

Douglas Alan Captain

Under Canvas: or, The Hunt for the Cartaret Ghost



Alan Douglas

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Douglas A.

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CHAPTER I OUT FOR SHELL-BARKS

"Toby, we must be half-way there now; don't you think so?"

"Guess you're right about that, Mr. Scout Master; as near as I can calculate."

"Glad to hear you say so, Toby, because, excuse me for saying it, but until I hear something that sounds like business I'm all up in the air. I've known you to fool your trusting scout comrades before this."

"There you go, George Robbins, suspicious as ever. No wonder they call you Doubting George. You never will believe anything till you see it with your own eyes, and then you often wonder whether you're awake or dreaming. Now, I told Elmer here, our Assistant Scout Master, about my plan, and he took my word for it."

"That's all right, Toby, but unfortunately I was born different; I'm not so trusting, and things are mighty deceptive in this world, sometimes."

A fourth boy of the party in the big wagon broke into the conversation at this point, by laughing hoarsely, and going on to remark, with a decided lisp:

"I bet you were, George; and I can thee you looking up at the doctor and thaying the very first thing: 'The moon *ain't* made of green cheeth; and I won't b'lieve it till you prove the thame to me, tho there!'"

"Hold on, Ted Burgoyne, don't fall all over yourself about my shortcomings; I'm not the only pebble on the beach when it comes to that; there are others. But to return to the subject. Toby, here are three of us burning up with curiosity to know where you're piloting this shell-bark hickory nut-gathering expedition. You let it out to Elmer in the start, but the rest of us don't know a thing about it. You promised to open up when we'd got far enough along the road so there wouldn't be any turning back. And there was something said about half-way; so now's your chance."

"I can see you all looking my way," remarked the fifth boy in khaki, with a peculiar little drawl, quite musical, to his voice, that stamped him of Southern birth; "and to hurry things up I move to make the request unanimous."

"There, you heard what Chatz Maxfield said, Toby; take the cover off, and tell us where this wonderful bonanza lies. You promised that we'd get every sack we're carrying along filled to the brim with dandy chestnuts, hickories, and black walnuts. Why all this mystery? It looks mighty suspicious to me – excuse me for saying it."

These five lads, sturdy looking chaps all of them, belonged to the Hickory Ridge Troop of Boy Scouts, Elmer, Ted, Toby and Chatz to the Wolf Patrol, and George to the Beaver. The troop was in a flourishing condition, since both patrols had their full quota of eight members, and a third one, called the Eagle, was almost complete.

Elmer Chenowith had long been leader of the Wolf Patrol, and being a full fledged first-class scout he had quite some time back secured from Scout Headquarters his certificate enabling him to act as Assistant Scout Master in the absence of the young man, Mr. Roderic Garrabrant, who usually fulfilled the duties of that important office.

These bright, wideawake lads, with others of their chums, had seen considerable in the way of excitement during the preceding summer. Some of their adventures and victories have already been

placed before the readers of this Series of scout books in preceding volumes, so that an extended introduction to Elmer and his four comrades is hardly necessary here. What has been said has only been for the benefit of such readers as are making their acquaintance for the first time.

It was on a Saturday morning in Fall that they were driving over the road some four miles away from the home town. A sharp frost on the preceding night was just the thing to make nutting a success, for it helped open the burrs on the chestnut trees, as well as caused the hickory nuts and black walnuts to drop.

Just before Thanksgiving holidays boys may be expected to develop a feverish longing for an outing of some sort. It had struck these scouts in full force when Toby Jones confided to them that he knew a place where almost unlimited amounts of splendid nuts were to be gathered with very little trouble, only he declined to reveal his secret until they were well on the road.

The consequence was that he had three boys guessing for the balance of the week; and plaguing the life out of him in the endeavor to coax him to tell. But Toby was nothing if not stubborn, and he only shut those jaws of his tighter, and waved the tempters away with the remark that some people called him a clam because he knew how to keep his lips closed.

Toby was himself driving the big strong horse between the shafts of the wagon. The conveyance belonged to his father, and it sometimes took all of Toby's strength to hold the frisky animal in.

Toby's middle name was Ellsworth, given to him because his grandfather had in the Civil War been connected with a regiment of Zouaves under the famous colonel whose death at Alexandria, Virginia, occurred just about the time hostilities opened between the North and the South.

Toby was a strange boy in many ways. He cherished a burning desire to become a celebrated aeronaut, and by means of some wonderful invention that would turn the world upside-down make the name of Jones famous. As yet, however, Toby had only succeeded in patching up several supposed-to-be flying machines, which had managed to give him a few rough tumbles, though luckily not any broken bones. His chums never knew what he would spring on them next, for he was constantly grappling with puzzling questions connected with the science of aviation, and deploring the fact that there was always something magnificent just ahead of him that seemed to be eluding his eager clutch like a will-o'-the-wisp in the swamp.

Ted Burgoyne had the misfortune to possess a hare-lip, which made him lisp. He was not so sturdy in build as some of his mates, but as smart as they make them, and with a decided leaning for the profession of a doctor. Indeed, such was the extent of his knowledge of surgery and medicine that he often went by the name of "Doctor Ted." And having had occasion to perform certain necessary operations along the line of setting broken limbs, and bandaging severed arteries, his work had been commended by several professional M.D.'s as marvelous.

When Doubting George made that last plea of his the driver turned his head and looked at his companions. He saw an eager glow in the eyes of the trio who had been kept in the dark up to that moment with regard to their mysterious destination.

"Well, we've got along so far that it ain't likely anybody'll want to turn back, and show the white feather," he observed, with a quick glance directly at Chatz Maxfield; "so here goes. We're headed right now for the old Cartaret place!"

