already it was one of the most popular and successful of the many institutions of its kind in that part of the country. He was tall, dark, strikingly good-looking, with an expression of shrewd and whimsical kindness that was eminently attractive. He knew boys as few know them, and managed them at once surely and gently. Like the fellows about him, he wore only the camp uniform of jersey and trousers, and the fire-light gleamed on a pair of deeply tanned arms that looked powerful enough to belong to a blacksmith.

"What did he say to you?" asked Tom.

"Said he was glad to see me, hoped I'd make myself at home and be happy, and told me to let him know if I wanted anything. It wasn't so much what he said as – as the way he said it."

"That's ju-ju-ju-just it!" cried Tom, with enthusiasm. "It's the way he says things and does things! And he's into everything with us; plays ball, tennis, and – Say, you ought to see him put the shot!"

"I liked that Mr. Verder, too," said Nelson.

“Yes, he’s a peach! The whole bunch are mighty decent. Ellery – that’s him fixing the fire – he’s awfully nice; he’ll do anything for you. The Doctor’s another mighty good chap. You’d ought to have seen the way he got a nail out of ‘Babe’s’ foot last week! It was perfectly great. ‘Babe’ came pretty near fainting! Say, don’t you want to get the bunk next to mine? Maybe Joe Carter will swap with you, if I ask him.”

“Oh, never mind; maybe when I get to know some of the fellows we can fix it up.”

“Well, and” – Tom lowered his voice – “I guess they’ll try and have some fun with you to-night; they always do when a new fellow comes; but don’t you mind; a little ‘rough-house’ won’t hurt you.”

“I guess I can stand it. What’ll they do?”

“Oh – er – well, you see, I oughtn’t to tell, Tilford; it wouldn’t be quite fair, you know; but it won’t hurt, honest!”

“All right.” Nelson laughed. “After the initiation I went through at Hillton last fall, I guess nothing short of a cyclone will feeze me!”

“Say, we’ve got a society here, too; see?” Tom exhibited a tiny gold pin which adorned the breast of his jersey. “I’ll get you in all right. We’re the only Hillton men here, and we ought to stand by each other, eh?”

Nelson agreed gravely.

“There’s a chap here from St. Eustace,” continued Tom. “His name’s Speede, Dan Speede; ever meet him?” Nelson shook his head. “Of course he isn’t a Hilltonian,” went on Tom with a tone of apology, “but he – he’s rather a nice sort. He’s in our hall; you’ll see him to-night, a big chap with red hair; he played on their second eleven last year. I think you’ll like him – that is, as well as you could like a St. Eustace fellow, of course.”

“I dare say there are just as good fellows go there as come to Hillton,” responded Nelson generously but without much conviction.

Tom howled a protest. “Get out! There may be some decent fellows – like Dan – but – Why, everybody knows what St. Eustace chaps are!”

“I dare say they talk like that about us,” laughed Nelson.

“I’d lu-lu-lu-like tu-tu-to hear ’em!” sputtered Tom indignantly.

Mr. Clinton arose, watch in hand, and announced that it was time for prayers. There was a scrambling and scuffling as the fellows arose from their places on the ground to kneel with heads bent and repeat the Lord’s Prayer. The dying fire crackled softly and its mellow light played upon the motionless forms, while overhead the white stars peered down through the dark branches as though they too were giving thanks to their Creator.

Then good night was said to the Chief and the fellows separated, the younger boys to climb the hill to Spruce Hall and the older to go to their own dormitory. Presently from across the clearing floated the slow sweet notes of the bugle sounding taps, and the lights in the junior hall went out. The seniors, however, still had a half hour before they must be in bed, and they made the most of it in various ways. When Nelson and Tom entered Maple they found three distinct pillow or “sneaker” fights in progress, and the air was full of hurtling missiles. On one bed two youths in pajamas were sitting cross-legged deep in a game of cribbage when a random shoe struck the homemade board with all the devastating effect of a bursting shell, and sent it, together with the quartet of pegs, over three bunks. Whereupon two voices were raised in rage, cards were dropped, and the ranks of the belligerents were swelled by two volunteers.

The senior dormitory was erected on the side of the hill, well off the ground for the sake of dryness, and was a simply but well-built structure some eighty feet long by twenty wide, with enough pitch to its gable roof to shed rain quickly and afford a sort of open attic under the rafters, where bags and wearing apparel were precariously hung from the beams or supported on occasional planks. The effect in the dim light was picturesque if not beautiful. There was a multitude of windows on either side, and at each end large double doors occupied a third of the space. As neither doors nor windows

were ever closed, save during a driving rain-storm, the occupants of the narrow bunks ranged along each side of the hall practically slept out-of-doors. A big stove stood in the middle of the building. At the head of each bunk, secured to the wall, was a white-pine locker. Sometimes this was supplemented by a square of matched boards which let down to form a writing-table. Wooden pegs held the every-day attire, and trinkets were disposed along the horizontal joists. The bunks, wooden-framed cots, were guiltless of springs, and were furnished with mattresses, blankets, and pillows. At Chicora sheets were looked down upon as emblems of effeminacy. The fellows slept with their feet toward the walls. From a rafter hung a sheet of wrapping-paper bearing the warning "No Snoring Allowed!" Some one had crossed out the last word and substituted "Aloud."

Nelson's bunk was the last but one on the left, and in the opposite corner was Mr. Verder. At the farther end of the dormitory slept Dr. Smith. What light there was was given by two reflector lanterns at either end of the hall, although for purposes of card-playing, reading, or writing the fellows supplemented this dim radiance by lighting one or more of the lanterns which were part of each boy's outfit. Aided by such extra illumination Nelson's right-hand neighbor, a curly-haired youth of about sixteen, whose name later transpired to be Hethington, was busily engaged in patching a tennis racket with a piece of string. Near the middle of the hall, a big, good-looking chap with very red hair was entertaining two companions with a narrative that must have been extremely humorous, judging from the suppressed laughter that convulsed them. Nelson had noticed him at table and now concluded that he was Tom's St. Eustace friend, Dan Speede.

