

Sketch

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Major Barr

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Major Barr

Loran Fisher

WHEN his sister, Caroline, found him in the walnut tree, six feet above the ground, she would probably say: "Alan dear, do you think you're quite strong enough to climb trees?" Ever since the fever had left his body she had talked to him like that. And he'd been out of bed for a week.

Only that morning when he found the little brown ants attacking a caterpillar and sat down on the ground to watch the battle, she had called out through the screen: "Alan dear, I wouldn't sit on the ground if I were you. Don't forget that you've been a pretty sick little boy." And when he had worked up in the swing so high that the whole yard rose and fell rhythmically before him and he could see over the vine-covered fence into the neighbor's yard, she had called again. "Alan dear, don't you think that's a little too strenuous? If you should get dizzy—!" He had said, "Aw, Caroline!" more than once, but he had always obeyed her. He understood that his sister just couldn't realize he was well again, that his legs could scarcely keep from running, and that long days and nights in bed had left him with a sense of time forever lost out of his life, time that he must make up for by filling his days brimful.

THE walnut bough felt rough and cool beneath him. He could rest his feet upon another branch and his back upon a third. With his arm hooked about the sturdy trunk he felt comfortable and safe; yet whether he looked up or closed his eyes, his body knew that it was six feet above the earth, and the knowledge sent little warnings to his arms and hands, making them cling more tightly.

The leaves of the walnut tree were paper-thin and pointed. The lightest stir of air set them to waving. The big waxen leaves of the gleaming cottonwoods by the road hung so heavily on their twisted stems that only the stronger puffs could lift and turn them. Beyond the road Alan saw a red and white cow cropping the grass and lashing at flies with her raveled tail. She swung her heavy head around to her shoulder and he saw the tether-

rope fly up, then drop back and lose itself in the deep grass. The grocer's wagon rumbled by, coming suddenly into view, appearing ahead of its sound and leaving its sound behind after it passed by—leaving with Alan, too, an after-image of the horse's bobbing head, of dull yellow dust spurting out from under the thudding hooves, of the bright yellow umbrella swaying above the driver's head, of a blur of spokes. The dust, fine as flour, made a haze over the road. It hung there long after the silence came back, slowly powdering the roadside grass. Even when it had thinned out and vanished, Alan had a sense of something suspended in the silence.

The cow lay down, lowering her great body awkwardly upon her kneeling forelegs. The trees blinked drowsily at Alan. Bright awnings with deeply scalloped fringes gave the house a heavy-lidded look. But nothing altogether slept. The trance of afternoon fastened upon the friendly company of familiar things about Alan, but they napped with their eyes partly open, and he felt them watching him—with the same look that Caroline had when she bent over him at night.

HE HEARD the ring of the cane upon the sidewalk with a start of surprise. Major Barr shuffled into view, a thin, black figure in sagging clothes. He moved slowly, bent over as if dragging a load behind him, and he scarcely lifted his knotty cane before he brought it sharply down again. His lowered eyes studied the sidewalk as if walking called for his utmost attention and care. Once, before he had crossed the open space, he lifted his eyes. His feet stopped moving. He leaned heavily upon his cane; then he lowered his head, picked up the trail again, and shuffled out of sight. His cane clicked, clicked, clicked, out of hearing.

Nearly every warm fair afternoon Major Barr walked back and forth upon the street. Alan might have seen him passing by a hundred times before he really looked at him. Then one day, a long time ago now, Major Barr had backed up to a slender tree and rubbed his shoulder blades upon it, up and down, up and down, until his knees began to sag. After that Major Barr had become fixed in Alan's mind as a figure of amusement, a man who did odd things that nobody else would do or think of doing, and Alan watched expectantly for his daily walks.

THEN on another day, much later, but still a long time ago, Alan chased the Major's hat for him, and the old man became suddenly real and alive. Alan remembered how the hat lifted and sailed, how Major Barr clutched after it much too late, how the hat rolled in crazy loops upon the edge of its wide brim, and went up again suddenly in a long, low arc as if somebody pulled it by a string. He caught up with it after a long run and, running, brought it back. He remembered just how the Major looked when he came near—the bald crown gleaming above the fringe of white hair, the overhanging brows and sunken eyes that looked out with such commanding keenness, the working mouth and untrimmed white mustache that quivered and bristled up. Major Barr had not stirred in his tracks from the moment his hat blew away until he set it on his head again and tugged it down. Then he had looked at Alan, and for some moments Alan hadn't seen the smile below the white mustache. He had not recognized it as a smile. Then with a quick bob of his head, and a wink with both his eyes, Major Barr had moved on again. Not a word had been spoken, but ever since, when the two passed one another on the street, Major Barr would stop and Alan would see, always with the same surprise, that he was smiling.

Old, they said Major Barr was, but old as yet meant little to Alan. Today, as he sat in the walnut tree after Major Barr had gone, he began to understand. Major Barr had been a Union officer, they said, when he was a young man, and the blue uniform he wore on Decoration Day carried half a dozen shining medals on the breast. For the first time Alan tried to think of Major Barr as he might have been many, many years ago. Perhaps he, too, had climbed trees, sat down on forbidden ground. Perhaps—but there was no use trying to think of it, for the cane clicked again, not so rapidly nor so loudly this time, and Major Barr emerged from the spot where he had vanished a little while before. He crossed the little space with infinite labor and concentration, stepping scarcely the length of his own foot in his shuffling gait. Before he passed from sight Allan called out, "Hello, Major Barr," but the old man did not hear him.

BOYS became men, and men became old like Major Barr. They lived to lean upon a cane, and walked at last with a shuffling gait. Alan began to see the unbelievable pattern. Maybe some

day he'd grow so old that he couldn't chase his own hat. The thought made him want to laugh, but he couldn't laugh. Perhaps it wasn't really funny after all. But if it wasn't funny, if he couldn't think about it without this strange feeling—almost like fear—then he didn't want to think about it any more.

He looked about the yard. Something had gone wrong. Everything looked at him still, but with a new expression. The house which he had known as long as he could remember faced him with a blank, unfamiliar stare. He knew quite suddenly that he was alone.

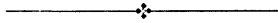
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It was while he hung from the lowest branch waiting to drop to the ground that he heard the sharp clatter upon the sidewalk. He knew instantly what it was, and twisting in the air as he dropped, he began to run. Major Barr was helpless without his cane, and it had fallen. But even as Alan ran he became afraid of what lay ahead, as if that sharp, ringing clatter had told him everything.

Major Barr's body lay as if tossed there from the trees. At Alan's feet lay the wide-brimmed hat, and as he struggled to breathe he saw how the leather band inside glistened with sweat.

Turning wildly, he began to run.

"Caroline! Caroline!" he screamed.



More Coffee?

Don Jackson

WANT mustard on yer hamburger?

Pretty cold out, ain't it? The thermometer on our porch said fifteen above this morning. It's on the north side of the house, though. The wind makes it seem colder, too.

Say, you ain't one of these unemployed fellers, are ya? Didn't think so. They all look alike. Clothes wore out, and hungrier'n horses. Always cussin' something. Damn the depression, damn the president, damn this and damn that. Why they have to pick my place to howl is more'n I can see.