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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MOTOR BOAT BOYS MISSISSIPPI CRUISE; OR,
THE DASH FOR DIXIE ***

E-text prepared by Al Haines



Jack was keeping his hand on the alert, ready to reverse his engine at even a second's warning.

MOTOR BOAT BOYS

Mississippi Cruise

OR

The Dash For Dixie

By

LOUIS ARUNDEL

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[Transcriber's note: The following two short stories were in the original book, but are not related to the above story. No author was given for them.]

An Awakening at Alvin

Caught with a Scrap of Paper

THE MOTOR BOAT BOYS' MISSISSIPPI CRUISE;

or

A Dash for the Dixie Cup

CHAPTER I.

ALL ABOARD FOR DIXIELAND!

"Aw, quit your kidding, now, George. You know I said I'd stick by you to the bitter end; and nobody ever knew Nick Longfellow to back water, did they?"

"I guess you're right about that, Pudding. Your word is your strongest hold—next to eating. I depend on you to be my boat-mate on that long cruise, if so be we make a go of the race."

"Huh! even if Herb Dickson and Josh Purdue can't get a chance to enter this old tub of theirs which they call the *Comfort*, what's to hinder us from starting when Jack heads his dandy *Tramp* south; tell me that?"

"Nothing, Nick; only three boats would be better than two, and add to the fun of the race for the silver cup;" and the speaker, George Rollins, bent affectionately over the smart, bright engine of a new and exceedingly narrow motor boat undoubtedly built for speed alone, and carrying the significant name of *Wireless*.

"I'm told by Jack that the cup his father is having made is a jim dandy one, and has the word 'Dixie' engraved on it," the fat boy remarked. "He says it will be here by tomorrow. Perhaps when the other fellows show it to their folks, they'll get the word they're waiting for."

"Well, for one I'm not worrying about their not going along," remarked George, as he rubbed away with a bit of waste. "Why, you know there'll not be any school till away after Christmas this year, because the Dunker boys came down with smallpox, and the health board ordered the building closed. That gives us a hunky-dory vacation. It was what made me think of going along with Jack in the first place."

"Yes," Nick went on; "he just has to be in New Orleans on the first of December, because that will of his daffy old uncle is to be read then; and the lawyer sent word that Jack Stormways was a big thing in the money that's left. And everybody that's mentioned has to be present when the will's read, or lose their share. That's a punk sort of a job, ain't it now, George?"

"Let up about that queer old uncle," remarked the other, in a low tone. "For there's Jack coming right now, with Jimmy Brannagan dangling at his heels. I guess Jimmy would go through fire and water for Jack, if he could only do him a good turn."

"Well," observed the fat lad, shaking his head in a positive way he had, "why shouldn't he when

Jack has done so much for him? Ever since Jimmy's mother died he's lived at Jack's house, and had a chance to attend school; though for that matter I don't think he'll ever set the world on fire with his knowledge of books."

"All the same the Irish boy is a shrewd fellow, and you've got to get up mighty early in the morning to beat him out in an argument," grinned George, who could look back to numerous occasions when he had confessed himself a poor second under such conditions.

"Say, look at the big bundle Jack's carrying, would you?" exclaimed Nick, taking a sudden new interest in matters, and getting to his feet; for he had been lazily stretched out, watching his comrade work at the engine of the speed boat, which was like a big cigar in shape, somewhat near twenty-seven feet in length, by only four and a half beam.

"I honestly believe that's the bully old silver cup Jack's bringing over to let us see," declared George, also aroused, so that his black eyes flashed.

"And it's going to be our silver cup some day before long; because, just as you say, this fine little beauty can cut circles around both the other motor boats," and the fat boy patted the varnished frame of the *Wireless* as he spoke.

"Sure thing," replied George, with a grin; "but don't discourage the rest by rubbing it in that we've got such a soft snap."

Two other fellows bustled into the big boathouse, where several launches were resting on the floor on either side of the basin, at the further end of which the water door was situated.

Jack Stormways was an active lad of about seventeen. His figure was as straight as that of an Indian, and his face one in which a steady purpose seemed to abide. Usually of a sunny, cheerful disposition, he knew how to arouse all dormant faculties in the members of a baseball or football team of which he might chance to be captain.

Nearly everybody liked Jack Stormways; and even such enemies as he naturally made during his career in school admitted that they admired his clean methods of doing things.

His companion, Jimmie Brannagan, was a short-bodied Irish lad, with red hair and a freckled face; but possessing a sturdy frame, as well as a ready wit.

"Open it up, and let us have a peep, Jack!" exclaimed George, as the newcomer placed his package on a bench near by.

"No use asking such sharp chaps as you to guess," observed the other, laughingly, as he started to follow instructions by unwinding the many papers that covered the mysterious bulky object. "You see everything, know everything. Well, what d'ye think of that for a beauty, George and Buster?"

Poor Nick had about as many names as a prince of the royal blood. His companions seemed to think that every title signifying something bouncing should be applied to him at odd times. And so he answered to anything that came along.

"My gracious! but ain't she a corker, though?" Nick now gasped, as his eyes seemed to be trying to pop out of his head with admiration.

"Finest ever," observed George, a little envy in his black eyes; for there were certain weak spots in his disposition that he had to fight continually, sometimes winning out, and again giving in to the temptation.

It was certainly a handsome specimen of the Winona silversmith's cunning, standing almost a foot and a half high, and being decorated with a magnificent mimic representation of a little motor boat resting under a live oak tree that overhung the water of a bayou; and which, of course, represented Dixieland, as could be easily seen from the long streamers of Spanish moss dangling from the limbs.

Both boys handled the trophy with eager hands.

"Say, that's worth going after," said Nick, finally. "And I'd like to wager that when Herb and Josh show it to their folks they'll easily get permission to join us in the long dash to New Orleans."

"And what great times we've already had, laying out the program," remarked Jack. "That was worth something, alone. The journey's divided up in about two hundred mile divisions. No boat can leave a division point until every contestant is there to make an even start. Only the time *consumed between actual stations* to be counted in the final summing up."

"And that other provision about the running time being exactly between eight in the morning and four in the afternoon is a mighty wise thing," remarked George.

"Yes," said Nick, "but what worries the crew of the *Wireless* is what they're going to do with all the time on their hands. We've planned to take a gun along, so we can do some shooting as we wait; and then the fishing ought to be worth while. If necessary, I'll go overboard, and try those new White Wings I bought. I'm going to have a whole lot of fun with those contraptions; besides learn how to swim like a duck."

"Oh! bother those old junk things; will we ever hear the last of the wonderful stunts Pudding expects to do with 'em'?" groaned George.

"Sure I saw him sthandin' in two fate of water one day, and flappin' his wings like a burrd, so I did," declared Jimmie, seriously. "I wanted him to walk out to dape water, but he said he didn't wish to get the blished things wet too suddent like."

"Say, just change the subject, won't you?" begged Nick, turning as red in the face as a turkey cock. "My time will come, and I'm going to astonish you fellows. Why, I can float right now, though perhaps you won't believe it."

"On the contrary, I never believed you could sink," declared George, derisively, as he surveyed the swelling proportions of his boat mate. "Talk about needing artificial support to keep you on top; I bet you'd float like a cork, or a lump of grease, if you only wasn't afraid to make the try."

"What are we waiting for now?" asked Nick, appealing to Jack, because that comrade never nagged him.

"Only to find out if the other fellows are going along," was Jack's reply.

"Well, we've just got to know pretty quick," grumbled Nick. "I've been kept waiting so long I'm wasting away to a mere shadow. If it holds up much more, why I'll not have the appetite of a poor little dicky bird."

Of course there was a shout at that, for truth to tell Nick seemed never to get enough to eat. He couldn't cook worth while, and yet was always first and last at the feast. On the other hand, there was the long-bodied and lanky Josh Purdue who was a splendid hand at getting up a camp dinner, yet seldom cared to partake of his tasty dishes, and was also, they whispered, addicted to dyspepsia tablets!

Between these two there was an almost constant warfare of humorous badinage in connection with their several weaknesses. Josh would twit the fat boy on his enormous capacity for stowing "grub" away; and on the other hand, Nick generally came back with sarcastic remarks about "shadows," and "living skeletons," and such unpleasant things.

"I've got a pretty good hunch that the thing will be all settled before another day," remarked Jack, nodding. "And if so, we can get away on next Monday morning."

"Hurrah!" shouted Nick, waving his arms above his head. "Just imagine what a bully good time we've got ahead of us, cruising down that creek yonder," and he pointed to where they could see the waters of the Mississippi flowing past the boathouse.

"I've already made most of the arrangements," announced Jack, "and only want to know whether there are going to be six of us, or only four, before ordering the provisions for the start."

"Oh, how happy I am!" gurgled Nick, trying to dance in the confined space alongside the motor boats, and almost falling into the well.

"He always acts that way at the mere mention of the word grub," declared George.

"Now you wrong me, partner," remonstrated the injured one. "I'm only anticipating what ge-lorious times you and I will have waiting for the others to come along—you shooting a cargo of ducks and geese on the sandbars, and little me sportin' in the tide with my jolly old wings buoying me up. How can I stand another three days of this agony? Somebody put me to sleep, and don't let me wake up till the horn blows for the race to start Monday A. M."

"Sure, I like to oblige," observed Jimmie, rolling up his sleeves to the elbows of his muscular arms. "If so be you wouldn't moind tilling me av ye'd prefer the jolt on the ind of the chin, or under the lift ear. I'm not at all particular mesilf, only I like to plase as good natured a chap as Puddin' Longfellow."

"Well, forget it, won't you, Jimmie? I guess I'll stay awake, after all; there's so much to see and hear, yes, and eat, too. But seems to me I just noticed a couple of fellows making this way from the road; and sure as you live it's Herb and Josh. Look at the big grins they're carrying, would you? Say, what d'ye think, they've gone and done it—got permission to take part in the race for the cup. Wow! ain't that all to the mustard, though?"

The door was darkened by a couple of hurrying figures, as the pair pushed into the boat house, almost out of breath from hard running, yet with faces that fairly shone with eagerness to tell the news.

"Hurrah for us, fellows!" shouted the leading boy, as he waved his cap violently above his head; "we're going along, all right. Dad gave in at last after ma put it up to him. Count the *Comfort* in that race; and she's going to give you all the time of your lives, too. Oh, my! is that the silver cup trophy? Josh, take a look, will you? Won't it just fit in my den, though? and I can see where they left space for our illustrious names. Boys, three cheers and a tiger for the Mississippi cruise!"

CHAPTER II.

THE START.

The volume of shouts that went up was so tremendous that several other fellows who happened to be passing the boathouse came rushing in to find out what had happened.

They found the six intended Mississippi cruisers shaking hands wildly, and congratulating each other on their good fortune.

There would be some envious fellows in town from that time on, when the news that the great race had been finally arranged went abroad; for hardly a boy but who would wish with all his heart and soul that he had been lucky enough to be in the game.

"Now, let's see that list of yours, Jack!" said Nick, after the excitement had in a measure subsided, and they could talk coherently again.

"Yes," observed Josh quickly, "you don't suppose Buster would be able to sleep a wink unless he knew there was going to be heaps of eatin' stuff along. For goodness sake, get out your list at the grocer's, Jack, and let him run it over. If Buster keeps on losing flesh, what in the world d'ye suppose the blessed old *Comfort's* going to do for *ballast*?"

"There you go," declared Nick, reproachfully, "hitting me below the belt as usual. Ain't I only thinking of the rest of you when I bother myself about such a thing as grub? Some people have to be tempted with dainties, to take their daily rations. As for me a cup of coffee, huh, give me some bread or crackers, a rasher of bacon with eggs, a potato baked in the ashes of a camp fire—and I'm as happy as a king."

"Oh, yes," Josh went on, persistently, "I admit all that, provided the *quantity* is there. Quality seldom enters into your calculations, Buster. But say, Jack, let's get busy. We've only got one more day, then comes Sunday, and the morning after——"

"We're off!" cried George, as he cast a fond look toward his swift speed boat; and then glanced around in a way that told how much he pitied these poor "chumps" who actually imagined they had a ghost of a chance to win the long race.

So for an hour and more they put their wise heads together, and conned the lists Jack produced. Many changes were suggested, some of which were made, after they had been discussed *pro* and *con*; for Jack was open to conviction, though as a rule there was little that he had forgotten, or that could be bettered in the program.