Nelson undressed leisurely and got into his pajamas, the while examining the bed and his surroundings for a hint as to the trick which was to be played him. But there were no suspicious circumstances that he could see; the bed looked and felt all right, and of all the sixteen inhabitants of the dormitory not one was apparently paying him the least heed. When he considered it, the fact that every one seemed to be resolutely keeping his eyes from his direction struck him as of ill augury; even the boy with the tennis racket was unnaturally absorbed in his work. Tom Ferris came over in a pair of weirdly striped pajamas and sat chatting on the bed a moment until the lights were put out. Then there was a scrambling, a few whispered good nights, and silence reigned save for the sounds of the forest entering through the windows and doors. Nelson found the bunk rather different from what he was accustomed to, but the fresh night air felt good; there was a novel pleasure in being able to look out through the branches at the twinkling white stars, and he sighed contentedly and wished the worst would happen so that he could go to sleep.

But everything was very still. Minute after minute passed. He strained his ears for suspicious sounds, but heard nothing save the occasional creak of a bed. The suspense was most uncomfortable. He had about come to the conclusion that after all nothing was going to happen, and was feeling a bit resentful over it, when a sound reached him as of bare feet on the boards. He turned his head noiselessly and stared into the gloom. He could see nothing, and the sound had ceased. Probably he had imagined —

Bang!

Thud!!

Clatter!!!

Down went the bed with a jar that shook the building; down came a shower of water that left the victim gasping for breath; and Nelson and a big tin bucket rolled together onto the floor and into a very cold puddle.

Pandemonium reigned! Gone was the peaceful quietude of a moment before. From all sides came shrieks and howls of laughter and kindly counsel:

"Pick yourself up, Willie!"

"Swim hard, old man!"

"Try floating on your back!"

"Sweet dreams!"

“Did I hear something drop?” asked a voice.

“Very high sea to-night!” remarked another.

Nelson struggled free of the clinging folds of the wet blankets and stood up shivering in the darkness. It had been so sudden and so unexpected, for all the warning he had received, that he didn't quite know yet what had happened to him. Then a match flared, a lantern was lighted, and the tennis-racket youth was holding it out to him.

“Did the water get you?” he asked calmly.

“Rather!” answered Nelson. “I'm soaked clear through!”

“Better get your panoramas off, then,” said Hethington. “I've got some dry ones you can have. I'll look 'em up.” And he climbed leisurely out of bed.

By that time Tom had come to the rescue with an armful of dry blankets from an unoccupied bunk. The tin lard can was kicked out of the way, the wet mattress turned over, and the new blankets spread. Hethington tossed over the dry pajamas, and Nelson, his teeth chattering, got into them and looked about him. As far as he could see in the dim light white-robed figures were sitting up in their bunks regarding him with grinning faces. There was something expectant in both faces and attitudes, and Nelson realized that they were awaiting an expression of his feelings. With a glance that encompassed the entire assemblage, he remarked earnestly, but more in sorrow than in anger:

“Well, I hope you choke!”

A shout of laughter rewarded him, while a voice from the nearer dimness remarked audibly:

“I told you he'd be all right, Dan!”

Nelson examined the bed, but found that it could not be made to stand without the aid of tools. So, thanking Hethington again for his pajamas and eliciting a calm “All right,” and looking about for evidences of further surprises without finding them, he blew out the lantern and descended into his lowly couch. The last thing he saw, as the light went out, was the amused countenance of Mr. Verder across the dormitory.

Ten minutes later he was asleep.

CHAPTER III

SHOWS THAT A MOTOR-DORY CAN GO AS WELL AS STOP

When Nelson awoke the early sunshine was dripping through the tender green branches outside the window, the birds were singing merrily, and Tom Ferris was digging him in the ribs. He blinked, yawned, and turned over again, but Tom was not to be denied.

“Come on, Tilford, and have a douse,” he whispered. “First bugle’s just blown.”

“Wha – ” (a magnificent yawn) – “what time is it?” asked Nelson.

“Five minutes of seven. Come on down.”

“Down? Down where?” inquired Nelson, at last sufficiently awake to hear what Tom was saying.

“Down to the lake for a douse. It’s fine.”

“Huh! It’s pretty fine here. And the lake must be awfully cold, don’t you think, Ferris?”

“It really isn’t, honest to goodness! It’s swell! Come on!”

“Oh – well – ” Nelson looked out the window and shivered; then he heroically rolled out onto the floor, scrambled to his feet and donned his shoes. One or two of the bunks were empty, and a few of the fellows who remained were awake and were conversing in whispers across the dormitory, but for the most part sleep still reigned, and the “No Snoring” order was being plainly violated. Tom and Nelson pattered down the room – the former stopping long enough at one bunk to pull the pillow from under a red-thatched head and place it forcibly on top – and emerged into a world of green and gold. As they raced past the flagstaff the Stars and Stripes was fluttering its way aloft, while from the porch of Birch Hall the reveille sounded and floated echoing over the lake. The air was like tonic, crisp without being chill in the shady stretches of the path, pleasantly warm where the sunlight slanted through, and the two boys hurled themselves down the firm pathway as fast as lurking roots would allow. At the pier a handful of fellows were before them. There was very little breeze, and what there was blew up the lake and so failed to reach the water of the cove. Over on Plum Island the thin streamer of purple smoke betokened breakfast, while up at Bear Island, farther away across the sunlit water, the boys of Camp Wickasaw were moving about the little beach. At the edge of the pier the water was bottle-green, with here and there a fleck of gold where the sunlight found its way through the trees that bordered the lake. It looked cold, but when, having dropped their pajamas, they stood side by side on the edge of the pier and then went splashing down into fifteen feet of it, it proved to be surprisingly warm. A moment or two of energetic thrashing around, and out they came for a brisk rub-down in the dressing-tent and a wild rush up the hill and into the dormitory, where they arrived side by side – for, considering his bulk, Tom had a way of getting over the ground that was truly marvelous – to find the fellows tumbling hurriedly into their clothes.

