

# The Big Race

Everybody in Bluffton who isn't too old or too young to remember things will recall the big race that was run right down the main street. It was one of the most exciting events that ever took place in Bluffton. But it wasn't recorded in any of the racing journals, because at that time Bluffton wasn't connected with the rest of the world. There were no telephones, the nearest telegraph office was eighteen miles away, and the road to Savannah hadn't even been dreamed of.

I'm talking, of course, about the big race between Lonnie Mulligan's black billy goat and Johnny Harrison's brown and white-spotted billy goat. Those two handsome goats were just about the same size, and everybody in Bluffton wanted to see them race. Everybody, that is, except Lonnie and Johnny. They knew it was bound to be a pretty close race, and they tried their dead-level best to talk it down.

"My goat was just operated on about two weeks ago," said Johnny. "It'll be another month or so before he can run again."

"I'm fatter than Johnny," said Lonnie, "and it wouldn't be a fair race because my goat'll have more to pull."

But nobody paid them any attention.

Grandpa Guilford was the mayor of Bluffton, and he instructed Mr. Forester, the marshal, to convert the main street into a race track. The street was paved with oyster shells and was just about a half mile long. The race, Grandpa said, would start in front of Prince Riley's barber shop at the north end of the street and stop at the big oak at the top of the hill leading down to the wharf at the other end. The winner, he said, would be awarded a two-bushel sack of oats. He appointed Captain Haynesworth of the steamer *Attaquin* the judge at the finish line, and they set the starting time at 2 o'clock the following Friday afternoon.

The night before the race I slept with Lonnie and his goat in a crocus-sack tent in Lonnie's yard. It was a black-as-pitch night and a hoot owl was mourning low in the pear tree back of Lonnie's kitchen. We had a lantern hanging on the pole, but the chimney was all smoked up, and it was almost as dark inside the tent as it was outside.

The goat bedded down between Lonnie and me and chewed his cud. He dozed with his eyes half shut, except when he was coughing or sneezing. Lonnie laid flat on his back with his legs crossed and his hands locked under his head, so he could watch for daybreak through

a hole in the top of the tent. I laid on my side with my head on one arm, so I could see Lonnie's face under the goat's beard.

Lonnie hadn't swallowed a mouthful of supper or drunk a drop of milk or water since dinnertime. He wasn't going to eat or drink anything until after the race. He said he had to get as light as Johnny by racing time, because the goat that had the most to pull was bound to lose the race.

"I'm empty as a church on Saturday night," Lonnie said, "and I'm all dried up inside for want of milk and water. But nothing's going down my throat till after that race tomorrow, and I mean it."

It wasn't easy to change Lonnie's mind, because he had red hair, just like Miss Chaplin, our school teacher. Once she told you to stay in after school for throwing a spitball or something, you could move up to the head of the spelling class, but you still stayed in after school.

But I knew Lonnie would be too weak to ride in the race if he starved himself all night. I tried to tell him that a cold biscuit filled with a little bit of Georgia cane syrup wouldn't make him much heavier.

Lonnie didn't take his eyes off that hole in the top of the tent. I couldn't see much use in saying anything else, but I had to keep trying.

"Shucks, Lonnie," I said, "did you ever watch your mother bake biscuits? Did you notice what a little bit of flour it takes to make a pan full of biscuits? I'll bet there's not one teaspoonful of flour in one whole big biscuit."

I kept watching Lonnie's face to see if he was changing his mind, but he kept his mouth shut tight as an oyster and I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"One teaspoonful of flour," I said, "is light as a feather on a buzzard's back. A buzzard's back got about a thousand feathers on it, but all thousand put together don't weigh enough to hold him on the ground. Any time he wants to, he can sail straight up into the sun so high you can't even see him."

Lonnie sat up and looked at me with his mouth wide open, the way you look at Santa Claus the first time you see him.

"Dogbite my skin," he said, "how come I didn't think of that!"

He jumped up and snatched the lantern off the pole and headed straight for the kitchen.

"Bring two!" I yelled after him.

He came back with two hunks of cornbread. Somebody, he said, had eaten all of the biscuits left over from supper.

The cornbread was dry as talcum powder and it made us thirsty.