"Whew! Cartaret's Folly they call it, because the man who built the same sank a fortune there making it beautiful, and then the owls and rats took charge, which was all of twenty years ago, I reckon!" George went on to say, first whistling to mark the surprise he felt over the disclosure.

"And there's a lot of talk going around to this day about ghosts being seen in the windows and around the grounds of that deserted place; but most people would say that's only old women's stories. All the same those people who don't believe in spooks and goblins and all such things couldn't be hired for any amount of money to camp out in that big house for just one dark night."

It was Chatz who made this assertion. All of his chums knew that Chatz had a deep-rooted vein of superstition in his system, which it seemed impossible for him to get rid of. He believed in

spirits coming back to haunt graveyards, and empty houses where perhaps some violence had once occurred. Elmer and other scouts had laughed at him many times, and Chatz even took himself to task because of his weakness, which he had probably imbibed through association as a small child with colored pickaninnies down on the plantation in South Carolina. Sometimes he boldly declared he was done with such childish beliefs; but when an occasion chanced to come along bearing on the subject it was strange how Chatz again found himself standing up for his old-time faith in hobgoblins, and the efficacy of the left hind-foot of a rabbit shot in a graveyard in the dark of the moon, to ward off evil influences, and repel the power of spooks to do bodily harm.

It was well known that many people shunned the vicinity of the old Cartaret place, some eight miles away from Hickory Ridge, because queer stories passed current concerning white figures seen stalking about the weed-grown grounds, and looking out of the open windows of the ruined house. That was why Toby had been wise enough to keep his secret until they were so far on the road that there was little likelihood of any boy venturing to propose that they abandon the nutting expedition and return home.

"Well, I knew some of you fellows would be saying that," he now remarked; "so I asked Elmer about it, and he advised me to bottle up till we'd gone half-way to the place. So now, I hope nobody wants to go back?"

"Oh! you needn't look at me that way, Toby," Chatz hastened to exclaim; "p'raps I may be silly enough to believe in ghosts, but nobody ever called me a coward; and where the rest of you go, suh, Chatz Maxfield can be counted on to follow."

"Me too!" chirped Ted.

"P'raps now you may remember that once before we ran foul of a haunted place up at that old mill," remarked George, "and it turned out to be only a bunch of game-fish poachers at work there. I never did take much stock in ghosts."

"You never take much stock in anything, suh, I notice, till you've pulled the same to pieces, and examined it all ovah," the Southern scout told him, quickly.

"Then it theems that you know about the thupply of nuts up at the old Cartaret place, do you, Toby?" asked Ted.

"I asked a man who was sent up there only a couple of weeks back by the lawyers that have the estate in charge, to look it over and see if it was worth while to try and repair the ruined house. And say, he told me he never saw trees loaded with such a crop of dandy nuts as there were in that woods back of the house. You never heard of any fellows going up there to gather hickories, did you? I guess nobody ever goes inside half a mile of the place if they c'n help it. And Elmer, he fell in with my scheme right away. Besides, you see, I'm taking something with me that I hope to get a chance to try out on this trip," and Toby pointed back to a mysterious bundle lying in the bed of the wagon, on the many gunny-sacks that had been brought along in order to hold the anticipated harvest of nuts for winter use.

"Well, well, well!" George exclaimed, in his skeptical way, "now chances are that's some other foolish invention of yours, Toby – a new kind of flying machine that'll drop you ker-plunk in a frog pond, or crack your head on a log when you try it out."

"Nothing'd ever be accomplished in this world if everybody had your doubting nature, George," the driver of the wagon told him; "I happen to be built on a different model, and p'raps you may live long enough to hear the name of Jones go thundering along the pathway of fame on everybody's lips."

"Mebbe I will," George told him, "because they say it's getting mighty near as common as Smith. But I'd better not say that when my cousin Landy Smith is around. I only hope this don't turn out a hoax, that's all. It's going to be an all day trip, and I'd hate to be sold, and come back with one measly bag of poor little nuts to be divided among five."

"Well, now that you know the dreadful dark secret, and nobody says turn back home," Toby announced, with a broad grin, "I'm goin' to invite the whole bunch to stop off at this wayside grocery at the crossroads here, and have some sarsaparilla with me. It's my treat this time."

As the road had been more or less dusty, and their throats were accordingly somewhat parched in consequence, there was no dissenting voice heard to this generous proposition.

"Plenty of time to gather all the nuts we want, and then make an early start for home," Elmer told them, as Toby pulled near a series of posts where the horse could be securely hitched.

"And the best of it is that we've thought to fetch some stuff along so we can build a fire and have a cooked dinner," George went on to say, with a pleased smile; for while he might be given to doubting many things, he never had occasion to question his appetite as every one knew – that was always in positive evidence.

All of them jumped from the wagon, which had two seats, so that three boys could sit behind, and one with the driver. While Toby was doing the needful with his hitching halter made of rope, the others stretched their legs, and waited, because it would be hardly proper for them to troop into the road grocery ahead of the scout who had invited them to join him in a refreshing drink.

A hulking boy was leaning against the fence near by, and observing the five scouts in a leering sort of way.

"Huh! that's Angus McDowd, one of that Fairfield bunch we beat at baseball last summer," muttered Toby, as he happened to glance over, and noticed the other observing them with a sneer on his face.

"Never liked him for a thent!" Ted was heard to say in a low cautious tone; for the other boy was a strapping big chap, and if provoked might give them more or less trouble, in a desire to fight them one after the other, as he had the reputation of being something of a bruiser.