Nelson had received his camp uniform, a gray worsted jersey, a gray gingham shirt, two pairs of gray flannel trousers reaching to the knees, one gray worsted sweater, two pairs of gray worsted stockings, a gray felt hat, a gray leather belt, and a pair of blue swimming trunks. Jersey and sweater were adorned with the blue C, while on the pocket of the shirt ran the words “Camp Chicora.” Following the example of those about him, Nelson donned merely the jersey and trousers, slipped his feet into his brown canvas shoes or “sneakers,” and, seizing his toilet articles, fled to the wash-house in the train of Hethington and Tom Ferris. By the most desperate hurrying he managed to reach the door of Poplar Hall before the last note of the mess-call had died away. He found himself terrifically hungry, hungrier than he had been within memory, and applied himself diligently to the work in hand. Mr. Verder asked how he had slept, and referred jokingly to the bath.

“Every fellow has to go through with it sooner or later,” he said smilingly. “They don’t even exempt the councilors. I got a beautiful ducking last week.”

“Oh, I didn’t mind it,” laughed Nelson. “But I was awfully surprised. I expected something of the sort, but I hadn’t thought of a wetting. I don’t see how they did it, either.”

“Well, in the first place, they got a wrench and took the legs off your bunk; then they put them on again the wrong way, tied a rope to the bed and trailed it along the wall where you wouldn’t see it. All they had to do then was to pull the rope, and the legs simply doubled up under the bed. As for the water, that was in a pail on the beam overhead; it’s so dark you couldn’t see it unless you looked for it. Of course there was a string tied to that too, and – Who pulled the string last night, fellows?”

“Dan Speede,” two or three replied promptly.

“And Carter pulled the rope,” added another gleefully.

The fellow with the red hair was grinning at Nelson in a rather exasperating way, and he experienced a sudden desire to get even with that brilliant Mr. Speede. But he only smiled and, in response to numerous eager inquiries, tried to describe his sensations when the bed went down. The affair seemed to have had the effect of an initiation ceremony, for this morning every one spoke to him just as though they had known him for months, and by the time breakfast was over he no longer felt like an outsider. Under escort of Tom and Hethington, who appeared to have detailed themselves his mentors for the present, he went to Birch Hall to examine the bulletin and find out his duties for the day.

The recreation hall stood on the edge of a little bluff, and from the big broad porch thrown out at the side a magnificent view of the lake and the farther shore presented itself. Across from the porch was a monstrous fireplace of field stones in which four-foot logs looked scarcely more than kindling-wood. The hall contained a piano, a shovel-board, innumerable chairs, one or two small tables for games, the letter-boxes, and the bulletin-board. Consultation with the latter elicited the fact that Nelson, whose name was the last on the board, was one of the ferry-boys. Tom explained that he would have to go across to Crescent with the mail at nine, two, and six-thirty.

“You can take the motor-dory, if you like. The letters are in that box over there; and the bag hangs over it – see? You take the mail over and bring back whatever there is and distribute it in the letter-boxes yonder. Who’s the other ferry-boy?”

“Speede,” answered Bob Hethington, referring to the bulletin.

“Well, that’s all right,” said Tom. “Dan knows all about it. You let him attend to it, but you’ll have to go along, you know.”

“Don’t let him work any games on you,” advised Bob dryly.

Nelson made a mental resolution that he wouldn’t.

Then Tom explained about the duties. Every fellow had something to do. There were four lamp-boys, who filled, trimmed, and cleaned the lanterns and lamps all through the camp; four shore-boys, who looked after the landing and the boats; four fire-boys, who cut wood for and built the camp-fire and the fire in Birch Hall; four camp-boys, who swept out and tidied up the dormitories and the recreation hall; three mess-boys, who set the tables and waited at them; two color-boys, who saw to the hoisting and lowering of the flags in the camp and at the landing; two ferry-boys; one historian, who wrote the history of the day; two orderlies, to whom the others reported, and who in turn reported to the officer of the day (one of the councilors); one police, whose duty it was to keep the camp-grounds clean, and one substitute, who stood ready to take on the duties of any of the fellows who might be ill or away from camp. The duties changed day by day, and the penalty for intentional non-performance of them, as Tom explained with gusto, was to be ducked in the lake by the other chaps.

Then a couple of the camp-boys clattered in with brooms, and the trio were glad to make their escape. Tom and Bob hurried away to their neglected duties, and Nelson idled back to Maple Hall with the intention of getting his things arranged. But the other two camp-boys were busily at work there and raising such a dust that he retreated. Just outside, on the scene of last night’s conflagration, two fellows were bringing brush and piling it up for the evening’s camp-fire. In the rear doorway of Spruce Hall Mr. Ellery was coaching one of the juniors in Latin. Near-by a freckled-faced youngster with a

pointed stick was spearing bits of paper and other rubbish and transferring them to a basket which he carried. Every one seemed very busy, and Nelson wondered whether the fire-boys would be insulted if he offered to aid them. But at that moment he heard his name called, and saw Tom beckoning him from in front of the mess-hall. As Nelson answered the hail he saw that Dan Speede was with Tom, and surmised that an introduction was in order. Speede shook hands, and said, with that irritating smile on his handsome face, that he was glad to know Nelson, and Nelson muttered something that sounded fairly amiable. Speede was getting on his nerves, for some reason or other; perhaps because he looked so confoundedly well pleased with himself and appeared to look on everybody else as a joke prepared for his special delectation.

"I know one or two Hillton fellows rather well," Dan said, and he mentioned their names. One of them was a special friend of Nelson's, but the fact didn't lessen his irritation to any degree.

"We're ferry-boys," Dan continued. "Suppose we go over now? It isn't quite nine, but no one ever waits, anyhow."

"All right," Nelson answered.

They left Tom, put the letters in the bag at Birch Hall, and went down the path. There wasn't much conversation on Nelson's part, but Dan rattled on carelessly from one thing to another without seeming to care whether his companion answered or not. At the landing he threw the bag into the motor-dory and climbed in, followed by Nelson.