Then each couple started to examine the boat in which they purposed taking that long dash toward Dixieland. It was of great importance that as few accidents as possible occur while on the way south. For, although an accident in itself would not penalize the contestant, if it happened to occur during the eight working hours there must be a loss of time that would lessen the chances for winning out.

"There's only one thing I wish," remarked Herb, as they talked over these matters, and jotted down a few ideas connected with the race.

"What might that be?" asked Nick, eagerly, for he was taking note of everything that occurred, and casting envious glances toward the fine trophy on the box.

"Of course," the other went on, "I hope the reliable old *Comfort* won't break down once on the trip; and I give you my word I don't believe she will. But if that *has* got to happen, I'm wishing it will be just around four in the afternoon. See the point, fellows?"

"Sure," replied Jimmie, with a grin. "That gives ye the hull night to be makin' repairs, and without losin' a blissed minute of time. A wise guy ye are, so I'm thinkin', Herbie."

A close inspection failed to disclose any structural weakness about any one of the three boats, or their motive power. Of course, each pilot was convinced in his own mind that he had the best chance to win. George relied mainly on speed; Herb placed his dependence on the well known ability of his broad-beamed boat to stand up before heavy seas, and always get there safely in the end; while with Jack there was a combination of these several points of excellence.

"Well," the last named remarked, as they prepared to go home, and the boathouse was being locked up for the night; "I can see where we're going to have a warm time of it in the last half of the race."

"How's that?" burst forth the eager Nick. "Tell us, Jack; it ain't fair to keep anything back. Will they arrest us for breaking the speed laws down south?"

"See!" cried Herb, instantly, "that's where a guilty conscience works overtime. It's just what he gets for risking his life in that floating coffin," and he jerked his thumb disdainfully toward the building they were leaving.

At that the proud owner of the cigar-shaped craft laughed aloud.

"Green with envy already, Herb!" he exclaimed. "Don't you pay any attention to what he says, Pudding. We're just going to lick the whole bunch to a frazzle, and that's easy. Now, Jack, suppose you tell us what's on your mind? How are we going to have lots of trouble in the last half, more than in the beginning?"

"When you fellows begin to study those maps of the Mississippi I brought you, it will open your eyes," Jack went on. "Why, the upper stretches of this river are as straight as a yard stick compared with what lies below Memphis. If ever you saw a snake turning and twisting after you've hit him with a stone you've got an idea of what the big river is down there in Dixie. It forms loops and bends galore. It turns back north, runs east, then west and for a short time south. For ten miles southing you make you have to go thirty."

"Well, I understood that was the way; but why should that bother us?" demanded George. "What's fair for one is fair for all. We'll hug the easterly shore all we can, and save many a mile."

"Perhaps you will," smiled Jack, "and then again the current races faster out in the middle, so the boat that ventures may profit by that. But what I had in mind was the innumerable cut-offs we're apt to strike."

"Cut-offs!" exclaimed Nick, turning a trifle pale, as though he thought this had something to do with the favorite southern lynching bee.

"Oh! I know about those things," declared Herb, carelessly. "Sometimes a native can save twenty miles by shooting through where a passage runs across a neck of wooded land. But I guess the good old *Comfort* will stick to the main stream. I may be the tortoise in this race, but there's lots of chances the hares will lie down for a little nap in the way, and let me go past."

"But it's fair to take advantage of a cut-off, ain't it?" asked George.

"Of course it is, if you want to take the chance of getting twisted, and losing oodles of hours wandering around in some old swamp," Jack answered.

"Well, they ought to have those cut-offs marked with buoys, or sign posts," grumbled George.

"Too many changes taking place all the time," Jack replied, showing how earnestly he had been studying the field. "They just couldn't do it. But of all three craft, yours ought to be the last one to want to steal a march on the rest, George."

"Oh, well, I don't expect to be compelled to; but then you never know what's going to happen. Suppose we had a breakdown, and lost many hours—it might be up to the *Wireless* to get busy, and wipe out some of that slack. But I'm going to study that lower river part till I get it by heart, bet your boots on that, fellows."

"And me ditto," said Nick, quickly. "None of that lost in the swamp for me. Just think how awful it would be, boys, wandering around day after day with snakes and alligators waiting to snap you up! Ugh!"

"That isn't the worst of it, Buster; just imagine the food giving out! Whatever in the wide world would you do?" asked Jack, with a chuckle.

Nick gave a wild look, and then groaned dismally.

"If it came to a case of drawing lots I just know George would pick out the lucky number, because he often looks at me now as if he'd like to eat me," he mumbled, no doubt falling to the joke, but nevertheless with a vein of seriousness in his voice.

On the following day the six boys haunted the boathouse most of the time. If anything was forgotten it could not have been for lack of consultations, since they were constantly putting their heads together, advising, making little changes in the packing and stowing of things, and running errands back to their homes and the stores.

When they left at eventime they knew of nothing that could be done to better conditions. Each boat was in prime condition for the southern dash of many hundreds of miles, possibly over stormy waters, where perils of various kinds awaited them.

And doubtless never in the history of those several families were such restless boys known as during the Sunday that followed. The minutes seemed to drag as if weighted down with stones.

But the longest day has its end, and finally night came.

Alarm clocks had been set for dawn, but in few cases were they needed, since the boys were up and doing before the gray had actually crept into the eastern heavens.

At seven o'clock a crowd began to assemble in the vicinity of the boathouse from which the start was to be made; for the race was the event of the season. Every boy in town was on the spot, and the constables had to keep the crowd from actually swarming over and swamping the busy contestants and

their families.

The three motor boats were ready in the water, with burgees flying and looking as spic and span as human energy could make them. The silver trophy was in the possession of Jack's father, and had been admired by hundreds.

As the time set for the start approached, the six boys manifested considerable nervousness. But this might be expected even of old campaigners, not to speak of young lads who, up to now, had possibly never been more than one or two hundred miles away from home.

Jack was really in command, since he had been elected commodore of the club by unanimous vote. He seemed capable of keeping his head in a time of excitement, and that meant a great deal.

Everything had been attended to so far as he knew, and they were now only waiting for the town clock to boom out the hour of eight, when the starting toot of his conch shell horn would announce that the race was on.

It was a foregone conclusion that the speed boat would easily take the lead, for almost everything had been sacrificed in her construction to the one prime necessity for reeling off the miles. Nick was quivering all over with anxiety. He might have backed out only that he chanced to have a stubborn streak in his make-up, and his word had been given. But he certainly looked far from happy as he faced the gloomy prospect of days and days cooped up in that cranky craft, where the least movement abroad [Transcriber's note: aboard?] set up a dizzy wabbling.

"Got your hair parted exactly in the middle, Buster?" shouted a comrade from the crowd, noting how the fat boy gripped the sides of the boat every time the pilot made a sudden little movement that caused the touchy *Wireless* to bob or roll.

"Better take a teenty more breath in that right lung, Hippo!" called another, with cruel intent; but Nick only grinned, and waved his hand, as though utterly indifferent to their jibes.

Jack looked at his little dollar nickel watch for the last time.

"Five minutes more only, fellows!" he announced. "Get aboard, all!"

Presently they were settled in their places, and the engines had been started to make sure everything was right for the word "go!"

Then the plain sound of the clock in the town hall came to their ears, as it started to strike the hour.

"Let loose!" called Jack; and immediately gave several sharp toots on his shell signal horn.

A storm of wild cheers broke out when the trio of handsome boats shot off as soon as those on the dock had eased the detaining cables.

"Look at the *Wireless*, will you? Talk about your speed, ain't she got it to burn, though?" shouted one enthusiast, as the long, cigar-shaped boat shot ahead, and rapidly opened a gap between herself and the other contestants.

And minutes before the *Tramp* and the *Comfort*, she passed out of sight around the bend in the river, a mile below the town.

As long as the pilots of the other two craft could see the faintest sign of the home town they were leaving on this long and doubtless perilous voyage over unknown waters, they could hear the whoops of the excited people, as they waved the adventurous cruisers and racers an adieu, with good wishes for a safe journey.

CHAPTER III.

A HANDICAP AT THE FIRST STATION.

"We've got to pull up here, Jimmie!"

"Sure; and what time have ye, Jack?"

"Just eleven. We've been booming along for three hours today, besides the whole eight yesterday, and without a single breakdown, too," and Jack looked proudly at the little motor which he was bending over and petting.

"Thims the houses of Clinton we say away ahead there, thin?" asked Jimmie, as he shaded his eyes with a palm, and stared toward the south.

"Yes, on the Illinois shore; and across the way lies Clinton in Iowa. I used the marine glass which every boat carries, and there isn't a sign of either the *Wireless* or the *Comfort* ahead. That means, Jimmie, we're the first to arrive at the initial bag or station."

The Irish boy grinned as though tickled. "Sure I can understand why Herb and Josh are held back by a slow boat; but by the powers where can that speed boy be? By the way he wint off he might be bringing up in New Orleans just now," he remarked, humorously.

"If I gave a guess I'd say he was up in some creek, tinkering at that twenty horsepower engine of his that shakes the whole frame of his boat whenever he opens the throttle wide," Jack replied.

"Right ye are," declared Jimmie, nodding his head. "And by the toime we get to the journey's ind I belave on me sowl George and Buster will know the location of ivery creek along the river."

"Well," remarked the pilot of the boat, as he turned shoreward, "if a fellow is daft enough to sacrifice everything else for speed, on a long cruise like this, he must expect to put up with all sorts of trouble. But I'm sorry for Buster, though."

"Sure he can afford to lose twinty pounds, and not fale it," declared the Irish boy, sagely. "And so long as the provisions howld out, Buster won't kick too harrd."

When they had arrived at a certain point not far from the shore the engine was shut off.

"Now!" sang out Jack, "drop it! Quick, Jimmie!"

With a splash the anchor fell into the water, and presently the jaunty little motor boat was riding restlessly at the end of her cable; while the two boys started to get something ready to eat.

Jimmie was to act as cook most of the time, since the other inmate of the *Tramp* had plenty of things to hold his attention in managing the engine, and figuring out the course.

First of all Jimmie placed on a firm foundation a neat little contraption made of brass, and which seemed to be a kerosene stove, capable of manufacturing gas. It was the pet of the skipper, and had served him many a time under conditions when a camp fire was out of the question, on account of pouring rain, or from some other reason.

This Jewel kerosene-burning stove was of German origin. It was primed with a little alcohol, and when the heat had thus been applied to the plate a few pumps started the oil to moving, and it was turned into blue flame gas, very powerful in its capacity for boiling water speedily.

When the stove was going it made a little crackling, hissing noise, but nothing to cause annoyance. And its convenience on a cruise of this sort outweighed any minor faults.

The other boats were equipped with other cooking appliances, the *Wireless* having a battery of three lamps, and the *Comfort* a genuine gasoline affair, of course of generous proportions as became so big a craft, on which a dinner for the crowd might have been prepared if necessary.

Jimmie heated some Boston baked beans left over from the preceding night's supper, and made a pot of coffee. A loaf of bread and some cheese afforded ample substantial, as Jimmie declared when he could eat no more.

Still there were no signs of either of the other boats above. They could see various river craft moving about, but though Jack used his glasses diligently up to two o'clock he had discovered nothing of the others.

"Say, this looks bad for a beginning," he observed, as three o'clock came, and he took the glasses again to sweep the upper river. "Already we have a start of four hours on both our rivals. Perhaps after all George may have to explore some of those cut-offs Nick dreads so much, in order to make up for time lost while tinkering with that blessed old engine of his, that breaks down once in so often."

He had hardly applied the glasses to his eyes than he gave an exclamation.

"I wager now that's the bully ould *Comfort* splashing along in the middle of the river!" cried Jimmie, who had good eyes of his own and had been using them to some advantage meanwhile.

"Go up head, Jimmie," said Jack; "for that's just what it is. And as sure as you live I think I sight the rushing *Wireless* away back there, booming along, and cutting through the water like a knife, while the broad bow of Herb's boat throws the spray flying with every dip! It's a race for second honors, that's what it is, Jimmie!"

"Whirra! and we're the spectators, so we are!" cried the delighted Irish lad, as he eagerly reached for the glasses and clapped them to his eyes. "Yis, ye're right, Jack, it's the speed boat all the same; and my sowl, how she's rushing things! By the powers, don't I hope the ould *Comfort* draws in here ahead. Won't it make George feel down in the mouth to be last at the stake?"