"My stars! but he was mad that day we won the game, though, let me tell you, suh!" observed Chatz; "and he did his level best to get in a scrap with some of our fellows. Felix Wagner and Tom Ballinger had to lead him away, you remember. He doesn't like the boys of Hickory Ridge any too well, believe me, fellows."

They all went inside the little dusty-looking building, where some enterprising man had started a wayside grocery, and general store, at which you could purchase nearly anything from a paper of needles to a coffin, or an automobile tire, and gasoline.

Fortunately the man happened to have some stray bottles of soft drinks like sarsaparilla and root beer that must have been left over from his summer trade; and presently each of the scouts was washing the dust down his throat.

Altogether they may have spent about ten minutes in the store; and then after Toby had settled the account, they again passed out to the wagon.

The loitering Fairfield boy had disappeared, as Elmer noted when he looked over toward the fence where Angus McDowd had been standing on their arrival.

"Now, what ails you for a silly thing, Nancy?" said Toby, as the mare laid back her ears, and pranced at their approach. "Been getting too much oats lately, I reckon, with too little exercise. Well, you won't be feeling so fresh and frisky by the time we get back home to-night. That load of nuts is going to make you puff, let me tell you. Pile in, fellows, while I unfasten the hitching rope. Whoa! there, don't you dare try to bite me, you horse with the nasty temper! Why, this is a new trick for you to show. Grab the lines, won't you, Elmer? The blame nag's that anxious to show off she'd leave me in the lurch! Let up, there, can't you?"

It was only by making a hasty jump that agile Toby managed to gain his seat, to take the taut lines from Elmer's hands. Immediately the mare commenced to rear up in a most remarkable manner. Then, taking the bit between her teeth, she started along the road, fortunately in the right direction, at a whirlwind pace, amidst a cloud of dust, and with the three scouts who had been sitting on the second seat tumbling around in a heap in the bed of the wagon, all of them having been thrown backward.

Even as the grocery keeper came running out of the door to see what was the matter, and while they were still within hearing distance of the place, Elmer felt sure he saw a head rise into view above the pig-pen situated on one side of the road, and could recognize the grinning face of that Fairfield loafer, Angus McDowd.

There was no time to say anything. The mare was undoubtedly running away, and the wagon flinging from side to side in the road, as Toby stood half erect, pulling with might and main on the lines in the endeavor to hold the frantic animal in.

It began to look like croaking George might have been right when he said he doubted whether the nutting expedition would be much of a success.

CHAPTER II

WHAT HAPPENED ON THE ROAD

"Hold her in, Toby!" George was heard to shout, as he floundered around in the midst of the gunny sacks, with the other two scouts straddling him half the time.

"Whoop! we ain't in thuch a hurry ath all that, Toby. Get a grip on the linth, Elmer, and help him pull. Oh! what a quack I got then on my head. I bet you I'll have a lump ath big ath a gooth egg! Quit clawing me, George; I can't help it if I do climb all over you. Look at the way the wagon thwings, would you?"

Elmer did not need to be told that it was his duty to assist Toby control the runaway animal. No matter what the cause of the beast's strange fright might turn out to be, their first business was to drag so heavily on the lines that Nancy would have to moderate her wild pace.

Accordingly both of the boys pulled and sawed and jerked until the mare was made to come to a full stop. This occurred fully a mile away from the wayside grocery, which was long ago lost to sight behind several bends in the road.

"Jump out and hold her, some of you other fellows!" gasped Toby, short of breath after his violent exertions.

Chatz, George and Ted all hastened to obey. They had been tumbled around in the bed of the big wagon at such a lively rate that they were only too glad of the chance to gain their feet. Held by a stout boy on either side the mare did not offer to run further, though still acting very strangely.

Elmer had once spent some time up on an uncle's ranch in Northwest Canada; and knew a heap about horses. He had sometimes seen animals act this way, and had before then guessed what might be the matter.

"Hold her steady, everybody, and let me look around a little," was what he called, as he jumped down, and began patting the sweaty back of the trembling animal.

A minute later and they heard him give an angry exclamation.

"I thought as much," Elmer was saying, as he held up his hand; "look what was fixed under her tail."

"Say, that seems like a bunch of those nasty little sand spurs that sting and poison like all get-out!" exclaimed George, and it might have been noticed that this time he showed no signs of his customary doubting spirit.

"Just what they are," Elmer went on to say, indignation in his whole manner.

"But how – when – where?" began Ted, when Chatz burst out with:

"He did it, Elmer, that skunk of a McDowd. Must have thought it'd be a fine way to pay back what he believed he owed the Hickory Ridge boys. The low-down coward, to hurt a hoss that way."

"But why, he might have made some of us get thrown out, and hurt right bad in the bargain!" exclaimed George, angrily.

"Much he'd have cared for that," Toby panted; "and didn't I just think I heard a silly laugh at the time Nancy started to rear up, and prance like a crazy thing? That must a been Angus. And like as not he's doubled up back there right now laughing over seeing how we got thrown around in the wagon because of his sand spur trick. For five cents I'd turn around, and go back to give him the licking he needs."

"Don't bother thinking about that," Elmer told him. "It was a mean trick, and I've known men to get a halter out on the plains for playing that same game. But we got out of the hole without any damage, only to our feelings; so let's forget it."

The others were usually swayed more or less by what Elmer thought or did. He was a natural leader, and it had become second nature for the other scouts to look to him for advice, whenever an emergency arose.

"Guess the poor frightened thing'll stand now, fellows, without holding her any more," Toby suggested; "so climb back on your seat; and be more careful next time how you let go your hold. It's a wonder none of you got dumped out when you tilted over backward."