"They've got quite a navy here," observed the latter.

"Yep; steam-launch thirty feet long, motor-dory, four steel skiffs, three canoes, one punt, and two four-oared barges – only the barges aren't down here yet. All aboard!"

Nelson took the lines and off they chugged straight for the corner of Bear Island, where the red-and-white banner of Camp Wickasaw floated above the trees.

"Hold her off a little more," advised Dan; "there's a shoal off the end of the island." He was gazing steadily toward the landing there, and Nelson noticed that he looked disappointed. "Pshaw!" said Dan presently; "I guess they've gone on ahead."

"Who?"

"The Wickasaw fellows. They have a little old sixteen-foot launch which they think can go. We usually get here in time to race them over."

"Who beats?"

"We do – usually. Last time I raced with them this pesky dory stopped short half-way across. I thought they'd bust themselves laughing. That's why I hoped we'd meet them this morning."

"Too bad," said Nelson. "What sort of a camp is Wickasaw?"

Dan shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "No good. The fellows sleep between sheets and sing hymns every night before they go to bed. Besides, the worst of it is, they have women there."

"Is it a big camp?"

"Only about twenty fellows this year."

Presently Nelson asked another question: "Can you walk from the camp over to the village?"

"Yes, there's a good road." Dan nodded toward the end of the lake. "But it's pretty near two miles, I guess. I never walked it."

Crescent proved to be the tiniest sort of a settlement. There were no more than half-a-dozen buildings in sight. To the right of the landing was a high stone bridge, through which, as Dan explained, the water from the lake flowed on into Hipp's Pond by way of a small river, and so, eventually, to Lake Winnepesaukee.

"You'd better go up front," advised Dan, "and jump onto the landing when we get up to it. Take the painter with you."

Nelson obeyed. The dory wormed its way in between a lot of rowboats, the propeller stopped, and Dan poised himself for a leap as the boat drifted in. When it was still some three or four feet away from the float he jumped. All would have gone well with him if at the very moment of his take-

off the dory had not, for some unaccountable reason, suddenly started to back away. The result was that Nelson landed in five feet of water, with only his hands on the float. It was something of a task to crawl over the edge, but he managed it finally and sat down in a pool of water to get his breath. Then he glanced up and encountered Dan's grinning countenance and understood. But he only said:

"That was farther than I thought, or else the boat rocked. Throw me the painter and I'll pull you in."

Dan, his smile broadening at what he considered Nelson's innocence, tossed the rope and jumped ashore with the bag.

"I guess I'll let you go up alone," said Nelson. "I'm too wet to visit the metropolis."

Dan said "All right," and disappeared with the mail-bag. Nelson climbed back into the boat and started the motor. The sun was warm, and after taking his shoes off and emptying the water out of them he was quite comfortable. He even smiled once or twice, apparently at his thoughts. Presently Dan appeared around the corner of the nearest building, and Nelson quietly pushed the dory away from the landing.

"What did you start her up for?" asked Dan. "She'll get all hot and smelly if you do that."

"Oh, I just wanted to see if I could do it," answered Nelson. "Pitch the bag in; I'll catch it."

Dan did so.

"You'll have to bring her in, you know," he said. "I can't walk on water."

"But you can walk on land, can't you?" asked Nelson sweetly.

"Walk on – ? Hold on, you idiot, you're backing her!"

"Must be something wrong with her," replied Nelson calmly. He reached for the tiller-line, swung the dory's nose toward the camp, shot the lever forward, and waved gaily at Dan. "It's only two miles, you know," he called, as the boat chugged away. "And it's a good road!"

He looked back, expecting to hear Dan explode in a torrent of anger. But he didn't; he merely stood there with his hands in his pockets and grinned. Half-way across the lake Nelson turned again and descried Dan's form crossing the bridge on the road back to camp. Nelson winked gravely at the mail-bag.

CHAPTER IV

RELATES HOW NELSON BORROWED A LEAF FROM BOB, AND HOW DAN CRIED QUILTS

There wasn't much about gas-engines that Nelson didn't know, for ever since he was old enough to walk his family had spent a portion at least of every summer at the shore, and of late years a gasoline-launch had been a feature of the vacation program. To be sure, a power-dory was rather a trifling thing after a thirty-six-foot cruising-launch, and the engine left much to be desired, but it got along pretty well, and Nelson wished he didn't have to return to camp, but might turn the dory's head up the lake and go cruising. But perhaps they would let him take the dory some other time. Tom Ferris was on the pier when the boat came within easy hail.

"Where's Dan?" he asked.

"Coming back by road."

"Road?"

"Yes; he decided to walk."

"What for?" asked Tom incredulously.

Nelson shook his head. "Exercise, I guess," he answered, as he steered the dory in under the boom. "Here! catch the bag, will you?"

It was evident that Tom was far from satisfied with the information supplied, for all the way up the hill he shot suspicious glances at Nelson, and stumbled over numerous roots and stones in his preoccupation. But he didn't discover anything more, at least from Nelson.

After the mail was distributed in Birch Hall the two boys got their rackets and balls and climbed the hill, past the spring and the little sunlit glade where church service was held on Sundays, until a tiny plateau was reached. Here was the tennis-court, fashioned with much difficulty and not altogether guiltless of stones, but not half bad for all that. It was well supplied with back-nets – a fortunate circumstance, since the woods closed in upon it on all sides, and balls once lost in the undergrowth would have been difficult to find. Tom, considering his bulk, played a very fast and steady game, and succeeded in securing one of the three sets which they managed to finish before the assembly sounded at eleven o'clock and they fled down the hill to the lake.