"Oh! this is only a beginning," remarked Jack. "Nobody can tell what is going to happen before we bring up at New Orleans. Depend on it, Jimmie, all of us will know a heap more by then than we do now."

"Herb sees us," observed Jimmie. "Josh is wavin' a flag. And the boat heads this way, too, makin' better time than I iver saw her do. Hurrah for thim! Look at the coffin nail gainin'; but I do believe the tub will win out afther all, I do that."

And so it proved; for, although George evidently risked considerable, and shoved on every horsepower his engine was rated at, he could not quite overtake the big clumsy craft he had affected to despise; so that the *Comfort* was alongside before the speed boat was more than within hailing distance.

Jack himself timed the coming of each craft, as was the duty of the one first at a station. Thus he knew just what a handicap the other boats labored under as the result of the initial run.

It was already late in the day, and as they were prohibited from running after the hour of four, a start was out of the question until another morning.

Accordingly the three craft made preparations for stopping over another night. A place was found where they could go ashore and camp, though meaning to sleep aboard their several boats; a necessity that caused poor Nick many a groan.

"Why, fellows," he grunted, rubbing himself in various places, "I'm just covered with bruises after one night of it. No room to turn without the bally old boat heaving and rolling. I give you my word there were lots of times I really made up my mind the blessed thing wanted to turn us both out into the creek. And would you believe it, I haven't yet been able to find those bully water wings anywhere. Seen anything of 'em, boys? Oh! I hope you have, because half the fun will be lost to me if I've gone and left my wings behind."

But no one remembered seeing the articles in question after the last time the owner had been holding them up for admiration, and which was on the Saturday before the start.

"So, you did pass the night in a creek, then?" asked Jack.

"That's what we did," admitted George, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Engine began to give trouble before two o'clock, and as we were near the shore we found a convenient creek, where we pushed in; and I've been working on that motor pretty much all the time since."

"We saw you both go past this morning," remarked Nick. "But George wouldn't let me give a toot on my horn. All I did was to cook while he worked."

"And eat. Don't forget to mention that, please," grumbled the aforesaid George. "Why, fellows, if he keeps on the way he's started, I sure don't know how we'll ever get enough grub aboard to keep going. And besides, such cooking you never saw."

"Here, no complaining," declared Jack. "You knew what you were up against before you started. And Buster is a willing chap, even if he has his faults. I've got a man aboard who's in training to equal Buster's record before this trip ends," and he nodded his head toward Jimmie, who grinned and answered:

"Indade an' I begin to belave that same mesilf, fellers. I'm hungry all the time, so I be. It must be in the air. Jack himself is no slouch whin it comes to stowing away things."

"That's all right," laughed Josh, seeing a chance to get in one of his favorite digs at Nick; "but I can feel for poor old George. He's tucked in with a cemetery, that devours everything, and keeps yawning for more."

And so they talked as they made a fire and prepared supper for the crowd just as the sun hovered over the distant shore to the west. No one came to bother them, for the place was isolated. A railroad ran near by, and during the night they heard numerous trains passing along. But snugly tucked away in their respective boats—much too snugly, Nick believed—they found little cause for complaint.

Another dawn found them facing a proposition that offered new possibilities.

"Hey! it's raining!" shouted Josh, he being the first one in the little fleet to get outside that morning.

But Jack had known this for some time, since he had been awake and heard the patter of the falling drops on the taut canvas awning that covered the main part of the *Tramp*.

After a while the boats were allowed to come closer together, while the pilots conferred as to the program for the day.

There were one or two feeble protests against starting in the wet; but on putting it to a vote the decision was reached that they must go on.

"We're not made of sugar or salt," declared Jack; "and besides, haven't we anticipated just such weather by providing waterproof garments. Everybody get into their oilskins right away, and slap a real old sou'wester on their heads. We can afford to laugh at this poor little storm. Wait till we strike something worth while later on, and then duck."

"Yes," put in George, a little maliciously; "we've just got to be moving right along, fellows. Satan always finds mischief for idle hands to do. Buster is supposed to be the deck hand aboard this boat, and when he hasn't anything else to do his mind keeps wandering in the line of eating. Suppose we did get really cleaned out some fine day, am I bound to begin on him for chops?"

All this while they were busy dressing, and Nick made the narrow speed boat wobble fearfully with his movements as he drew on his oilskins.

"Oh! I tell you I'm just going to be a complete nervous wreck before we get done with this fool race," he complained when he had finally succeeded in donning the wide trousers, the legs of which persisted in sticking together.

"Get out and walk then," said George, promptly.

"I would if the walking was good," replied Nick; "but it's wet both above and below; and besides I want to give another look around for my precious white wings."

At eight o'clock another start was made. As before, the fleet boat shot ahead, with the *Tramp* a good second, and the wallowing *Comfort* in the rear, Herb and Josh in no way disconcerted because of the poor beginning. History had a way of repeating itself; and they believed that the accident to George's cranky engine was only a specimen of many other troubles and tribulations that would be apt to befall the ambitious pilot during the progress of the race.

But hardly had the *Wireless* gone two hundred yards before there was a tremendous splash heard.

"Arrah now!" burst out Jimmie, who had happened to be looking at the time, "it's happened just as I knowed it would!"

"What is it?" asked Jack, bobbing up from the engine, which had been taking all of his attention.

"He falled overboard, so he did, just like a sack of corn!" continued Jimmie.

"Who did—oh! look at all the splashing back of the *Wireless*! Why it's Buster and he's holding on to a rope or something! Stop the boat, George; stop her!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE SUDDEN PERIL.

Even while Jack Stormways was giving vent to that shout he saw that George had shut off power, for the swift speed boat no longer rushed through the water like a thing of life.

Meanwhile both the other launches were bearing down upon the scene, with their occupants only too anxious to lend a helping hand.

George had seized hold of the other end of the rope to which the unfortunate Nick clung so desperately, and was dragging the floundering fat boy in, hand over hand.

"Hold on, George—not so fast I tell you! I'm full up now with this nasty yellow water, and can't stand any more. Easy, George! Oh, if I only had my wings on right now, what a chance to try 'em out!"

In this ridiculous fashion the flapping boy-fish gave vent to his mingled feelings of reproach and regret as he found himself hauled close in to the side of the drifting *Wireless*, until the skipper managed to get his fingers twisted in the abundant scalplock of his boat-mate.

"Why, he's got a life preserver on! He couldn't have drowned if he tried!" exclaimed Josh, as he leaned over the side of the big roomy *Comfort*; an act that did not seem to disturb her stability one bit.

"Course I have!" spluttered the dangling Nick, ever ready to take up cudgels with this adversary, no matter what his condition. "Course I have," he repeated. "Think me crazy to sail in this cranky message boat without insurance against a spill? I guess not. And you see what a wise head Nick has, fellows! Why, hang it, I'd just about been drowned this time if it hadn't been for this hunky-dory life preserver!"

"That's so," said Jack, warmly. "And you're a wise boy, all right, Buster. Just as long as you ride in that speed machine you keep close to that cork affair. You never know when you'll need it."

"That's so," grunted Nick, as he ejected a quart or so of water which had gotten into his mouth and stomach. "Ugh! get me aboard, please. I feel wet!"

"Glory! hear that, would ye?" roared Jimmie. "Sure he looks it, too, by the same token. But it will nade the hull caboodle of us to lift Buster aboard, for what wid all the wather he's gulped down he must

weigh a ton, so he do."

"Say, he certainly changed his mind, and concluded that the walking was good, after all!" exclaimed Herb, as he lent a hand toward raising the young elephant.

"Yes," remarked George, who had really been badly frightened, but now tried to hide his feelings by a little joshing, "and I don't think it's a bit fair for your own crew to mutiny that way, and turn against the skipper."

"What's that?" gasped Nick, half way over the side; "who mutinied?"

"Why, the evidence is all against you, Hippo," returned his boatmate. "Didn't you see him, boys, holding on to a rope, and trying his level best to keep the dandy little *Wireless* from getting too great a start? I'm going to offer that as a protest if I miss getting the silver Dixie cup."

"Huh!"

That was all Nick could get out, for just then with a grand heave all around his comrades managed to raise him over the gunwale of the speed launch, so that he came down on the after deck with a squash, streams of water running off his saturated garments.

"There's only one thing to do," remarked Jack, "and that's to make a fresh start when Buster gets into some dry clothes. So hurry up, old fellow."

"However did you come to do it, Pudding?" demanded Herb, as the three boats kept company drifting on the current of the river.

"Well, I hardly know," grinned the other, as he started to leisurely undress. "I saw a coil of rope slipping overboard, and remember bending down to grab it. Guess the frisky little craft must have given a kick just about then. Next thing I knew I was in the drink, and swallowing more water than was good for me."

"But you grabbed the rope all right, it seems!" remarked Josh, sarcastically.

"Looks like it," admitted the other readily; "and I held on, too. My dad always did say I was a great fellow to keep my grip once I got it. There's only one thing I'm sorry about."

"Now just quit that right where you are," remarked George. "What do you take me for, a phonograph with a blank record? Forget about those silly wings that were going to make a swimmer out of you. A few more duckings like this at the end of a rope and you'll be a boss paddler."

"Oh! do you think so, George! Perhaps, then, once in a while you wouldn't mind tying a rope under my arms and letting me drop, easy-like, off the stern here, to learn the strokes. I wouldn't care very much, if I always had this good old cork thing on."

"You get out!" snorted George, who never knew when his companion was serious or joking, since his pudgy face was always set in a broad smile. "What d'ye take me for, hey? Think this is an excursion to teach fellows who won't try it on at home, how to swim? You've got another think coming then. Hurry up and get into some dry clothes now. We want to be off."

"Oh! start just when you feel like it; I'm going to take my time. Now quit joshing me. I'm too full for utterance," and to prove the truth of his assertion Nick bent over the side to eject another quart of water he had been forced to swallow, much against his will.

So presently Jack gave the word and again the three boats made a fresh start, in the same general alignment as before, with the *Wireless* ahead, and the big *Comfort* bringing up the rear.

Half an hour later and Jack, looking around, found that he could no longer see either of his competitors, the rain and mist utterly shutting them from view.

For some time, however, the heavy "pant" of the *Comfort's* exhaust came booming from the rear, though by slow degrees it grew fainter, until finally even this sign of her presence failed.

"I hope George will be cautious in this half fog and rain," Jack could not help remarking, as they continued to run along, and he kept Jimmie constantly in the bow to report what the prospect ahead might be.

"Sure, I was just thinkin' that same," admitted the Irish lad, turning his head for a minute while speaking. "It's so thick beyant that I do belave a stameboat might crape up on us unawares, and we not know a thing about it till we kim slap bang against its bow."

"That's one thing I'm afraid of," remarked Jack. "You notice that I manage to keep fairly close to the shore, don't you, Jimmie? Once in a while I glimpse the Illinois bank when the breeze lifts the fog a bit. I wouldn't like to run out in the middle of the river in this muss. The only thing I'm wondering is what boats coming up-stream do in a mess like this? Do they creep along closer to the shore than usual; or stick to the middle, and whistle from time to time?"

But Jimmie shook his head.

"Blest if I know a thing about it, Jack," he admitted. "All the same, it's me opinion that ye're doin' the right thing. Sure, ye always do, by the same token," for Jimmie was a great admirer of Jack Stormways, and ready to stick to him through thick and thin.

"What a lucky thing it was Buster thought to tie that life preserver on. Only for that he might have been drowned before any of us could get to him," Jack remarked a short time later.

"Oh! after all, he's the wise guy, an' don't ye forget it, Jack. Only I'm sorry for poor Buster, because, ye say, he really don't hanker afther goin' on the thrip at all, it sames. And sure, it must be pretty tough balancing in that cranky ould boat all the time."

"Don't waste too much pity on Buster, Jimmie," laughed Jack. "When you come to know him as well as I do you'll understand that a heap of his agony is put on. To tell the truth, I've often suspected him of being even a bigger joker than Josh. Besides, he ought to put up with a heap from George; just think how the skipper has got to eat Buster's cooking for a couple of weeks, maybe. I wonder if he'll ever live through it. But perhaps Buster may improve, now that he just has to eat his own messes."