Just as he said, the animal seemed to have partly recovered from her mad fright occasioned by the pain the little sharp-pointed burrs inflicted. Though still trembling, and acting in a skittish manner, she gave signs of being docile enough to be driven.

The three scouts hastened to climb in at the back of the wagon, and after securing the gunny sacks, as well as the large package belonging to Toby, they once more found seats for themselves. George and Chatz, however, it might be noticed, made sure to get a firm grip somewhere on the side of the wagon; while Ted, being in the middle, threw an arm around each of his chums, as though he depended on them to sustain him, should another runaway occur.

They were soon going along at a fair clip, though Toby had to "lean" pretty heavily on the lines in order to hold the big bay mare in, for he did not think it advisable to let her have her head again. The next time she made such a mad spurt as that they might not find it so easy to get her to stop.

"What d'ye reckon possessed that coward to play such a mean trick on us?" Toby wanted to know.

"Oh! he had it in him, that's all, and when the chance came around he just couldn't help himself," Elmer told him, for the Assistant Scout Master was somewhat of a philosophical boy, and able to figure out things that might puzzle some of his tent mates.

"Next time I see that Angus he'll hear my opinion of a sneak who could play a dirty trick like that!" continued the driver, vigorously.

"Thame here!" chirped Ted. "And if he giveth me any thath I'll pull hith red noth for him, thee if I don't."

"All I can say is, keep your eye out for sledge hammer punches if ever you go to pulling *his* nose," warned George; "because he's a born scrapper, and would as soon fight as eat."

"Let's forget about that little affair," suggested Elmer; "no use crying over spilt milk, and what's done can't be undone. Toby, suppose you tell us a little more about this nut grove up at the old Cartaret place; because if I remember rightly you said you'd been asking everybody all about the estate."

"Why, old Judge Cartaret, the rich man who built up the place, meaning to live there with his young and handsome wife, went crazy, they say, after he'd found her dead in her room. The mystery never was cleared up. To this day some people say she was murdered by a man she once promised to marry before the millionaire judge came along; another lot seem to believe she committed suicide because the judge was so cruel, and wouldn't let her leave the place; and one man told me he always had believed ever since he was a boy that the judge struck her down in a fit of passion. But of course those things don't cut any figure with us."

"On the contrary," interrupted Chatz, who had been listening to all these horrors with wide-open eyes, and a look of intense interest on his dark face, "they strike me as being decidedly interesting, suh. If I had a chance I'd like to investigate this queer thing, and perhaps learn what did happen in that big house ever so many years ago."

"But how about the nut treeth, Toby, did the judge plant the thame when he wath trying to make a thut-in paradith for that pretty bride of hith?"

"That's just what he did, boys, so they told me," Toby continued, readily consenting to be squeezed for information; "he planted a whole lot of chestnuts, walnuts and shell-bark hickories that have been growing for several dozen years. They're busting big trees, and just breaking down with the finest crop ever known, and with never a single fellow brave enough up to this time to go there and gather the harvest. Why, when I heard what that man had to say about it, I was fairly wild to be

off. And believe me, boys, we'll make the eyes of the other fellows stick out of their heads like fun when they see what an enormous supply of nuts we've gathered for next winter around the fire. Yum! yum! I always did say that a plate of red-cheeked apples, a dish of fresh popped corn, and a pocketful of nuts beats all creation on a stormy night, winter times."

"Believe it when I see it!" muttered skeptical George, who undoubtedly thought this wonderful harvest was too good to turn out to be true; after they had arrived on the ground, very probably it would only be to find that the trees had been stripped of their burden of nuts by some hardy souls who did not place much credence in the stories of the ghost said to haunt the place; something was always on the eve of turning up to keep George from reaping success, it seemed.

"No use talking," observed the disgusted Toby, "George never will be convinced till he begins to load up the wagon with bags running over with nuts. And even then he'll expect some white-sheeted ghost to step up, and demand that we throw every one of the same back again where we found them. You couldn't convince him of a single thing till he's had a chance to prove it over and over again."

"Learned that in school when I was doin' problems," George declared with one of his most exasperating grins; "which was why I always passed with such a high percentage in arithmetic and algebra. They said I'd make a fine carpenter, because I'd always measure my boards again and again before I cut 'em, and that way there never'd be any mistakes about my sawing."

"And a great carpenter you'd make, George," chuckled Toby; "why, you'd take everlasting and a day just to get your foundation started. The folks would all die off waiting for you to finish your job. A carpenter – whew! excuse me if you please from ever employing a mechanic who spends all his time figgering out how things could be so and so."

"But we must be within a mile or two of the place by now, fellows," Elmer told them about that time, "so if you hold up a little we'll soon know the worst or the best. I'm of the opinion myself that what Toby says is going to turn out true; for nobody ever goes near the Cartaret place these days. Lots of boys around home never even heard about it; and others couldn't be coaxed or hired to explore around a place they call haunted."

"Yes, I'm not the only silly believer in ghosts," Chatz told them, looking pleased at what Elmer had just said, "for misery always likes company, and you'll remember, suh, how the sly old fox that had fallen into a well told the goat looking down that it was a lovely place to drop in; and when Billy had taken him at his word he hopped on the goat's back and jumped out. But if I have half a chance I expect to prowl around more or less while we're up heah, and see if the stories I've heard about this queer old rookery could ever have been true. Why, they even say the judge had the house built so that it was like a big prison, or some sort of asylum."

Chatz was full of his subject, and might have wandered on still further, once he got fairly started, only for a sudden movement on the part of Elmer. Sitting alongside the driver it was the easiest thing going for that worthy to seize the reins and with a quick strain on the same bring the mare to a full stop.