The morning bath, or "soak," as it was called, was compulsory as regarded every camper. Nothing save absence or illness was allowed to excuse a fellow from this duty. Tom and Nelson donned their bathing trunks and pushed their way out onto the crowded pier. Two of the steel boats were occupied by councilors, whose duty it was to time the bathers and keep an eye on adventurous swimmers. The boys lined the edge of the pier and awaited impatiently the signal from Mr. Ellery. Presently, "All in!" was the cry, and instantly the pier was empty, save for a few juniors whose inexperience kept them in shallow water along the little sandy beach. The water spouted in a dozen places, and one by one dripping heads bobbed above the surface and their owners struck out for the steps to repeat the dive. Nelson found the water far warmer than he was accustomed to at the beaches; it was almost like jumping into a tub for a warm bath. When he came to the surface after a plunge and a few vigorous kicks under water he found himself close to the boat occupied by Dr. Smith. He swam to it, laid hold of the gunwale, and tried to wipe the water from his eyes.

"What's the trouble, Tilford?" asked the councilor smilingly.

"I guess my eyes are kind of weak," Nelson answered. "The water makes them smart like anything."

"Better keep them closed when you go under. It isn't the fault of your eyes, though; it's the water."

"But they never hurt before, sir."

“Where have you bathed – in fresh water?”

“No, sir – salt.”

“That’s different. The eyes are used to salt water, but fresh water irritates them.”

“I should think it would be the other way,” said Nelson, blinking.

“Not when you consider that all the secretions of the eye are salty. Tears never made your eyes smart, did they?”

“No, sir; that’s so. It’s funny, though, isn’t it?”

“Well, it’s like a good many other things, Tilford – strange until you get used to it. I suppose you swim pretty well?”

“Oh, I don’t know, sir. I’ve swam all my life, I guess, but I don’t believe I’m what you’d call a dabster.”

“I wouldn’t think of calling you that, anyhow,” laughed the Doctor, “for I don’t think I know what it means. But how about diving?”

Nelson shook his head.

“I’ve never done much of that. I’ve usually bathed in the surf, you see. I’d be scared silly if I tried what those fellows are doing.”

The fellows referred to were standing on a tiny platform built up a good ten feet above the floor of the pier. One by one they launched themselves into the lake, at least eighteen feet below, some making straight dives, some letting themselves fall and straightening out just as they reached the surface, and one, who proved to be Dan Speede, turning a backward somersault and disappearing feet first and hands high over head.

“That was a dandy, wasn’t it?” asked Nelson with enthusiasm.

“Yes; I guess Speede’s the star diver here. But he takes mighty big risks sometimes. If you want to try a dive I’ll watch you and see if I can help you any with criticism.”

“All right, but I just jump off when I dive,” said Nelson. “But I’d like to learn, sir.”

So he swam over to the steps, reaching them just ahead of Dan, and walked along the pier to a place where there was no danger of striking the steam-launch which was tied alongside. He had just reached a position that suited him and was standing sideways to the water, when there as an exclamation, some one apparently stumbled into him, and he went over like a ninepin, striking the water in a heap and going so far under he thought he would never come up again. But he did finally, his lungs full of water and his breath almost gone from his body – came up choking and sputtering to see Dan looking down with that maddening grin on his face, and to hear him call:

“Awfully sorry, Tilford. I tripped on a knot-hole!”

Nelson coughed and spat until some of the water was out of him – and it was odd how disagreeable it tasted after salt water – and turned to swim back. Dr. Smith was smiling broadly as Nelson passed, and the latter called, “We won’t count that one, sir.”

Dan was awaiting him on the pier, apparently prepared for whatever Nelson might attempt in the way of revenge. But Nelson took no notice of him. This time he made his dive without misadventure, and then swam out to the Doctor to hear the latter’s criticism.

“That wasn’t so bad, Tilford. But you want to straighten out more and keep your feet together. And I wouldn’t try to jump off at first; just fall forward, and give the least little bit of a shove with your feet at the last moment.”

“I’ll try it again,” said Nelson.

This time Dan did not see Nelson as the latter came along the pier. He was standing near the edge, daring Hethington to go over with his hands clasped under his knees, and knew nothing of his danger until he found himself lifted from his feet. Then he struggled desperately, but Nelson had seized him from behind and his hands found no clutch on his captor’s wet body. The next instant he was falling over and over in a most undignified and far from scientific attitude. He tried to gather himself together as he struck the water, but the attempt was not a success, and he disappeared in a

writhing heap. Like Nelson, he came up choking and gasping, trying his best to put a good face on it, but succeeding so ill that the howls of laughter that had greeted his disappearance burst forth afresh. But, thought Nelson, he was a wonderful chap to take a joke, for, having found his breath, he merely swam quickly to the steps and came up onto the pier looking as undisturbed as you please.

“That puts us even again, doesn’t it?” he said to Nelson.

Nelson nodded.

He kept a watch on Dan the rest of the time, but the latter made no attempt to trouble him again. He profited to some extent by Dr. Smith’s instructions, and when the cry of “All out!” came he believed that to-morrow he would have the courage to try a dive from the “crow’s-nest,” as the fellows called the little platform above the pier. He walked up the hill with Bob and Tom.

“I don’t see why that silly idiot of a Speede wants to be forever trying his fool jokes on me,” he said aggrievedly.

“That’s just his way,” answered Tom soothingly.

“Well, it’s a mighty tiresome way,” said Nelson, in disgust.

“He has an overdeveloped sense of humor,” said Bob Hethington. “It’s a sort of disease with him, I guess.”

“Well, I wish he’d forget it,” Nelson grumbled. “I’m afraid to sit down on a chair now for fear there’ll be a pin in it.”

“Oh, he gets tired after a while,” said Bob. “He was that way with me for a day after camp began.”

“What did you do?” asked Nelson curiously.

Bob smiled; so did Tom.

“I gave him some of his own medicine. I filled his bunk with pine-needles – they stick nicely to woolen blankets, you know – tied knots in every stitch of clothing he had, and put all his shoes in a pail of water. He’s never bothered me since.”

“Did he get mad?”

“Mad? No, you can’t get the idiot mad. Carter says he laughed himself to sleep that night – Dan, I mean.”

“I wonder if all the St. Eustace fellows are like him,” Nelson mused. “If they are, life there must be mighty interesting. Perhaps they have a course of practical joking there.”