"Sure, he's got his mamy's blissed cook book along," observed the other, with one of his broad grins. "Didn't I say him studying it like a gossoon?"

"Poor George! I wouldn't be in his shoes for a cooky. But turn around again, Jimmie. I don't feel easy about this sort of cruising. That's why I've cut off some of our speed, you notice. Safety is my play first, and progress afterward."

"And a bully good motto, Jack, that always gets ye through all sorts of scrapes, right side up wid care. Ugh! did ye say that floater we passed? Sure it was a big tree, so it was. And av we'd slapped bang agin the roots, what a juicy hole they'd have knocked in our shiny side. Ye swerved just in the nick of time, Jacky, bye."

"Keep watching, and sing out if you see or hear anything."

Jack was keeping his hand on the alert, ready to reverse his engine at even a second's warning. Then he could swerve, if it became necessary to avoid some peril that suddenly loomed up ahead.

A train was moving slowly along ashore, and apparently groping its way, if one could judge from the many signal whistles heard. This rumbling sound was magnified in the fog until it seemed almost deafening at times. It annoyed Jack, for he was straining his heading to catch anything that came up the river.

Still, he had adopted all precautions that might occur to a careful cruiser, and under the circumstances it seemed a bit silly to think of halting in his progress down the stream.

Several hours passed thus, with both boys laboring under a constant strain.

"Would ye moind tilling me the time, Jack, darlint?" asked the Irish lad, still crouched in the bow as a lookout.

"Just twelve," replied the engineer, straightening up for a change, and as customary, casting a glance ahead as well as on either side; for if anything the atmosphere was just as thick as ever—indeed, Jimmie had more than once referred to it contemptuously as "pea soup!"

"Arrah! would ye moind now if I got a bite of grub? I'm that impty I suspect me stomach is glued till me backbone."

Jack laughingly gave his consent.

"I'll keep on double duty while you're about it," he remarked; "and play the part of engineer and pilot. At the same time here goes to reduce speed another notch, to be on the safe side."

Of course it was useless thinking of having anything hot while going along at even half speed, much as they would have enjoyed a cup of coffee to warm them up, for the rain and fog made the air seem chilly.

"But in a race every minute ought to count," remarked Jack, when Jimmie suggested this thing of stopping half an hour. "This is our running time, you know. After four o'clock we can hold up all we want. In fact we have to, as nothing gained by keeping on then counts."

And so they ate a cold "snack," as Jack called it, while pursuing their course down the river. Jimmie was again perched in the bow, talking when his jaws were not otherwise taken up in masticating his sandwich.

"Seems to me the fog is lifting just a little," suggested Jack.

"I don't belave it," objected the other. "Me eyes is clane tired tryin' to say into the mess beyant. Sometimes I do be thinkin' I glimpse a big stameboat comin' straight for us; and just whin I'm shoutin' to ye to back wather, I discover that it do be a fraud. Right now the same delusion sames to strike me, an' sure am I dramin', or is that something like a house below? Jack, darlint, it moves, sure it do! The wolf is comin' at last! Back her, Jack, back her, me bye! It's a stameboat this time right enough, and

bearin' dead for us, by the same token!"

And the boy at the motor knew the emergency which he had been anticipating for the last three hours had suddenly come upon them, for a packet was pushing up the river just ahead, and aiming direct for the little launch!

CHAPTER V. AROUSSED AT MIDNIGHT.

"Hold tight, Jimmie!" cried Jack.

"I am that!" shrilled the Irish lad, crouched in the bow, with his eyes staring wildly at the dreadful shape that was swiftly drawing closer to them, as though bent on running the motor boat down.

Jack had changed his plan at the critical instant. He had a peculiar faculty for grasping a situation, and solving a problem. Although he had made up his mind to reverse in a case like this, it flashed over him that such a course just then would have but one result—the collision might be deferred for a few seconds; but if the approaching steamboat continued to advance, it must take place after all.

Better to throw on full power, and try to slide off to one side, thus giving the big craft the right of way.

It was done in a twinkling. The *Tramp* shot forward with a jerk; and had Jimmie not been forewarned he might have found himself thrown sideways into the river, for the little craft careened badly in making the swerve.

But she answered gallantly to the call, and glided out of the way just as the broad bow of the sternwheel steamboat came along, raising a white, foam-crested wave as she breasted the swift current.

Jack fancied he heard a startled exclamation from up in the pilothouse of the big craft; but not a word was flung at them. That the man at the wheel realized how remiss he had been in not signaling oftener, was made evident, for immediately a long and hoarse whistle broke loose, even as the steamboat was passing the boys.

"Wow!" gasped Jimmie, as he turned a white face toward his mate; "that was about as close a call as I ever want to mate up with. And sure, only for your wonderful presence of mind we might have been run down. The same 'twas criminal carelessness, so it was. And I'd like to give the bog-trotter a bit of me mind."

Jack himself had gone through a thrilling experience, which he would hardly care to have duplicated. He was trembling some too, now that the necessity for prompt action and quick thought was gone.

"But didn't she respond to the wheel fine though, Jimmie?" he asked: just as if the boat deserved all the credit. "If it had been the clumsy old *Comfort* now, nothing would have saved her, she's so slow to mind her helm."

Jimmie had ideas of his own about the matter. What they were he did not choose to put into words just then; but the way his kindling eyes surveyed his friend made it easy to guess.

"An' did ye notice how soon the pilot blowed his whistle?" he remarked, as they resumed their course. "Small use that same would have been to us after a smash. Sure, I'd taken it for Gabriel's trump calling us to the resurrection, I would."

"Well, let's forget it if we can, and talk of something more pleasant," observed Jack, who was now urging the little boat nearer the shore than ever, since it appeared they had been in the path of up-river craft, hugging the Illinois bank.

Of course he had again reduced the engine to half speed; and his vigilance was not in the least relaxed.

"Give me warning if you ever even *think* you see anything ahead, Jimmie," he remarked a little later. "Then we can get ready to head in, while we're trying to make out what it is. But I'll be glad when this beastly day is over, that's what."

"Amen!" said Jimmie, with due reverence; for that expressed his own feeling to a dot.

The time crept on slowly. They had passed under the great railroad bridge at Rock Island, and even navigated the river at this dangerous point, where craft were moving in many directions. And as the

afternoon wore away, with mile after mile left behind, Jack, who had taken occasional furtive looks at his maps, concluded from certain signs that they were within ten miles of Burlington.

"It's nearly four, Jimmie, and we'd better be hunting a place to put in for the night, I don't just fancy anchoring here on the open water in this fog. And as to going on, what's the use, when a big city looms up a few miles ahead? We couldn't get past it without cribbing on the time that doesn't count. So keep your eyes on the watch for anything that looks like a creek."

They often saw the gaping mouths of these little tributaries that emptied their flow of water into the Mississippi; and Jack hoped such would be the case now, when they were in sore need of a harbor.

When therefore Jimmie presently announced that he believed the signs were favorable ahead the skipper of the *Tramp* rejoiced.

"I only hope it's a decent creek, and has some bully good places for keeping out of sight," Jack declared, as he headed for the opening near by.

Jimmie knew what was on his mind, for they had talked this matter over with the other fellows more than once. Jack had read lots about the great Father of Waters, and knew what a highway it has been for scores of years to a class of criminals who are fleeing from justice.

Of course there are many honest men on the numerous shanty boats that float down the river, tying up from time to time at some landing, or hunting a friendly creek mouth in which to pass the night. At the same time thousands use the water highway as a means for eluding pursuit. It offers such an easy method of fleeing, after committing a robbery, or breaking the law in some other way, that the honest traveler must needs keep his eyes about him constantly while floating on the bosom of the mighty Mississippi.

The creek proved to be everything Jack could wish.

"This is all right," he said, after they had moved up its tortuous channel for a little distance, until, coming to a promising spot where trees and bushes chanced to screen them, the boat was stopped. "We'll call this our camp for the night, Jimmie, and proceed to make ourselves as comfortable as the law allows."

"No going ashore to cook dinner this night," remarked Jimmie, as he surveyed the dripping trees close by.

"Well," said Jack, "let's be thankful that we've got such a bully old tarpaulin to keep the wet off. Suppose we get busy right away with it? The sooner it's up the quicker we can shake these nasty oilskins; though I hadn't ought to run them down, because they've served us well today, and kept us dry as toast. I don't believe you could get wet if you tried, in these Fish suits."

"Aw! Buster did!" observed the other, with a droll chuckle.

"You're right, he certainly did. But then I didn't mean if you took a header overboard. Now, up with your end, Jimmie, and fasten it snug. I've got mine ready; and in a few shakes of a lamb's tail we'll be able to laugh at the weather."

"And, worse luck, now that we've stopped runnin' it looks like it's goin' to clear up, so it do," grumbled the other.

"All right," laughed the skipper, "we can stand it. So much the better, because we've got a big run ahead tomorrow, to make up for the time lost today. I'd give a cooky to know just where the other boats are right now. I only hope nothing has happened to either—at least nothing serious; because there's just bound to be something going amiss with that engine on the *Wireless* nearly every day she runs."

Presently the cover was in place, and tautly secured. Under its shelter both boys doffed their waterproofs and made things look more shipshape. Jimmie, as usual, was more than ready to get to work with that dandy little Juwel kerosene gas contraption; and its cheery humming soon told that supper was under way.

Jack meanwhile found plenty to do in rearranging things in the boat; for during a day such as they had just endured makeshifts are in order.

Under Jack's schooling Jimmie was beginning to improve in his cooking; and as he took more or less pride in the results, there was some hope for him; whereas with Buster it was a thankless task.

They had a few eggs left, and these were made into quite a tasty omelette. Then a can of corn was opened, to be heated in a saucepan. This, with a pannikin of tea, and some baker's cakes, constituted their meal. And as both boys were quite hungry they enjoyed every particle of the same.

"While they were eating Jack had heard sounds that annoyed him.

"I'm afraid we're pretty close to a road, Jimmie," he had remarked. "And I only hope no curious party spies the light of our lantern inside the tent here. I'm not at all anxious to pick up acquaintances."

"So say we all of us, Jack, me bye," the other had replied promptly.

As the sounds of vehicles passing were heard at frequent intervals the boys determined not to keep the lantern lighted very long after they had prepared their beds for the night. Sometimes it was their habit to sit up, and read or talk; but this seemed to be an occasion when it would be better to crawl in under their blankets and get all the sleep they could, looking forward to a busy day on the morrow.

"It's eight o'clock!" announced Jack, finally, with a yawn; and as that had been the time set for retiring, he prepared to "douse the glim" as he termed it, in sailor's parlance.

"Let her go!" remarked his boatmate, as he snuggled down in his place.

They were of course confined to rather scant space; and many persons might have found it hard to sleep soundly when in such close quarters. But healthy boys can stand for almost anything, and think it fun.

So Jack, having arranged his own bed, crawled in, after which he reached out his hand to extinguish the lantern. One last look he took at the Marlin shotgun that he had brought along, in the hope and expectation that he might find use for it during the long cruise. It was hanging from a couple of pegs just under the coaming of the deck, and by simply raising his hand he could touch it.

Somehow the very presence of that reliable little shooter seemed to give Jack a sense of security when they found themselves marooned in an exceedingly lonely place, with the darkness shutting them in as with a curtain, and unknown perils impending.

Once the light went out the boys lay there and talked in low tones for perhaps a full hour. They had much to confer about, with the uncertain future beckoning them on; and the main history of the cruise yet to be written.

The last thing Jack remembered hearing as he passed into the land of sleep was a vehicle rumbling over the bridge that evidently spanned the creek some little distance above.

Then he knew no more for some time.

The little launch floated on the bosom of the creek, fastened to the shore. At times she heaved gently, as some wave of larger proportions than usual came in from the river, possibly caused by a passing steamboat's suction. But by this time the boys were getting accustomed to this sort of thing. One night afloat had taken off the newness for them, and they could sleep now through any ordinary motion.

Something digging him in the ribs aroused Jack. Then a voice whispered in his ear, and he knew that it was Jimmie.

"Jack, wake up! I hear voices beyand, and I do belave the thaves of the worrld are comin' to clane us out, so I do!"

"Sh!" was all Jack made reply; but at the same instant his hand groped for the reliable gun so close at hand.

Once this was in his possession he gently lifted the flap of the waterproof tent that covered the boat; for he knew just where to find this loose portion, left so for an emergency of this sort.