"Why, what under the sun!" began the astonished Toby, when Elmer clapped his hand over his mouth and immediately said:

"Hush! be still! Look what's coming out of that side road ahead there!" and at the same time he pointed with his disengaged hand.

All of the others hastened to do as he requested. There, in plain sight, though their own vehicle was partly hidden by the foliage still clinging to the bushes that jutted out at a bend of the road, was a two-horse wagon, containing four boys, in whom they readily recognized some of the toughest elements around the town of Hickory Ridge.

As the other wagon rattled into the main road, and went speedily on without the occupants once looking toward them, Elmer and his chums exchanged troubled glances.

CHAPTER III

NEAR THE HAUNT OF THE "SPOOKS"

"We might as well hold up here a little bit, so as to let that crowd pass on," suggested George. "I never did take any stock in Connie Mallon anyway. He's got a pretty bad name down around our way. My father says he'll land in the penitentiary before he's two years older, except he reforms, and I'd never believe he'd change his ways."

"Oh! Elmer, I wonder now, could they know about those splendid nuts, and mean to skin the trees ahead of us?" exclaimed Toby, as though nearly overwhelmed by a staggering thought.

"You've some reason for saying that, Toby?" Elmer told him.

"Why, don't you know, it flashed over me just like a stroke of lightning," was what Toby went on to say, excitedly, a troubled look on his face. "You remember that when I was talking to you over the telephone, Elmer, and telling you about wanting to get the boys to come up here with me Saturday, I said several times somebody was rubbering, and once even told 'em to get off the wire, which they did, only to come on again."

"Yes, I do remember something like that," admitted the other scout.

"Well, our telephone is on a four-party line, and one of the other three houses is Jackson's down the street. Phil Jackson is one of the cronies of Connie Mallon, and he's sitting there in that wagon right now."

"Then you think he must have heard all you were telling me that man said about the immense crop of nuts up here at the Cartaret place, and has put the others wise to it?" Elmer asked.

"I wouldn't put it past Phil a minute!" Toby declared, with an expression of pain, "and now it looks like we mightn't get what we came after, unless we fight for it."

"I knew it!" muttered George; "call me a doubter all you want, but let me tell you things ain't always what they seem. There's a string tied to nearly everything you think you're going to get so easy. Oh! I know what I'm talking about, and for one I'm not surprised at anything happening."

"Don't throw up the sponge so easy, George," Elmer told him. "We may have our troubles, but scouts are supposed to be wide-awake enough to know how to overcome any kind of difficulties that happen along. As Sheridan said at the battle of Cedar Creek, we'll have those camps back, or the nuts in our case, or know the reason why."

"Lithen to that kind of talk, would you?" burst out Ted, brimming over with confidence in their leader; "why, we haven't begun to get buthy yet. That Connie may think he'll tholen a march on our crowd, but thay, he'll have to cut hith eye-teeth before he can beat Elmer here laying planths."

"It may turn out to be a false alarm, after all, boys," Elmer continued, while Toby still restrained the impatient Nancy; "but even if we get there to find that they're on the ground ahead of us, we'll hatch up a scheme to turn the tables on that crowd, I give you my word for it."

"That's the ticket!" Chatz exclaimed, being inclined to display an impetuous style of talk and action, as became his hot Southern blood; "if they've sneaked this idea from Toby by listening over the wire they've got no business up here. I'd call it rank piracy, and treat the lot like I would buccaneers of the Spanish Main. Why, it'd serve 'em right if that ghost they tell about jumped out at them, and sent the lot scampering off like crazy things."

"That's just what I had in my mind, Chatz," said Elmer, chuckling; "and perhaps we'll find some way to coax the spook to help us out."

"Elmer's got the dandy idea, all right," said George; "you leave him alone, and he'll sure bring home the bacon. But how much longer do we have to stay here? I wonder if anybody's getting cold feet about now?"

"Speak for yourself, George!" cried Toby; "I'm for going on three times as much as I was before we saw that bunch cutting in ahead of us. When Elmer gives me the word I'll start things moving."

"You might do that now," said the leader, "but take it slow, Toby. I want to keep an eye on the track of their wheels. If they turn off at any fork in the road, or into the woods, we want to know it."

"Thith theems to be getting mighty interethting," observed Ted; "and I want to thay right now that I've got tho much confidence in Elmer and the whole of our crowd that I'd call the chances five to one we'll go home with a full cargo thith afternoon."

"Good boy, Ted; and I second that motion!" Chatz announced, heatedly.

The mare was allowed her head, but Toby kept a tight rein, so that they did not begin to whirl along with half the speed the other wagon had displayed as it came out of the side road on to the main thoroughfare.

Elmer kept his gaze firmly fixed ahead, where he could plainly see the marks of that other vehicle in the dust of the road. Thus they continued for a short time; then the leader put out his hand, and Toby again pulled in.

"They've left the road, and entered the woods back there twenty feet or so," the acting scout master told them.

"On the left, wasn't it, Elmer, that they turned out?" asked Chatz, eagerly.

"Just what it was, which shows that you were using your eyes, as a scout should always do," came the reply. "Back up, Toby, and we'll follow suit."

"Do you think we're at the place already?" asked Toby.

"I certainly do, though I'm some surprised that they knew where to hit that little grass covered wagon-road that led off among the trees," Elmer replied. "It was once used as a way through the forest to the rear of the Cartaret place, so I was told when I asked a man about it who used to work for the judge long ago. They must have been busy doing some of the same kind of missionary work, because I don't believe any of them has ever been up here before – to stop I mean."