Dinner was at twelve-thirty, and it was a very hungry set of fellows that dropped themselves onto their stools and attacked the soup, roast beef, potatoes, spinach, beets, apple pie, and cheese. Nelson marveled at first at the quantity of milk his neighbors got away with, but after a day or so he ceased to wonder, drinking his own three or four glasses without difficulty. After dessert the history of the preceding day was read by one of the councilors, while the historian, a very small youth known as “Babe,” grinned sheepishly and proudly as he listened to his composition. Nelson’s hazing was referred to with gusto and summoned laughter, and “Babe” was loudly applauded when the history was finished and the reader had announced “George Fowler.”

At one-thirty the bugle blew for “siesta,” the most trying part of the day’s program. Every boy was required to go to his bunk and lie down for half an hour with closed eyes and relaxed body. By the middle of the summer custom had enabled most of them to accept this enforced idleness with philosophy, and to even sleep through a portion at least of the terrible half hour, but at present it was suffering unmitigated, and many were the pleas offered to escape “siesta.” When Nelson approached his bunk he was confronted by a square of brown wrapping-paper on which in black letters, evidently done with a blacking-brush, was the inscription:

HILLTON IS A

BUM SCHOOL

He felt his cheeks reddening as the snickers of the watchers reached him. There was no doubt in his mind as to the perpetrator of the insult, for insult it was in his judgment, and his first impulse was to march down the aisle and have it out with Dan there and then. But he only unpinned the sheet, tossed it on the floor, and laid down on his bunk. Presently, when his cheeks had cooled, he raised his head cautiously and looked around. The dormitory was silent. One or two fellows were surreptitiously reading, a few were resolutely trying to obey orders, and the others were restlessly turning and twisting in an agony of inactivity. Mr. Verder was not present, and the dormitory was in charge of Dr. Smith, whose bunk was at the other end. Nelson quietly reached out and secured the obnoxious placard, laying it clean side up between his bed and Bob's and holding it in place with a shoe. Then he found a soft pencil, and, lying on the edge of the bunk, started to work. Bob looked on dispassionately. Nelson wondered if he ever really got interested in anything.

After a while the task was completed. Nelson looked warily down the room. Dr. Smith was apparently asleep. Finding two pins, he crept off the bed and secured the sheet of paper to the rafter where it had hung before. Up and down the dormitory heads were raised and eager eyes were watching him. This time the placard hung with the other side toward the room, and the new inscription read:

1903

Hillton 17

St. Eustace 0

Nelson scuttled back to bed. Faint whispers reached him. Then:

"Where are you going, Speede?" asked the Doctor's voice suddenly.

Dan, creeping cautiously up the aisle, paused in his tracks.

"I left something up here, sir."

"Get it after siesta, then."

Dan went back to bed. The whispers grew, interspersed with chuckles.

"Cut that out, fellows," said the Doctor, and silence reigned again. For the next quarter of an hour the score of last autumn's football game between Hillton and St. Eustace flaunted itself to the world. The fellows, all save one or two who had really fallen asleep, wondered what would happen after siesta. So did Nelson. He hoped that Dan would make trouble, for it seemed to him then that that insult could only be wiped out with blows; and although Dan was somewhat taller and much heavier than Nelson, the latter fancied he could give a fairly good account of himself. And then the bugle blew, fellows bounded onto the floor, and the ensuing racket more than made up for the half hour of quiet. Dan made at once for the placard. Nelson jumped up and stood under it. Dan stopped a few steps away.

"That's my piece of paper, you know," he said quietly.

"Get it," answered Nelson.

"Cut it out, you two," said Bob.

Nelson flashed a look of annoyance at the peacemaker.

Dan viewed him mildly. "Look here," he said, "if you'll take that down and tear it up, we'll call quits."

"I don't know," said Nelson. "How about Hillton being a bum school?" Dan grinned.

"You take that down," he said.

"I will when you take back what you wrote on the other side."

"Don't you do it, Dan," advised a snub-nosed chap named Wells.

"You shut up, Wells," said Bob; and Wells, who wasn't popular, was hustled out of the way by the others who had gathered.

"Well, ain't she pretty bum?" asked Dan innocently.

"Not too bum to lick you at football," answered Nelson hotly.

"Pooh!" said Dan. "Do you know why? Because they wouldn't let me play."

That aroused laughter, and Nelson stared at his antagonist in deep disgust. "What an idiot he was," he said to himself; "he couldn't be serious even over a quarrel."

"Well, she did it, anyhow," he said rather lamely.

"Well, it's over now, isn't it?" asked Dan calmly. "So let's take the score down," and he moved toward the placard.

"No you don't!" Nelson exclaimed, moving in front of him; "not until you've apologized."

Dan smiled at him in his irritating manner.

"Don't you believe I could lick you?" he asked.

"Maybe you can," said Nelson, "but talking won't do it."

"Well, I can; but I'm not going to. There isn't going to be any row, so you fellows might as well chase yourselves. It was just a joke, Tilford. Hillton's all right. It's the best school in the country, barring one. How'll that do for an apology, my fierce friend?"

"It isn't quite truthful," answered Nelson, smiling in spite of himself, "but I guess it'll answer. Here's your old paper."

Dan accepted it and tore it up. Then he stuffed the pieces in the first bunk he came to.

"War is averted," he announced.

Then he went out, followed by most of the inmates of the dormitory, who were laughingly accusing him of "taking water."

"He's a queer chump," said Nelson, with something of unwilling admiration in his tones. But Bob didn't hear him. He was back on his bed, absorbed in a magazine.

"And you're another," added Nelson under his breath.

CHAPTER V

TELLS HOW DAN PLAYED A TRUMP CARD, HOW BOB GAINED HONOR, AND HOW THE “BIG FOUR” CAME INTO EXISTENCE

6.55. First reveille: morning bath.
7.00. Last reveille: colors.
7.25. First mess-call.
7.30. Last mess-call: breakfast.
8 to 9. Duties.
11.00. Assembly: “soak.”
12.30. Mess-call: dinner.
1.30 to 2. Siesta.
2 to 5.25. Recreation.
5.25. First mess-call: colors.
5.30. Last mess-call: supper.
7.30. Assembly: camp-fire.
8.30. Taps: Juniors’ lights out.
9. Seniors’ lights out.