The storm had departed, and the sky was now clear. While it was far from light without, still to Jack's eyes things looked fairly plain. And the first thing he saw seemed to be moving figures, two of them, that were creeping toward the tied-up motor boat.

Now and then they would pause, and then low and significant whispers would follow. Jack felt a thrill pass over his frame as he began to quietly thrust the muzzle of the shotgun through the opening of the tent. He did not intend to aim at the prowlers of course, but hoped the sudden shot might give them a good fright.

Jimmie was creeping toward the bow, as if desirous of seeing all that went on; when Jack, feeling that he was certainly privileged to defend his property against pirates, pulled the trigger which his trembling finger had been pressing; and a sudden roar awoke the echoes of the night.

CHAPTER VI.

STARTLING NEWS FROM NEAR HOME.

"Run, ye spalpeens, run wid ye!" whooped Jimmie, as he thrust his tousled red head through the opening at the bow.

Jack was prepared to repeat the shooting part of the business if there seemed any necessity; and

perhaps the next time he would not be so particular about aiming so as to miss the prowlers.

But he immediately saw that there would be no need, for already the pair of would-be thieves could be heard crashing madly through the undergrowth, in the endeavor to make a safe getaway.

Jimmie continued to send derisive shouts after them until Jack advised that he had better bottle up the balance of his enthusiasm.

"But did ye say how they tumbled over wan another whin ye let go?" demanded the Irish lad, gleefully.

"Well," remarked the skipper, dryly, "I noticed that they never waited to leave us a visiting card. And Jimmie, this proves how wise I was to fetch my gun along. I'd advise every fellow who intends to knock about along this river to have some way of defending himself in case of need."

With which remark Jack slipped a new shell into the chamber of his double barrel shotgun.

"Did ye pepper thim good and hot?" asked Jimmie, presently.

"Oh! no, I didn't want to do that," said Jack, quickly. "We really had no business to shoot straight at them unless they were coming aboard. I just aimed close enough to give them a good scare. And I think I did the right thing, too."

"By the powers, I bet ye they're runnin' yit!" ventured his boatmate, confidently.

"They must have hit the road by this time. I only hope they won't think to come back for another turn," Jack observed, thoughtfully.

"No fear of that, I wager," laughed the Irish lad. "Sure, thim gossoons know whin the stick is loaded, and they'll niver return to say what it was wint off. Make your moind aisy about that, Jackey, me bye."

The boys lay down again, but Jack could not sleep.

"I don't like this thing," he said, finally, sitting up. "And it would be better for us to take turns watching. In that way we'll have some sleep; and as it is, I don't feel as if I could get a wink. The idea of waking up to find a couple of greasy hoboes in possession of our boat gives me a chill."

Jimmie announced himself as favoring the plan, and declared that he was ready to stand his watch either then or later, just as Jack decided.

And so it was arranged. The balance of the night was divided into two equal parts, and in this way both of the cruisers managed to obtain a few hours sleep.

Nothing happened after all, and Jimmie must have been right when he declared that the pair of thieves had been so badly frightened when the gun went off so unexpectedly that nothing could induce them to return to the attack.

All the same Jack was glad to see that it was broad daylight when he awoke. He found, just as he might have expected, Jimmie at work getting breakfast. Indeed, it may have been the delightful aroma of coffee and bacon that helped awaken him, for the interior of the tent was fragrant with the combination.

Eight o'clock came, and they started from the creek, passing the city shortly afterward. If their visitors of the preceding night saw them come out they were sensible enough not to disclose their identity; though Jimmie did declare he saw two men who might be tramps watching them from behind the trees below the mouth of the friendly creek.

There were numerous boats upon the river, but although Jack used his glasses to advantage he could pick up no clue to either the *Wireless* or the *Comfort*.

The day was nice and clear after the fog and rain.

"Here's where we hit it up to make time, and pay for the slow traveling yesterday," the pilot announced, when he coaxed the steady going little motor to do its prettiest.

At noon they had reeled off something like sixty-odd miles, the current having assisted very much in advancing the boat.

Keokuk had been passed, and they were now aiming to reach Quincy by the middle of the afternoon. Just below this place the second station had been marked; and if, as was to be expected, George and Buster had arrived ahead of them, they might anticipate being signaled to draw in.

"It's right funny we don't say anything of the other byes at all," remarked Jimmie, while they were pushing steadily along, the engine working with clock-like fidelity, and never missing a stroke.

"Oh! I don't look at it that way. Unless some accident happens to George there's never the least chance that we can look in on him in that racer. And the same applies to the *Comfort*—if we go on as

we have, they can never hope to catch up with us. And there you are," and Jack laughed as he spoke.

"Ye mane that we're betwixt the divel and the dape say," observed Jimmie, with one of his chuckles.

"Oh! now that's going it pretty steep," Jack protested. "The *Comfort* might come under the head of deep sea, or anything else that's big and slow and reliable; but it's pretty hard calling George's boat by that other name. But there's another railroad bridge across the river far below, unless the glass fools me. And if so, this must be Quincy just beyond."

"Hurrah! thin, we've arrived at the ind of the sicond stage of the journey, and right side up wid care. If ye choose to hand me the glass, Jack, I'll be afther lookin' for signs of the sassy little *Wireless*."

But it was some time after they had passed under the bridge spanning the Mississippi that Jimmie was able to announce that he believed he had discovered the object of his search.

"Let me have a look," remarked Jack; and a minute later he went on: "There's a boat of some sort anchored close to the shore down there, and the sun shines on her just as it does on the varnished deck of the *Wireless*. Yes, I do believe that's our peerless leader, as George is so fond of saying. I'm glad to know they've got here all safe and sound."

Shortly afterward they heard the sound of a horn, and Jimmie answered with a few vigorous blasts on the conch shell, which had its apex sawed off to admit of a certain amount of air; though some practice was necessary before one could produce a far reaching note.

"Thought you'd never get here," said George, as the *Tramp* swung in alongside so that the rival crews could shake hands, which they did heartily.

It turned out that luck had highly favored the leading boat. They had escaped any catastrophe on the river, even though making fast, and possibly reckless time. And wonderful to relate, not once had the engine broken down since last the boats separated.

"That's good news!" exclaimed Jack, when he heard this; and there was not a trace of envy or malice in his hearty tone. "That would be fine, if only it kept up all the rest of the trip, eh, Buster?"

"It would be just heavenly," sighed the fat boy; "but I don't expect it. I know that measly old engine all right; and I just bet you she's holding in so as to get a good whack at us when she does let go. My! all I hope is, that the blamed thing don't go up the flue, and scatter us around. I seriously object to getting wet as a regular diet."

"I wonder if the other boat will get here by four?" George ventured; but none of them pretended to be a prophet, and so his question remained unanswered.

When the time arrived there was still no sign of the *Comfort*. Another hour passed, two of them, and the boys were growing anxious, with many looks cast up the river.

It had been arranged that if one of the boats had to run "after hours" in order to join the others at a station, the time stolen should be charged against that craft's record. And this was how it came that they were hoping the third boat might yet appear.

But the darkness gathered around them, and they had to give it up for that day, since they had all promised their folks at home never to run at night except under an actual necessity.

There being no creek handy the two motor boats remained where they were, with their mudhooks holding them steady against the never ceasing flow of the current.

They were close enough to shake hands, though when it came time for sleep the one nearer the shore hauled off fifty feet or more, so that there might be smaller chances of a collision.

Nothing occurred during that night to alarm them, though Nick professed to feel nervous, after having heard of the adventure which Jack and Jimmie had met with on the other occasion.

In the morning they did not hurry, for they could not leave that station until the arrival of the third craft, no matter if it meant several days' delay, such being the conditions of the Dixie cup race.

"There they come!" whooped Nick, after they had finished breakfast; he had been looking through the glasses which George owned, and of course his thrilling words quite electrified the others.

"You're right, Buster; that's the steady old *Comfort*, all the same," said Jack, as he too leveled his marine glasses up-river way.

"She rides like a big goose," laughed George.

"But mighty comfortable, all the same," sighed Nick, mechanically rubbing his fat haunches as though they still felt sore from contact with the sides of the narrow boat, while trying to sleep.

When the steady-going launch brought up alongside, many inquiries were made as to what had detained them so long.

"Lots of trouble," Herb replied, readily enough; "not with the engine, for she never missed a note; but Josh here got cold feet after a steamboat shaved us, and made me cut down speed, so we hardly did more than crawl with the current for hours. Yesterday we boomed along, trying to make the riffle in time; but finding we couldn't, we just stopped about ten miles above for the night."

"And then as we came into Quincy I went ashore to see if there was any mail. A letter for each of us, Nick, and only a paper for Jack," with which Josh handed over the articles in question.

As the two boys had not eaten any breakfast, it was decided to wait for them. Jack after a bit picked up the home paper, and idly started to open it.

The others immediately heard him utter an exclamation, and looking up, saw that he seemed to be eagerly reading something he had discovered.

"Well, I declare, if that just don't beat the Dutch!" he remarked.

"What does?" cried Nick, all excitement. "Has John Guthrie got new shingles on his barn; or was old Weatherby seen at church for the first time in ten years?"

"Yes," added Josh, "don't keep us waiting so long, Jack. Go on and tell us what excites you so. Nobody ain't got twins, have they?"

"Say, fellows, it's happened at last. You know the bank over at Waverly? Well, it's been robbed—cleaned out, the paper says, and thousands taken. May bust the bank up, if they don't get the thieves. And what do you think, they say they believe the two men who did the job have gone down river *in a motor boat!*"

"A motor boat!" shouted the rest in unison.

"Listen while I read about it, and then tell me what you think about this description of a suspicious craft that was seen leaving the river front between midnight and Tuesday morning," saying which he went on to read the account, while all the others sat there in suspense, drinking in the news, since they knew that bank in the thriving town mentioned very well.

"Hear what that reporter says about the suspicious motor boat," said Jack, in conclusion. "Now, fellows, what craft does that make you think of?"

"The *Tramp!*" sang out Nick, immediately.

"Yes, Jack," said George, soberly. "It sure hits your boat to a T. I only hope it don't get you fellows into a peck of trouble, that's all!"

But it did, all the same.

CHAPTER VII.

QUITE A SURPRISE PARTY.

"I say, George, remember me telling you about that suspicious boat I saw across near the other shore just after we got settled last night?" said Josh.

"Hold on," returned George, quickly. "You don't mean it that way, Josh. To hear you talk the fellows might think we were running after hours. Fact is, we reached our stopping place at just ten minutes of four. How was that for a swift run on a foggy day, one hundred and thirty miles? And it was just before dusk when the rain let up, that Josh said he glimpsed a boat that looked like the *Tramp*, sneaking along down close by the Missouri bank."

"Yes, sneaking, that's the word I used," declared Josh, positively; "because, you see, there was something about the way it went on that made me think the crew didn't want to attract attention. Of course I knew right away it wasn't our crowd. But after hearing what Jack read I'd just like to bet that was the thief boat."

"Oh! well, there are heaps of motor boats on the old Mississippi," laughed Jack, "and I guess the same company that made mine have sold a dozen of the same model in Illinois and Missouri. Still, it might be as you say, Josh. And perhaps it will pay all of us to keep an eye out for these slippery customers."

"What would you do if you happened to come on the boat like yours?" asked Nick.

"That depends," replied Jack, seriously. "If I felt positive the men aboard were the chaps who broke open the Waverly bank I'd try to let the authorities know. But they must be pretty hard cases, and I'd

go mighty slow about trying to grab such customers myself. I'm not hired to play the part of detective or sheriff. All that stuff I leave to the proper officials."

"How do we stand on this second leg, Jack?" asked George.

"I've just been figuring it up," replied the other, referring to his notebook. "It seems that the speed boat made the run in just ten hours of actual work. We did the same in fourteen hours, twelve minutes; and the steady old *Comfort* in eighteen hours, seven minutes. That's as near correct as it could be figured."

George beamed with gratification.

"Shake, partner," he said, thrusting out a hand to Nick, who looked at him suspiciously, then examined his hand, and finally gingerly allowed the other to take hold of a couple of his pudgy fingers.

"You see, we've more than wiped out our first day's loss, and have a nice little balance in the bargain," George went on.