"Well, what if we get in where the nut trees are growing to find that lot skinning every tree, and ready to put up a rattling fight before they'll let us have even a look-in; what are we goin' to do about it?" Toby wanted to know.

"First of all we'll just hang around, and watch them work," Elmer declared.

"That's all very fine, Elmer," interposed George, who was always the first one with any objection; "but once they cover the ground with nuts, we'd find it a hard proposition to chase the bunch away, and lay claim to what they'd gathered."

"But they'd be really *our* nuts," interrupted Toby, "because didn't the bright idea flash right into this brain of mine; and ain't first discoverers entitled to the land always? It's the rule of the world. They hooked the idea from me by unfair means, and ain't entitled to any consideration at our hands. If Elmer can manage to scare them away you watch and see how quick I'll start to filling my bag with some of the nuts they've knocked down."

"I only want the chance to do the thame," Ted insinuated.

"Ditto here, because, as we said, they're only a pack of wolves or pirates, and have no rights honest people are bound to respect," Chatz added as his quota to the discussion; "after we've filled all our bags, if there happens to be some more nuts to be had why they're welcome to the same. Gentlemen first, every time, we believe, down our way."

"Pull up, and let's listen, Toby," Elmer counseled; "I thought I heard a shout or two just then; and perhaps they've started to work."

When the mare had been made to stand they could all readily hear the sounds that welled up some little distance ahead. Loud laughter and boyish shouts attested to the fact that a party of nut gatherers must be busily engaged in the grove; for with other sounds could be heard the plain swish of poles beating the branches of the trees in an effort to rattle the nuts down.

"Just our luck!" muttered George, disconsolately.

"Well, what would you have?" demanded Toby, like a flash; "it ain't every bunch that can have a lot of fellows knock down their nuts for 'em, is it? Think of all the hard work it's going to save us. Elmer, the more I look at that grand little scheme of yours the better I like it. Go it, Connie, Phil and your mates; keep the ball arollin' right along. The more the merrier, say we. And now, Elmer, do we hide our rig somewhere around, so they won't happen on the same if they come to skip out of that grove in a big hurry?"

"That's the idea, Toby," Elmer told him; "turn out to the left here, and we'll like as not run across a good hide-out for the wagon. When we've got the nuts all sacked we can come back for the outfit, and head for home."

A short time later they found the place they were looking for. It offered concealment for the wagon and the mare; and Toby soon had the latter securely hitched to a limb.

"Fetch the bags along with you, boys," remarked Elmer at this stage of the proceedings, and picking up several himself as an example.

Toby saw that the others had cleaned out the entire assortment of sacks, which fact caused him to grin with satisfaction. He calmly secured the rather bulky package that lay in the bottom of the wagon, and trotted after the rest of the scouts.

They made a sort of detour in approaching the spot where all that noise announced a busy lot of boys covering the ground with shell-barks and other varieties of choice nuts.

"Whee! looky over there, Chatz; ain't that the house you c'n see through the trees? I never thought I'd ever have the nerve to come up here, and break in on the enchanted ground given over to hobgoblins and spooks and owls ever so many years."

When George said this in a low and rather shaky tone he clutched the arm of the Southern boy, and pointed toward the left. Of course Chatz eagerly followed the line of his extended finger; for he had been wishing to catch the first glimpse of the haunted house for several minutes back.

"Yes, that's it, all right, George," he replied, with a sighing breath, as though something he had long yearned to see was now before him.

"Come on, you fellows back there," said Elmer, who did not like to have them lagging so; and accordingly George and Chatz hurried their steps.

It was certainly anything but a cheerful place, for a fact. The trees were very much overgrown, and the undergrowth had year after year increased its hold until it would have been difficult to force one's way through this, only for wandering cows having made paths which could be followed.

"Elmer, I c'n see 'em workin' like beavers over there!" whispered Toby, who had forged alongside the leader, still burdened with that package which the others believed must contain some new fangled contraption of his connected with the science of aviation.

The five scouts gathered in a group, being careful not to expose themselves in a way to draw attention. They could see a boy in a chestnut tree, and plainly hear the rattle of nuts from the opened burrs, whenever he switched the branches with the long pole he was carrying, secured somewhere in the woods near by.

"Did you ever hear it hail nuts like that in all your born days?" gasped George as they stood there, sheltered by the bushes and watched operations.

"Oh! listen to him talk from the other side of his mouth, fellows?" Toby muttered. "George has seen a big light; he ain't a doubter any longer, you notice. He hears the rattle of the nuts, and sees 'em falling like hail. Talk to me about beavers and busy bees, that crowd would take the cake for business. Look at that one climbing to the very top of the hickory tree to get the best nuts that always grow up high. There he starts in slashing, and it's like a regular bombardment on the ground. If they get away with all that lot I'll die of a broken heart. There never was, and there never will be again, such a bully chance to lay in a big winter's supply of nuts in double-quick time. And I never did like to take other people's leavings."

"Make up your mind to it we don't have to," Elmer assured him.

"Might as well make ourselves comfy while we're about it," suggested George, as he dropped down, and sat tailor-fashion, with his legs doubled under him.

"Yes, for we may have to stay here quite some time," admitted Elmer, copying his example without hesitation.

"Ain't it nice to watch other people working for you?" observed Ted, after a while.

"Only they don't know it," added George; "but, Elmer, suppose you give the rest of us a hint what you mean to do. I see you've been cutting the bark off that white birch tree, and got the same in your hand. It's used for marking canoes, and picture frames as well. Some persons even write on the brown back of the bark, but I don't think you mean to send them a notice from spookland, telling them that if they don't clear out instanter the bully old ghosts will grab them tight?"