That was the daily schedule. On Sunday it differed in the rising-time and time for dinner, the first being half an hour and the latter an hour later. But there was nothing very hard-and-fast about the schedule, for frequently an afternoon’s outing on the lake prolonged itself past the hour for supper, and quite as frequently the tales about the camp-fire became so absorbing that taps didn’t sound until long after the accustomed time. Largely for this reason the schedule never proved irksome. Life moved very pleasantly and smoothly at Chicora. Ordinary misdemeanors were passed over by the councilors, to be dealt with by the fellows, and so to a great extent the boys governed themselves. To be ducked by his companions was the most degrading punishment a boy could receive, and only twice during the summer was it meted out. The Chief and the councilors mingled with the fellows on all occasions, and were tireless in the search for new methods of enjoyment. Mr. Clinton played the headiest kind of a game at second base in the scrub games, and knocked out three-baggers and home runs in a manner beautiful to see. Mr. Verder, too, was a good player, while Dr. Smith, laying aside his eye-glasses, would occasionally consent to go into the field and excitedly muff everything that came in his direction. Mr. Thorpe was the camp champion at ring toss, and Mr. Ellery was never defeated at shovelboard.

The afternoons were given over to baseball, or tennis, or boating, if the weather permitted, or, if it rained, to fishing for bass, pickerel, perch, and chub in the lake, or to the playing of games or reading in the recreation-hall or dormitories. But always, rain or fine, there was a bath at five o’clock, which few missed.

By the end of his first week at Chicora Nelson was thoroughly at home, and any doubts he may have entertained as to his liking the place and the fellows had vanished. It was a healthy life. He was out-of-doors all day long, and even at night he could scarcely consider himself housed. He went bareheaded, barelegged, and barearmed, and rapidly acquired a coat of tan of which he was very proud. He went to every meal famished, and jumped into bed at night in a condition of physical weariness that brought instant slumber. And he made friends on all sides. The closest of these were Bob Hethington and Tom Ferris. But there was one other who, if as yet scarcely a bosom friend, had captured Nelson’s respect and liking; and that one was Dan Speede.

After the incident of the placard in Maple Hall Dan had not offered to molest Nelson in any way during the two days following; neither had he appeared to take any notice of him. But on the evening of the second day Nelson was coming back from the dormitory after supper when he met Dan.

"You're the fellow I was looking for," Dan announced in quite the most cordial manner in the world. "Want to go down to the Inn with me in the dory? I'm going to take a note for Clint."

Nelson hesitated.

"I don't believe I can, Speede. I promised Bob Hethington to help him mend his camera."

"Oh, let that go. I'll ask him to come along."

"Well," said Nelson.

Bob consented, and the three tumbled into the dory and set out. The distance to the Chicora Inn landing was short, if you kept along the shore; but Dan suggested prolonging the trip by going around Bass Island, with the result that they navigated most of the upper end of the lake before they reached their destination. Dan was evidently on his best behavior, for the trip was completed without misadventure, and they got back to camp just as assembly sounded.

After that Nelson and Dan saw a good deal of each other, and the more they were together the more Nelson liked the big, handsome, red-headed fellow with the clear blue eyes, and began to understand him better. There wasn't a grain of meanness in his make-up. The jokes he was forever playing were usually harmless enough, and served as outlets for an oversupply of animal spirits. Nelson thought he had never seen a fellow more full of life, more eager for adventure and fun, than Dan. He would go almost any length to secure a laugh, even if it was against himself, and toil for days at a time to bring about an event promising excitement. He seemed to be absolutely without fear, and no one ever saw him really angry.

Nelson's liking for Dan was not, however, altogether shared by Bob, who dubbed Dan's tricks and jokes "kiddish," and usually treated him with a sort of contemptuous indifference. As a rule he avoided Dan's society, and finally Nelson was torn between his allegiance to Bob and his liking for Dan. Affairs stood thus when, about two weeks after Nelson's arrival, the election of captain of the baseball team came off, and Dan played a card which, if it did not at once gain Bob's friendship, at least commanded his gratitude.

At camp-fire Mr. Clinton announced that he had received a note from Camp Wickasaw asking when Chicora would be ready to arrange a series of ball games with them.

"Last year," said the Chief, "as those of you know who were here then, Wickasaw won all three games from us. There's no disgrace in being beaten, but it's lots more fun to beat. So this year let's see if we can't do better. They have fewer fellows than we have, and last year we allowed them to play their councilors. I guess it was that that beat us. But it was only fair, and unless you fellows object they will make use of the same privilege this year. How about it?" and Mr. Clinton looked about the fire-lit group questioningly.

"Let them use them, sir," exclaimed one of the boys. "We can beat them anyhow."

"That's so, sir; and there'll be more glory in it," said another.

And a chorus of assent arose.

"All right," said Mr. Clinton. "Now we ought to get things fixed up so that we can arrange dates with Wickasaw and the other nines. There will be the Mount Pleasant team to deal with, and I suppose there will be a nine at the Inn as usual. And I guess we can arrange some games with the Camp Trescott fellows. I propose to supply bats and balls and such things, as I did last year. We'll need one new base-bag, too."

"I think that one can be fixed up all right, sir, with some sawdust, and a piece of canvas to patch it with," said Bob.

"Well, we'll have a look at it. If it can't, we'll send for a new one. We'll have to have some balls and bats, anyhow. We've got two masks and a protector left from last summer. Is there anything else?"

"We ought to have some mitts," said Carter.

“Seems to me the fellows ought to buy those themselves,” Dan announced.

“Well, I’ll get some,” said the Chief. “If any one wants to have his own, he can. Now, how about choosing a captain? Shall we do that here to-night, or had you rather wait?”

“To-night!” “Now!” were the cries.