"Yes," laughed Jack, "and a balance is a handy thing to have, whether in a bank or in a record of days' runs during a long race. I congratulate you, fellows, and hope you may duplicate the performance."

Herb and Josh seemed in no wise cast down over the poor showing their boat had made up to date.

"Just you wait," observed the former, positively. "Perhaps we've got a card or two up our sleeves. We don't tell *everything* we know, do we, Josh? And long ago I learned that the race is not always to the swift."

"Yes," added his comrade in misfortune, "and it's a long lane that has no turning. Anyhow, we didn't make any big brag about what we were goin' to do when we set out; so you see nobody's going to be disappointed even if we get left. I'm enjoyin' every minute of the time; and that's more'n some fellers could say," with a meaning look in the direction of poor fat Nick, who winced, and shook his fist at the speaker.

It was all of nine o'clock when Jack got the three boats in line, and had Jimmie toot his conch shell horn as a starting signal.

History repeated itself again that day.

The speed boat shot off like a greyhound released from bonds, the *Comfort* wheezed along amiably in the rear, and Jack's craft took up a midway course. Thus for two hours and more the crew of the *Tramp* could watch both competing craft. Then the narrow beamed *Wireless* seemed to melt out of sight in the dim distance, nor could Jimmie pick her up again, though several times he thought he glimpsed her.

Half an hour later, and the other boat had also passed from their ken, swallowed up in the little wavelets that covered the surface of the rapidly growing river; for they were now approaching the spot where the mighty flood of the Missouri joined forces with the swollen current of the Mississippi, to boom along toward the sunny land of Dixie.

Then they came to where the great city of St. Louis stood. It required considerable and careful maneuvering to pass safely among the various river craft they found moving about on the Mississippi at this important port; but Jack was a keen-eyed pilot, and knew just how to handle his boat, so that they managed to get by without any serious trouble, though whistled at by tugs and ferryboats as they bravely cut along.

The running time was pretty well up when they saw the last of the metropolis of the Middle West.

"One hour only, and then we must pull up, Jimmie," remarked the skipper.

"'Tis meself that's glad to hear the same," replied the other, with a wry look on his freckled face, and one hand pressing against his stomach, as if to call attention to its flat condition; for they had only eaten sparingly at noon.

"You might be keeping a lookout for a harbor," remarked Jack; but not with any great amount of animation.

Truth to tell, he was wondering whether after all it paid to leave the river and hide up one of those gloomy looking creeks, where all sorts of dangers might be lying in wait.

"I hope as how we don't have the same luck we had before," grumbled Jimmie, who apparently had not forgotten the experience either.

After that he was constantly on the job of looking ahead for signs of a creek.

"If we don't find the same, thin what?" he asked, when half an hour had passed without any favorable result from his critical survey of the nearby shore; creeks he could see in plenty; but none that seemed navigable for a boat drawing as much water as their craft; and Jack meant to take no

chances of being held fast in the mud on a falling river.

"Why, we'll just have to stick it out, and anchor. But there's a point below us that looks favorable, Jimmie, where the brush is heaped up on a sandbar. Unless I'm greatly mistaken the signs point to a fair-sized opening there."

And just as Jack said it proved to be just what they were looking for.

"This looks better to me," remarked the skipper as they turned in. "Plenty of elbow room here. We can go up a little ways, and then anchor right in the middle of the stream. We'll be free from the wash of the big New Orleans and St. Louis packets, that nearly upsets our little boat."

"Yis," added Jimmie, "and just be afther sayin' how dape the water is, Jack, me bye. 'Twould take a hobo with mighty long legs to wade out here, and crawl aboard our boat."

"All the same," replied the skipper with grim determination, "it's another case of four watches during the night, of two hours at a stretch."

The mudhook was soon down, and good holding ground found. While Jack busied himself rubbing up the faithful little engine that was serving them so well, and afterwards poring over the maps of the river he had secured for each pilot in the long race to New Orleans, the cook wrestled with supper.

It was a congenial task for Jimmie, and he often sang as he worked. Jack liked to hear Jimmie warble, for he had a voice like a bird, clear and sweet, though wholly untrained.

"Another good day takes us below Cairo, and the mouth of the big Ohio," Jack announced after a while; to which the cook added his blessings, and hoped everything would run to their liking.

It was five o'clock when they sat down to supper. Jimmie had spread himself to some purpose on this occasion; that is to say, he had made a fine stew out of some corned beef taken from a tin, the balance of the corn, left from a previous meal, but removed from the can after opening, in order to avoid danger of ptomaine poisoning, and a couple of cold potatoes cut up into small pieces.

Then he had also opened a can of peaches, to top off with; and they also devoured the last piece of homemade gingerbread, carried from the start.

"This is simply great," observed Jack, as he sighed while looking at his share of the dessert, as though doubtful regarding his capacity.

But no such fears ever assailed Jimmie, who could run even Buster a race when it came to doing "stunts" along the line of eating.

"I wonder if there could be any other boat above us?" Jack ventured after a little while spent in chatting, as night set in.

"Sure, now, ye must have seen the same thing I did," declared the other, quickly.

"Do you mean to say you noticed that small piece of cotton waste floating on a bit of board just at dusk?" demanded Jack, curiously.

"I did that, and have been badgerin' me moind about the same iver since. Truth to till, I was jist about mentionin' it to ye whin ye spoke," Jimmie declared.

"H'm. Well, I've been figuring it out this way. There's a distinct current setting out of this big creek. You can see that by the way our boat hangs with her bow upstream. All right. Then it stands to reason that that piece of waste was thrown over at some point *above*. And then again, it looks as if the other craft might be a motor boat, for some one has been wiping the engine off. There was fresh oil on that waste. I could see it passing off on the surface of the water."

Jimmie fairly gasped in his great surprise.

"Did I iver hear the loike?" he said. "Next ye'll be tillin' me the kind of boat it is, I'm thinkin'. Looky here, Jack, ye don't guess now that it could be that same dhirty craft that was spoken of in the newspaper—the one as looked like the dear ould *Tramp*?"

"Oh! there would hardly be one chance in twenty of that happening," laughed the other. "Just think of both boats picking out this very creek, of the scores there may be south of St. Louis? Oh! that would be too funny for anything. It's just a plain motor boat, I reckon; and those aboard don't want to make our acquaintance any more than we do theirs. So there you are."

Jack pretended to dismiss the idea lightly; but nevertheless it remained with him during the balance of that evening, to give him more or less cause for speculation and anxiety.

At nine he bade Jimmie go to sleep, as he would sit up until eleven, when he promised to awaken the other. So the Irish lad, confident that no evil would befall them while Jack stood watch, curled up in his blanket, and presently his heavy breathing announced that he had found solace in slumber.

Promptly at eleven Jack aroused him, and handing over the gun, with positive directions that he

was to be called if anything suspicious arose, he in turn took to his blanket on the bottom of the cockpit of the boat.

Why, it seemed that he had hardly lost his senses when he felt Jimmie shaking him. Just as before the Irish boy was whispering in his ear.

"Wake up, Jack; there's a boat comin' this way!" was what he heard.

"Why," replied the skipper, as he bounced up, "it sounds as if it might be coming in from the river! I can hear the stroke of oars, a lot of them, too."

As the two boys poked their heads out of the canvas cover that served as a tent over the open boat, they could easily see the advancing boat.

"Glory be!" murmured the amazed Jimmie, "we're in a nice pickle, now, Jack. Sure there's half a dozen of the gossoons, if there's one. And by the powers, look at 'em heading this way, too! What will we do, Jack? Lit me have the gun, if so be ye don't want to shoot!"

"Wait!" replied Jack, sternly. "We'll see if we can hold them back first. Perhaps, when they see that we mean business and are armed, they may haul off."

Nearer came the boat. It could now be seen that those who handled the oars were trying to make less noise, as though desirous of not arousing the sleepers they expected to take by surprise.

Suddenly Jack called out as sternly as he could:

"Stop there! or it will be the worse for you!"

He also waved the gun that the starlight might glint from its barrel, and show the men in the boat they were not unarmed.

A man stood up in the bow of the advancing craft, and a heavy voice shouted:

"It's all up with you, men. You are known, and we demand you to surrender in the name of the law!"

CHAPTER VIII.

LEFT IN THE LURCH.

The two young cruisers in the motor boat could not say a single word when these astounding words reached their ears.

Meanwhile the other craft had drawn quickly nearer, and Jack could even make out the fact that the men crowded in her seemed to be in some sort of uniform, for he certainly discovered brass buttons.

Then it was not a joke, nor yet some sort of trick being played by cunning river vagrants in order to catch the boys off their guard.

Jimmie was rubbing his eyes, and muttering to himself, as though he began to believe he might be dreaming.

"Don't think of offering any resistance, you rascals!" continued the gruff voice in the nearby boat; "because we're ready to give you a volley. Take hold there, Grogan. Now aboard with you!"

A couple of burly men came sliding into the natty little motor boat. Then lights flashed in the faces of the two astonished occupants.

"Say, they're a couple of boys, Cap!" exclaimed the man who had grasped hold of Jack, as the glow of his lantern illuminated the face of the skipper of the *Tramp*.

"Guess you've made a little mistake, mister," remarked the boy, as calmly as he could, for he was naturally more or less excited.

"Hold on there!" bellowed the leader of the expedition, as he started to clamber aboard; "don't let up on 'em a minute, men! Just remember the account said something about the thieves being young chaps, with smooth faces. This is the boat to a dot; and I reckon we've got our men!"

But even he was more or less shaken when he came to look into the smiling countenance of Jack Stormways.

"Take a look around," he said, presently. "Perhaps you may find the evidence we want, and the plunder. These are the days of the young men. I've known mere kids to undertake jobs that long ago would have staggered old professionals."

While two of the men were upsetting things in their eager search, the man who had been called "Captain" once more turned to Jack.

"Who are you fellows, where'd you come from, and what are you doing here up this creek?" he demanded, harshly, as though expecting to scare the other into a confession of guilt.

"My name is Jack Stormways, and his is Jimmie Brannagan. We are on our way south on a little race to New Orleans. There are two other motor boats in the match, and a prize of the Dixie silver cup falls to the winner."

"Well, you've got that down fine, anyhow," remarked the big officer, with what sounded like a sneer. "Perhaps it's the truth, and again it may be all hatched up to pull the wool over the eyes of honest officers. What would you think if I told you there was a thousand dollars reward out for each of you if taken; and five times that if the swag is found intact?"

"I'd think some one was valuing me pretty high, considering that I've never as yet done anything to make it worth while capturing me," replied Jack, pleasantly.

His manner was apparently having an effect on the burly officer, who again surveyed the face of the boy by the aid of his own dark lantern. The two men were all this while making a sad mess of things in the boat, turning waterproof clothes bags inside out, upsetting the stores so neatly packed away in order to give all the room possible, and making things look "sick" as Jimmie afterwards observed.

"What's that you've got, Grogan?" suddenly demanded the captain, as he saw one of the others looking closely at something he had picked up.

"A newspaper with something marked by a blue pencil, Cap," replied the other. "And by the powers, if it ain' an account of that Waverly robbery, too!"

Immediately the captain became severe again, and shot a triumphant look at the boy, even as he let a heavy hand fall on Jack's shoulder.

"Say you so, Grogan?" he exclaimed. "Hold it out here, so I can see. Well, now, that looks like a find worth while. A paper with a marked account of the bank robbery, and in the possession of these innocent boys. How would you account for such a thing, my fine fellow?"

"Nothing easier, Captain," replied Jack, readily. "You never heard that we belong in that little town where the paper is published. I've been in that bank more than a few times when over in Waverly on business."

"Sure you have; ain't that just what we're saying?" declared the man named Grogan.

"Keep still, Grogan, and let me do the talking. Go on, young fellow; tell how the paper chances to come in your possession, and who marked it?" the one in authority continued.

"I suppose my father marked that with a blue pencil, because he knew all of us would be deeply interested. Besides, when we read the description of the mysterious motor boat we recognized that it was a ringer for my own little *Tramp* here."

Grogan was apparently inclined to be incredulous. While he dared not break in again with any remark of his own, he took occasion to sniff as loudly as he could, and in this manner show his utter disbelief in the story given out by the skipper of the craft they had boarded.

"Then the paper came by mail?" continued the captain, as he examined it again.

"Surely," replied Jack. "One of my companions got it at Quincy, where others received letters; but this was the only thing for me. You can see the creases plain enough, where it was folded several times."