"Not the kind of message you're thinking about," replied Elmer, smiling. "In the first place I don't know what sort of hand writing ghosts would be apt to use; and then again, I don't believe they'd pay much attention to that sort of thing. Watch and see if you can guess now."

With that he rolled the large strip of bark so that it looked like a great cornucopia. So had Elmer seen Indian guides fashion a horn when wishing to call the aggressive moose on a dark night, away up in Northern latitudes.

"Oh! now I see what you're meaning to do!" exclaimed George; "that looks like a regular megaphone now, the kind they use when there's a boat race on, or at college games. You're going to throw a scare into them by whooping it up through a horn; is that right, Elmer?"

"You've hit it to a fraction, George, because that's exactly what I'm meaning to do with this birch bark horn. And as some of the bunch have started to slip down the trees even now, thinking they've got enough nuts on the ground to keep them busy picking the same up, we'll watch until they've gathered all they want, and then you'll see some fun – that is, it'll be fun at this end, but a serious business for them. Lie low when I give you the signal."

They hovered there for a full hour while the four boys were gathering the nuts, and stowing them away in sacks that had been brought for the purpose.

At last Elmer decided that matters had gone far enough. There were evidences that one of the boys had been sent to fetch the horses and wagon up, in order to load the numerous bags that had been filled. So cautioning his chums to lie low so they might not give the game away, Elmer raised the bark horn to his lips.

CHAPTER IV

"TO THE VICTORS BELONG THE SPOILS"

So far as the other scouts knew, Elmer Chenowith had never seen such a mystery as a real ghost in all his life; and he certainly had not heard one groan, or give any kind of sound. Consequently his imagination was called upon to conjure up a series of queer, blood curdling noises such as an orthodox specter, fresh from the world of shades, might be expected to utter when tremendously excited.

Josh and George afterwards confessed that if they had not known it was the scout master who amused himself in this way, they too might have shivered in their shoes. As for the Southern boy, he lay there amidst the brush, and kept his eyes glued all the time on the face of Elmer, as though he dared not depend on his knowledge of facts, but must back this up with the positive evidence of his eyes.

Once Chatz even cautiously put out his hand, and gently felt of Elmer's khaki sleeve; it was a mute confession that while never a doubter like George, the boy from Dixie had to be convinced when it was a matter of superstition.

But the main thing, of course, was what effect Elmer's groaning might have upon the four boys who had stolen a march upon the scouts, and reached the harvest of nuts in advance.

No sooner had the first sounds begun to rise than they looked up with startled expressions on their faces. Of course, like nearly every other person in town, the quartette must have heard strange stories connected with the abandoned Cartaret place, for such things have a way of traveling from one end of a county to another, being eagerly repeated even by many who would scorn to admit their belief in such silly notions as ghosts.

Before coming up here perhaps Connie and Phil, with the other two fellows, may have talked things over seriously, and expressed many a fervid hope that their piratical operations might not be interrupted by any visit from a spectral guardian, such as was said to watch over the place.

The first thing they did was to stare at each other, while their mouths could be seen to open with astonishment.

Elmer changed his key, and gave them another sample of the weird sounds capable of being coaxed from a birch bark horn. He certainly was making a great success of his music, his comrades thought, as they lay there and waited to be invited to have a share in the proceedings, according to agreement.

Toby afterwards solemnly declared that he could see the caps of the four frightened boys start to rise, as their hair stood on end; though an element of doubt always surrounded this statement; for Toby was so excited himself that possibly his imagination worked over-time.

With the change in tune the boys seemed to regain in some measure the command of their faculties; at least they were able to rush close together, as though seeing protection in mutual sympathy. It was a plain case of "united we stand, divided we fall!" And clutching at one another they continued to shiver and listen, – meanwhile looking all around, as though more than half expecting to discover some terrible figure bearing down on them.

Elmer would have been only too happy to have provided such a specter for their accommodation; but unfortunately he had not come prepared to launch such a thing. Ghosts were hardly in his line; and in lieu of a specimen for exhibition purposes he was compelled to do the best he could with the material on hand; which is always a cardinal principle with scouts.

"Now!"

When Elmer hissed this single word his four chums knew that their time had come to get into the game. The snake had been "scotched, not killed," as Josh later on aptly described it. No matter how much frightened Connie Mallon and his cronies might seem to be, if they stood by their guns

what would the advantage amount to? The affair must be turned into a regular rout in order that the scouts might reap the full benefit.

Accordingly all of them got busy immediately. George pounded on a hollow log with a heavy stick, and managed to produce a series of throbbing sounds that were likely to add to the consternation of the listeners; Ted clapped two stones together; while Toby and Chatz rattled the brush violently, and added a few choice groans of their own manufacture as good measure.

It was enough, yes more than sufficient.

Human nature had reached its limit, so far as those alarmed fellows were concerned. Undoubtedly they must have become convinced that their raid on the preserves of the ghostly guardian of the haunted Cartaret place had aroused the ire of the said defender, and that they were now in deadly danger of being seized by bony hands.

Of course Connie and his followers were raw novices in matters connected with haunts, and all such things, or they would have known that no self respecting ghost was ever caught giving public exhibitions of his oddities in broad daylight. The gloom of night, or the weird light of the moon, has always had a monopoly of these thrilling diversions.

When Connie Mallon suddenly gave a tremendous spring forward, and started on a full run, there was no holding the other three back. They went plunging madly on in his wake, paying little attention to the direction they took, so long as their flight promised to carry them away from those dreadful manifestations.

Elmer did not stop his labors; in fact he even went to some pains to increase the racket, under the impression that once you get a thing started it is good policy to keep it moving.