“Very well; suppose you nominate your candidates, and we’ll have a rising vote.”

Much laughter and whispering ensued. Then Dan was on his feet.

“Mr. Clinton,” he began.

“Mr. Chairman,” some one corrected.

“And gentlemen of the convention,” added Mr. Verder.

“Who’s making this speech?” asked Dan good-naturedly. “Mr. Clinton, I nominate Bob Hethington.” Applause followed. “He’s as good a player as any of us; he was here last year, and knows the ropes, and he – he’s a good fellow for the place.”

“I second the nomination!” cried Nelson.

Three other nominations followed, among the candidates being Joe Carter and Dan himself. The latter promptly withdrew in favor of Bob, and when the voting was over, Bob, in spite of half-hearted protestations, was declared elected. Thereupon Carter moved that the election be made unanimous, and it was. “Babe” Fowler was elected official scorer, an honor which quite overwhelmed him for the moment, and Mr. Verder was appointed manager. He and Bob were to get together at once and arrange dates, issue challenges, and start things moving generally. A call for candidates was issued on the spot, that constituting Bob’s speech of acceptance, and it was decided that practise should be held every week-day afternoon, when there were no games, at four o’clock.

“It seems to me,” said Mr. Verder, “that the best way to get good practise is to have some one to play against. Couldn’t we form a scrub team to play against the camp nine? We’ve got plenty of fellows here.”

“That’s a good plan,” said the Chief. “And you and I’ll join it.”

“And the Doctor,” some one suggested. Whereupon there was a laugh, and the Doctor begged to be excused.

“I tell you what I will do, though,” he said; “I’ll umpire.”

“All right!” they called.

“Kill the umpire!” shouted Dan.

“And I’ll get even with you, Mr. Clinton,” threatened the Doctor. “You’ll never see first when I’m umpiring!”

“He never does see it,” grumbled Tom. “He runs too fast!”

“Well, that’s all settled, then,” said Mr. Clinton when the laughter had subsided. “Now, let’s all get to work and turn out a good team, one that’ll knock the spots off of Wickasaw! And when we can’t find any one else to play, we’ll have some, good games between the first team and the scrub, and I’ll put up some prizes – boxes of candy, or something like that. How’ll that do?”

“Bully, sir!”

“That’s swell!”

“I’m going to play on the scrub!”

And the next afternoon, while the enthusiasm still held, the first practise was held, with almost every boy in camp as a candidate. Nelson turned out with the rest, and even Tom, under the excitement of the moment and with visions of candy before him, essayed to try for the outfield. Dan and Nelson were practically certain of making the first, if only by reason of former experience, for each had played on their class teams at school. The most glaring deficiency was a good pitcher, and the problem of finding some fellow to work with Bob, who was catcher, bothered the latter for some time. In the end a rather likely candidate showed up in the person of Wells, a chunky, snub-nosed senior, who, in spite of the fact that he was rather unpopular, decidedly stubborn, and a bit lazy, gave promise of turning into a fairly good pitcher. Dan was put on first, and soon proved his right to the place.

Nelson went into the field, and finally found his position at center. He was a good batsman and a heady base-runner. Tom dropped out of the contest after a day or two, having been thrice struck by the pitcher while unsuccessfully endeavoring to hit the ball, and retired to watch the practise from the spectators' gallery and nurse his bruises. A series of three games with the rival camp of Wickasaw were arranged for, and five other dates with hotel and camp nines were made. This meant an average of two games a week for the remainder of the season, and Bob got down to hard work. As it proved, it was lucky that the enthusiasm came when it did, and supplied him with sufficient material from which to turn out a team, for shortly afterward a spell of hot weather made its appearance, and while it lasted it was difficult to get any save the members of the camp nine to make the trip to the baseball field. But Bob didn't let the heat bother him much, and practise was as rigorous as ever. When not enough fellows came out to make up the scrub, Bob held batting and base-running practise instead, until Dan declared that he had lost ten pounds in a week.

He and Bob were rapidly becoming friendly, or rather Bob was, for Dan had liked Bob all along. Dan took hold of baseball affairs in a way that won the captain's heart, playing his own position for all there was in it, and helping cheerfully with the coaching no matter how hot the sun beat down on the field. As a result of this change of sentiment on Bob's part a four-cornered friendship was formed which lasted for a good many years. Nelson, Dan, Bob, and Tom were together pretty much all the time, and finally the camp took notice and dubbed them the "Big Four." Nelson meanwhile had been taken into the society and had afforded amusement for the entire camp when he had been put through his initiation, which, for want of a building affording privacy, was conducted in the clearing between Poplar and Spruce Halls.

CHAPTER VI

OPENS WITH AWFUL TIDINGS, AND ENDS WITH A GLEAM OF HOPE

Dire news reached the camp one morning, brought over from the village by a small junior who had gone for the mail. His tale was listened to with incredulous indignation by a large group of the fellows congregated outside of Birch Hall. The junior's name was Rooke, and he was vastly impressed with his importance when he saw with what breathless interest his news was received. When Dan joined the group, after having reported as orderly to Mr. Ellery, officer of the day, Rooke was telling his story for the second time, and with what Tom called "imposing detail."

"There's a fellow over at Crescent staying at the boarding-house named Harry Fraser," began Rooke.

"Queer name for a boarding-house," said Dan.

"Shut up, Speede!" some one admonished him.

Rooke looked hurt.

"All right; never mind what the boarding-house is called, Kid," said Dan. "Fire ahead!"

"I'd met him now and then at the post-office, you know. Well, this morning, when I came out with the mail, he was there – "

"Were there any letters for me?" asked Dan eagerly. Then he retired to a safe distance, and waited for his pursuers to become absorbed again in the narrative.

"Say," he said, "Wickasaw put it on to you fellows good and hard, didn't they?" "How did they?" says I. "Oh, you don't know anything about it, do you?" says he. And of course I didn't, but I wasn't going to let on to him."

"Foxy kid!" murmured Dan.

"Oh, that!" I says; "that's nothing! Any one could do that!"

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