"Yes," the other went on, cautiously; "it has that appearance, though any smart chap could do the same thing if he had his wits about him. But I suppose you boys can easily prove you are what you claim?"

"Sure we kin!" spoke up Jimmie just then. "Give me the chanct, and I'll show ye lots of things to prove I niver had but the one name, and that was Jimmie Brannagan."

"There's another thing I just thought of, Captain," Jack broke in with.

"Well, let's have it then. For unless you satisfy me that you're the parties you say I shall consider it my duty to take this boat back with me, and both of you boys in the bargain."

"Let me have the paper, please," said Jack. "Officer Grogan didn't look inside, or he might have seen another article, marked with a blue pencil too."

"Look out, Cap," warned the suspicious one; "mebbe he just wants to tear it into finders [Transcriber's note: flinders?], and destroy incriminating evidence."

"Give him the paper, Grogan; I'll be responsible for its safety," returned the captain, who seemed to be drawn more and more toward a belief in Jack's innocence; for there was something in the clear gray eyes that met his gaze to convince him that this lad could never be a desperate criminal.

So Jack turned the local sheet inside out.

"There it is, Captain; please read it, and see if you can believe what I told you to be the truth," and Jack thrust the paper into the other's grasp.

"What's this?" exclaimed the burly officer, as he read, "an account of a race to the Crescent City, in which six young fellows, well known to most of the readers of this paper, have entered, the prize to be a magnificent silver cup donated by Mr. Stormways, the father of the skipper of the *Tramp*!"

Grogan uttered a disgusted grunt, as if keenly disappointed because apparently he had made a dismal failure in trying to fasten the robbery upon these two lads. Doubtless he had been figuring on what he would do with his share of the prize money, and hated to see his rosy visions fade away so soon.

"And this is that same little *Tramp*, sir," continued Jack, pleasantly; "as you can see for yourself if you take a look at the stern, where the name is painted in gold letters. We are unfortunate enough in having a boat that seems to resemble the one supposed to have been used in their flight down the river by the robbers. But if you care to wait long enough for me to get out some letters I have, I am sure you will be convinced of our entire innocence."

"Say no more, Jack," declared the captain, heartily. "I'm satisfied right now that we've been misinformed when told that a boat answering the description of the one in which those two yeggmen fled, was seen to enter here this afternoon; and that two young men were aboard her."

"What time in the afternoon, Captain?" asked Jack, quietly, though with a purpose in the question.

"The man who talked to me over the phone, said he had arrived in the suburb where he lived at four o'clock. He had been out in his motor, and was crossing a bridge here when the boat passed under, going up. He could not be sure to the minute, but reckoned that was somewhere around two p. m."

Jack turned to Jimmie. His face shone with eagerness, for a faint suspicion that had been creeping into his head was now rapidly becoming a certainty.

"Tell the captain, Jimmie, when we came in this creek," he said, quietly.

"Twelve minutes till four, it was, sir," replied Jimmie, promptly.

"Oh! what made you take such exact notice of the time, may I ask?" the officer went on, curiously, though plainly interested.

"We are compelled to make a memorandum of our stoppings. The conditions of the race forbid any boat to be moving south before eight in the morning, or after four in the afternoon. So I can show you in my notebook how an exact record is kept of such things. It will be figured on when the race is decided. We are going by stations you see, Captain, that are about two hundred miles apart. At each station we wait for the slowest boat, and then make a new start."

"It was about four-twenty when the gentleman called me up," observed the police officer; "and he had a long way around to go after leaving here. He could never have made it if it was your boat he saw."

"There's another thing, Captain," said Jack, smiling.

"Please let me hear what it is, my boy," returned the other, eagerly now, for he was beginning to comprehend that this was no ordinary young chap with whom an error of judgment had thrown him in contact.

"Did the gentleman in the auto say that the motor boat went *under* the bridge at the time he saw it?" Jack pursued.

"That's just what he did say," replied the captain. "Of course he only had one quick look as his machine traveled over the bridge crossing the creek; but even then it seemed to him the boat had a familiar look. And then, later on it suddenly dawned on him that it just fitted a description he had been reading in a St. Louis paper about the mysterious motor boat of the bank thieves."

"All right, Captain. We have not been up as far as the bridge, as we anchored right here when we came in. But, Captain," Jack continued, earnestly, "both of us believed at the time that there must be some sort of a motor boat up yonder, for we saw a piece of oiled waste floating down on a chip of wood, as if some one had been wiping an engine, and thrown it aside."

"Well, what do you think of that?" exclaimed one of the listening officers. "It beats anything our best detectives could have done. But say, Cap, I hear something moving close by. There it is again!"

There's a boat coming down, and being poled, too."

"Turn your lights around that way, quick!" cried the police captain, as though he grasped the true significance of the sound.

As the men did so the dim outlines of a motor launch were discovered not far away, with one man using a pole at the stern to hasten its departure.

Jack understood what it meant, even as must the officers; for as seen in the faint light from the dark lanterns the strange boat was an exact duplicate of his own little *Tramp*!

"There they go, Cap! Sure it's the rascals all right!" shouted Grogan, forgetting how he had been so sure that Jack and Jimmie were the guilty parties.

Immediately the second man aboard the other boat must have turned the engine over, for there sounded a quick popping, and the launch began to glide through the still waters of the wide creek with increasing velocity.

"Stop! Hold up, there! You are under arrest!" bawled the captain, as he started to fire a pistol he had snatched from his pocket.

The man aboard the fugitive boat ducked; and as the craft faded away in the darkness of the night a derisive laugh came floating back to the ears of the officers.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SWIFT RUN OF THE TRAMP.

"I reckon you pinked that feller, Cap!" cried one of the officers.

"Not much," returned the disgusted leader of the expedition. "He only dropped to avoid getting in the way of flying lead. They're gone, and left us holding the bag."

"If it hadn't been for these boys we'd a gone further up the creek, and sure nabbed 'em," grumbled Grogan, sourly.

"That isn't the fault of these boys," replied the captain, quickly. "They had a right to stay here if they wanted. It's just our tough luck to hit on the wrong boat. They must have heard something of the rumpus, and thought it a mighty good time to clear out."

"And all that long row back to town for nothin'," Grogan complained.

"If I only had a fast boat I'd feel like following the rascals. Say, boys, what's to hinder you taking us down river. Perhaps your little *Tramp* might overhaul the other craft, or keep them going till daylight, when we could corner the yeggs?" and the captain turned upon Jack with renewed interest.

But the boy was not at all inclined to favor him. In the first place it would break up the race, since the strict conditions must be shattered. Then again their promise not to travel after dark except in case of dire necessity stood in the way. And last but not least, Jack did not much fancy having that disagreeable officer Grogan as a passenger for hours at a time; nor did he care to be compelled to remain awake.

"Sorry, Captain," he remarked, pleasantly, "but the fact is I was working at my engine when night came on, and it's not in condition for immediate service. I expected to finish the job while my friend cooked breakfast. So you see, long before I could get it to working that sound would be lost, and we'd never raise it again."

"Oh! well, if that's the case," said the other, with a quick look toward the motor of the boat, which even his inexperienced eye could see was in some measure taken apart, "I reckon we'll just have to call it off, and make the best of a bad job. But you've interested me a whole lot, Jack, and I hope you will win your race, my lad."

"I'm not thinking much about that," replied the boy, "since the cup was given by my own dad, you see. But I was wondering whether we might not get in more trouble below because our boat happens to look like that other one."

"That's a fact, to be sure. Here," said the captain, as if struck by an idea, "perhaps I might be of some assistance to you."

He drew out a pencil and paper, and wrote a few lines, signing his name.

"If any police officials bother you, just show them that, and tell them if they want to call me up on

the long distance phone I'll stand sponsor for you."

"Thank you, Captain, I will," and Jack gladly put the little document away, hoping at the same time that it would never have to be shown.

And so the disappointed officers clambered back again into their rowboat, and started on the tiresome journey against the current of the river. The last the boys heard of them was the grumbling sound of Grogan's complaining voice.

"Well, that was an experience, sure enough!" exclaimed Jack, as he looked around at the confusion which abounded aboard the motor boat.

Jimmie, who had lighted their own lantern when the police boat pulled out, was already trying to get things in some sort of order, though most of the work would have to be left until they had daylight to assist them.

"And would ye belave it, that sassy little boat was a lyin' beyant the bridge all the toime we were here, an' us not suspectin' the same!" Jimmie remarked.

"But how slick they got away," observed Jack. "That chap with the pole was bent on pushing her past without being discovered, while the other had his hand on the engine, ready to start things with a rush. It was a bold venture; and between you and me and the lamp post, Jimmie, I rather guess the nervy chaps deserved to get off that time."

"Bad luck till 'em," grumbled the other, "jumpin' aboard a gentleman's boat like that, and turnin' iverything topsy-turvy, so that ye don't know where ye kin foind a place to slape at all."

"Oh! anything will do for the rest of the night. But you lie down, Jimmie. It was just about time to call me anyhow, and I'll take my turn on duty," saying which Jack started to arrange his blanket half way decently, so that later on he could crawl under it again.

The balance of the night passed without further alarm. With the coming of the morning both boys were astir. Jack anxious to complete his little job at the engine, and Jimmie, of course, just as desirous of attending to the vigorous demands of the inner man.

Promptly at eight the start was made, for they were to have a great trip that day, unless some unexpected trouble arose to alter their plans.

The current of the river was now very manifest. Jack even ventured out further upon the vast flood than at any previous time, wishing to get all the advantage possible, so as to make Cairo before the hour came to haul in. Both of them noticed a vast difference in their progress. Even if the current were only a mile an hour faster there than close to the shore, that must count considerably in their favor during the day.

"It's moighty foine ridin' out here this way, I'm thinkin'," remarked Jimmie, after they had been booming along for several hours on the swift tide, with the little engine doing its prettiest all the while.

"You're right," replied Jack, "though I'd just hate to have any accident happen while it lasts. We're a long ways from shore, Jimmie, remember."

"But the swimmin's foine, by the same token," was the immediate response of the ready-witted Irish lad, who never took trouble by the forelock, believing there was always time enough for worrying after things had happened.

As had become their habit, they ate a cold lunch at noon, though Jimmie hinted broadly that it might pay them to pull in closer to the shore, and anchor, while he made a pot of coffee.

The afternoon began to wane as they came in sight of Cairo on its low point of land at the junction of the two great streams.

"My sowl, wathiver becomes of all the wather?" exclaimed Jimmie, as they passed the mouth of the Ohio, and could see the great flood of turgid water that was pouring into the Mississippi, there having evidently been something of a rain to the eastward recently.

"Oh! this is only a swallow to the ocean, Jimmie," laughed his comrade. "Just wait until we get our first peep at that, and then talk."

"Sure we same just loike a teenty chip on it all, and I'm growing nervous, so I am," remarked the Irish boy, looking from side to side at the heaving flood that was bearing the motor boat so swiftly on her way.

"Well," returned Jack, soothingly, "if you observe you'll see that I've already headed her in toward the shore on the left. That would be Kentucky now; and somewhere between the junction and the ten mile mark, as we can guess it, is our next station. I wonder if the *Wireless* is there, and has George grown sick waiting."

The boat rolled considerably when Jack steered her slanting with the current; but there was never a time when the young pilot did not have her under complete control; and if a wave that was larger

than ordinary swooped down toward them he instantly changed the course so that it followed behind, and would not strike the *Tramp* on the counter, and splash water aboard.

In this fashion, then, they drew nearer the shore. Both boys were on the lookout, for many crafts had been moving about on the water at the confluence of the two rivers, though by degrees they left these behind as they made progress down stream.

"It's afther getting near our toime, I'm thinkin'," remarked Jimmie, with a shrewd squint up at the sun, pretty well along down the western heavens.

"Yes, we have just enough to find some sort of a refuge for the night," replied Jack. "You see the current is getting so swift now that it's dangerous for a small boat like ours to anchor near the shore. When one of those big packets goes past it draws the water off, and then lets it come back with a rush. We might be upset, or thrown on the rocks, and get smashed."

"Thin it's us till a nate little cove, or a swate creek!" exclaimed Jimmie. "Only I do be hopin' that this toime we run aginst no polace officers or thaves. It do distarb me more nor I care to be waked up so suddint loike, and arristed for something I niver did."