He had distinctly warned the others, however, not to allow their excitement to overlap their discretion; for should one of them so far forget himself enough to give vent to a genuine boyish shout, perhaps the panic-stricken quartette might become wise to the fact that they were being made victims to a great hoax.

"Come on, let's chase after them a bit, fellows!" Elmer told them, between his puffs through the birch bark megaphone; "but keep well back, so that they can't get a look-in at us if they turn their heads. Noise is what we want, and plenty of the right kind."

Acting on his suggestion the others trailed after their leader. They swished in and out of the bushes, and accompanied their progress with all manner of novel sounds, each of which was calculated to add just a mite more to the alarm of the fugitives.

More than once they heard loud cries of pain coming from ahead, as one of the runners collided with some tree which had not been noticed in his terror; or else found himself tripped up by a wild grape-vine that lay in wait for unwary feet. As Toby declared later on, all this was "just pie" for the chasers; they feasted off it, and seemed to enjoy the run immensely; which was more than the Mallon boy, with his three cronies, could ever say.

At least Connie seemed to have kept his head about him in one important particular, which pleased Elmer very much; he knew in which direction lay their wagon, for which he had been in the act of sending one of his companions at the very moment this awful clamor broke out which had started them in full flight.

The neigh of a horse close at hand told Elmer what was happening, and he immediately held his eager clan in. Far be it from them to wish to delay the departure of the Mallon tribe, whose room was worth far more to the scouts than their company.

"Wait, and listen!" said Elmer, in a whisper.

"You didn't get the whole of that straight, Elmer," Toby told him, quickly, in a low, husky voice; "you ought to have said, 'Stop! Look! Listen!' That's the way it always is at railroad crossings!"

"Hist! Be still!" cautioned the leader.

They could hear loud excited voices near by, accompanied by the stamping of horses' hoofs, as though the excitement had communicated to the team used by Connie Mallon and his three cronies in their rival nutting expedition.

"Now, let's start up again, and add the finishing touches!" Elmer told the others, when a dozen more seconds had dragged past, and they felt they might safely assume that the fugitives must have untied the team, as well as scrambled into the wagon.

Once again did that strange chorus break forth, with Elmer groaning through his birch bark horn, and the others doing all in their power to accompany him in regular orthodox ghostly style, in as far as their limited education along these lines went.

Taken altogether the racket was certainly enough to scare almost any one. Snorts and prancing on the part of the horses announced that they were now sharing the general excitement. Then came cries urging haste, and presently the plain unmistakable smack of a whip being brought down with decided emphasis on the backs of the animals, several times repeated.

With that there was the crunch of wheels, and away dashed the two-horse wagon, making for the road which Connie knew must not be far away. Once or twice the scouts had fugitive glimpses of the departing vehicle as it flashed past small glades where the view happened to be unobstructed; and it was certainly "killing," as George called it, to see those fellows bouncing about in the bed of the wagon, holding on for dear life, and with Connie plying the whip savagely, while the horses leaped and tugged and strained to make fast time over the uneven floor of the woods.

The echoes of the flight grew fainter in the distance, and presently as they stood there the scouts could tell from the change in sounds that those who were fleeing from the wrath of the ghosts must have reached the harder road, for the hoof beats of the horses came with a pounding stroke.

Gradually even this was dying away. Then the five boys turned and looked at each other, with their faces wreathed in huge grins.

"Tell me, Elmer, is it safe to let off steam now?" demanded Toby, eagerly.

"If you're careful not to be too noisy, go it!" came the reply.

With that Toby threw himself flat on his back, and began to kick his heels up in the air, all the while laughing, and giving queer gurglings that were meant to serve his pent-up emotions about as the escape valve of a boiler does when the steam presses too heavily on the boiler, and relief is necessary.

He was not alone in his hilarity, although the merriment of the others partook of a different nature. Ted, Chatz and George went around shaking hands, and assuring each other that never in all their lives had they ever run across a more ridiculous diversion than this flight of the bold nut-gatherers.

"Talk to me about Napoleon's retreat from Moscow," said George, who prided himself on his knowledge of history, "why, it wasn't in the same category as that wonderful escape of the Connie Mallon gang from the raid of the Cartaret ghosts. And say, what thrilling stories they'll have to tell about it all! Believe me, the whole Hickory Ridge will know about it by night time. Oh! I'll never forget it! I haven't had so much fun for a whole year as to-day. It was worth coming twenty miles just to see them on the jump."

"Why," observed Ted, after he could regain his breath in part, "that Phil Jackthon took the cake when it came to covering ground. Did you thee him clear that log like a buck? I bet you he made a record jump that time, and beat anything he ever marked up on the thlate at a match."

"Well, they're gone, all right," said Chatz; "and from the way they whipped their poor hosses I'd like to guess they'll keep on the wild run till they get home. And there isn't much chance that we'll be bothered again by that Mallon bunch to-day; how about that, Elmer?"

"You can set that down as certain," replied the one spoken to. "It would take more spunk than any of that crowd happens to own for them to change their minds, and come back here. And that's why I wanted you to be careful not to give the secret away. We've got the field to ourselves the rest of the day."

"Unless something comes along to give us a scare too," added Chatz, meaningly; for truth to tell, the superstitious Southern boy was already wondering whether all this playing ghost on their part might not bring something down on their heads savoring of retribution.

"Then what's to hinder our getting busy, and changing all that pile of fine nuts from their sacks to ours?" George wanted to know. "The spoils of battle belong to the victors every time; and besides, they were trying to beat us out of our share as first discoverers. For one I ain't a bit ashamed to grab everything. Let that silly bunch wake up earlier next time, if they mean to get away with the game."

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