On this occasion they were compelled to go a mile or so after the time had expired, before finding what they sought. But it was worth the penalty, both thought, as they pushed into the little opening, where they could rest in peace, without the fear of an upset on account of the "wash" from passing steamboats.

They remained near the mouth of the creek as long as daylight lasted, so that a watch could be kept, in order to signal either of the other boats, should one of them heave in sight.

But there was no such luck. Apparently neither had reached the third station, for Jack had scanned the shore line for miles just before they came in, without seeing any sign.

That night passed without any incident of note; although Jimmie insisted upon having an entry made in the log to the effect that his first effort at flapjack making proved an elegant success, since not one of the mess was left. But if the truth were told it would be found that the cook himself accounted for something like three-fourths of the number. And then he had the nerve to declare that he had made only one mistake, which was in limiting the amount of flour used.

"Looks like we might have a nice loafing spell over Sunday for a change now," remarked Jack on the following morning when, having partaken of breakfast, they moved down to a position nearer the river, where they could use the glass to advantage.

"Thin ye don't be sayin' annything of thim whatever?" asked Jimmie, who was still wrestling with the various kettles and dishes used in preparing and eating the meal, while his comrade swept the watery waste with the marine glasses.

"Nothing doing, as yet," replied Jack. "But perhaps in an hour or so we may pick one of them up. Of course it stands to reason the *Comfort* is away up there somewhere. I only hope George didn't go on down past here. After a while perhaps we'd better show ourselves outside, and anchor there. If he is below he'll see us through his glasses, and make signs."

It was a long morning to the boys. By turns they went ashore to stretch their legs, which were beginning to feel very much cramped on account of the length of time they had been in the confined space of the small boat.

About two o'clock Jack sighted something that looked promising.

"It's either a big alligator acomin' surgin' and heavin' down the river, tryin' to drink up all the wather; or ilse it's that bully old *Comfort* swimmin' along, wid a bone in her teeth," declared Jimmie, after he had had a turn with the glasses.

Of course it proved to be the motor boat; and half an hour later they caught the attention of those aboard, so that a reunion was speedily accomplished.

"But where's George, and poor old Nick?" asked Herb, as he shook hands with the skipper and crew of the *Tramp*, while Josh got the mudhook overboard.

"That's what is beginning to worry me," admitted Jack. "I knew you couldn't outrun us here; but they had a great send-off. Of course something happened. It always will with that cranky speed boat and the big horsepower motor it carries."

"I warned George that sooner or later it would shake the plagued boat to pieces," declared Herb. "Hope that didn't happen when they were away out on that rearing, tearing flood, though. My gracious, how it does rip along! Guess we could have made six or eight miles an hour without using our engine."

It was then after three. Another hour passed and not a sign of the absent boat could they discover. Several false alarms caused a thrill to pass over the four boys; but night finally drew near without the hoped-for arrival of the *Wireless* manifesting itself.

And although they found a snug harbor in the mouth of the creek that had proved so secure a

refuge to the *Tramp* on the preceding night, none of the boys rested as well as they might. They were worried over the strange absence of their two chums, and imagined all sorts of evils as having overtaken the crew of the *Wireless*.

CHAPTER X. IN A KENTUCKY COVE.

"Turn out, you sleepy heads! The sun's coming up!"

"That's Jack, of course," grumbled Josh, thrusting his tousled head out from the curtains of the big launch, and digging his knuckles into his eyes. "Say, have you been awake all night? Don't you ever sleep, Jack?"

All were soon astir, and preparations made for a meal. Jimmie, of course, was keenly awake to the fact that he could pick up a few points by watching the boss cook of the entire outfit; and hence he turned his eyes toward the *Comfort* many times while busy with his own duties.

Jack and Herb took things easy, sitting in the bow of their respective boats and swapping experiences. Of course both the others had been deeply interested in the story about the descent of the police and the daring escape of the mysterious boat manned by the two robbers. And Herb never wearied asking questions concerning the thrilling events of that night.

When breakfast was finally a thing of the past, both boats were started out of the creek. Finding a good anchorage not far distant, they settled down for a wait, the length of which no one could prophesy.

But Jack, after making preparations for an indefinite stay, electrified the rest when he declared that he believed he had sighted the missing launch far up the river and coming like a streak of light.

It was no mistake, as the rest declared once they had taken an observation. And when the lost boat drew near, such a dreadful clamor as broke forth, both Jimmie and Josh blowing conch shell and tin horn for all they were worth; while Nick did his best to drown them out with his own battered musical instrument.

"Same old story," laughed George, as they came alongside. "Don't rub it in too hard, fellows. Breakdown right when we were doing the best stunt of the trip. Only for that it would have been a record breaker of a run between second and third stations for the *Wireless*. Gee! but she can fly when she takes the bit between her teeth."

"And gee! but she can bite though," grunted Nick, as usual rubbing his haunches and putting on a most forlorn expression.

"Well, what's the use of staying here?" remarked Herb. "It's now past eight, and time we were on the move. It's just a picnic for Josh and me. We sail along like a big house, and nothing disturbs us. Josh cooks to beat the band; only I don't believe he eats more'n a bite each meal himself."

"That's where you're away off, commodore," asserted the other. "Why, I'm feeling ever so much better since I started. If it keeps on I'll soon be able to get away with my full share of the prog, as well as the rest of you—all but Buster. I never want to run a race with that—"

"Don't you dare call me a hog," cried the fat boy, pretending to get ready to hurl a big spoon, which he was wiping, at the cook of the other boat.

"I didn't, leave it to the rest if I did. You're the only one who mentioned the name at all," grinned Josh, ready to dodge behind his skipper if necessary.

It being decided to get away without further delay, the start was soon made, and once more the three boats began their progress toward the Land of Dixie.

For a change George did not rush off immediately; nor did Jack put on speed so as to leave the *Comfort* behind. Truth to tell, they wanted to chat some more; and talk of future plans when they should get farther along in the journey. For by now it had been impressed upon the minds of them all that "the worst was yet to come," as Jack put it.

An hour later and George believed he had loitered long enough.

"My boat is just itching to get a move on, fellows," he called out, as he started to leave the others. "So by-by until we meet up again at Station Four."

"Good luck to you!" cried Jack, waving his hand after the speed boys, one of whom looked anything

but happy as he sat there with the life preserver belted on, and his fat hand clutching the brass after rail.

Presently Jack also considered that the pace was altogether too slow for him, much as it pleased Josh and Herb. Far ahead they could see the *Wireless* looking like a speck on the tumbling waters.

"Good-bye, fellows!" Jack called out as he too increased his speed, and began to draw ahead of the big launch.

"Off, too, are you?" laughed the easy going Herb. "Well, wait up for us below. And I say, Jack, if you get the chance, you might grab that nice fat reward that's out for the apprehension of the robbers. Five thousand ain't to be picked up every day, I'm telling you. And what with your great luck I believe it wouldn't be hard for the two of you to do it. Good-bye! Good luck!"

An hour later and those aboard the *Tramp* could just barely make out the last boat in the race. The *Wireless* had long since vanished from view in the hazy distance down-river way.

"What are you thinking about, Jimmie?" asked Jack, as he saw his boatmate sitting there with a queer look on his freckled face.

Jimmie grinned, as though tickled with what was passing through his mind.

"Sure, I do be pityin' that poor Buster," he observed. "Did ye not hear him tellin' how he longed so much to be havin' thim ilegant wings of his durin' the six hours George was tinkerin' wid the ingine? It was the chanct of his loife, so it was; and he says he would have been sportin' in the wather all the toime, learnin' to shwim loike a duck, by the same token. I've been wonderin' what he did wid the same, and I've come to the conclusion that he swallowed thim wings!"

"Oh! that's too much for me to believe, Jimmie," laughed his companion. "Whatever put such an idea into your head?"

"Becase he ates iverything he says. Josh is right whin he calls him a human billy goat, so he is. I wouldn't put it past him, now," and Jimmie shook his head in an obstinate manlier, as if to show he could not be persuaded differently; so Jack did not waste time trying.

As before, the day wore on, and with the coming of the hour which was to mark the close of the run they began to carefully watch the bank as they flew along, in the hope of discovering a friendly haven of refuge.

These things may seem a bit wearisome, but they became an important part of the daily program with the venturesome small boat cruisers, and as necessary as partaking of their meals.

Once more luck seemed to favor them, for after a long search Jimmie discovered what seemed to be a series of little coves, in one of which they could doubtless find water enough to float the *Tramp*.

It was almost dusk by now, and they would have to deduct considerable time from their balance sheet in making up the record for the day's run, according to the conditions set for the participants in the race.

"Think we can get in?" asked Jack of his mate; for Jimmie was in the bow, using a pole to test the depth of the water.

"Aisy it is, wid plenty of wather, and to spare," came the reassuring reply.

So, urging the boat gently on, Jack sent her over the bar and into what proved to be a splendid little cove, apparently just made for a haven of refuge to small craft, risking the dangers of the vast river flood.

"Snug as a bug in a rug!" declared Jack, joyfully, as they came to a stop in the cove, being able to run alongside the bank, which fact would allow of their going ashore if they chose.

Jimmie looked about him a bit nervously.

"Sure it's meself is wonderin' if we'll have the luck to run slap up against that other motor boat agin," he called out, as Jack happened to be bending over the engine at the moment.

The skipper made no response, as his attention happened to be taken up just then with something that required a little work. But the words had been spoken loud enough to have been heard twenty yards away in that quiet nook.

"I wouldn't shout so, if I were you, Jimmie," remarked Jack a little later, as he came back to where the other was getting the tent ready for erecting over the boat.

"Why, who's agoin' to hear me, sure?" demanded Jimmie, at the same time casting a nervous glance around at the heavy growth of bushes and trees that bordered their little cove.

"Oh! I don't suppose there's a human being within a mile of us right now," admitted Jack, laughingly; "but all the same it isn't good policy to tell all you know. Nobody can be sure there isn't

some tramp lying hidden in these woods. And we don't want company, you see."

Frequently after that Jimmie would turn to glance around him, even while he was building the fire ashore and cooking the supper over it for a change. He could not get the warning of his boatmate out of his head, and Jack noticed that for a wonder the usually merry and light-hearted Irish lad made no attempt to carol any of his favorite school songs that evening.

They sat there by the fire a long while after eating. The night air had grown a bit cool, for it was October, when the early frosts nip vegetation in the north; and even this far south the coming of night brings a change from the warm day.

And about nine o'clock Jack, feeling his eyes growing heavy, wondered whether it would not be wise for them to turn in. They had concluded, since everything seemed so safe, to try sleeping ashore for a change from the narrow quarters aboard the little motor boat; and the blankets were already lying in a heap; in fact, one served Jack as a means of keeping him from coming in contact with the bare ground as he sat there writing in his log book and figuring out the respective positions of the participants in the race, up to that time.

"I say, Jimmie," he began, when, looking around, he discovered that he was alone, the other having crept away at some time while Jack was busily employed.

"Now, where under the sun did that boy go to?" Jack said to himself, as he turned his head this way and that in the endeavor to see some sign of the missing one.

Presently he made another strange discovery.

"Well, I declare, if he didn't take my little Marlin gun along with him," he muttered, failing to find the weapon where he felt sure he had laid it down.

This gave him food for more serious thought. He remembered now how Jimmie had been impressed with that chance remark of his about the possibility of danger in the shape of concealed hobo-camps. Evidently, unable to resist the temptation, Jimmie had silently picked up the gun and crept away to make the rounds of their immediate neighborhood, his design being to learn whether there could be any hobo camp near by.

"Oh! well, I suppose I'll just have to sit here and wait for him to come back, after he's had his little turn. A queer boy Jimmie is, and inclined to be superstitious. Perhaps he's looking for a ghost right now, or one of those banshees the Irish people believe in. Hello! I believe I hear something moving over there! Wonder if that's Jimmie now?"

Jack had arisen to his feet as he watched to discover what came in sight. Although he might not have confessed to the fact that he was excited, still his hand was trembling a little as he held back the branch of the tree to see better.

"Of course it's Jimmie. But what does he act that way for? Why is he beckoning to me and holding a finger on his lips, just as if he'd taken a turn to tell me not to call out. What has the boy discovered now, I wonder?"

Jack awaited the coming of his comrade, who was crawling along, looking back every little while as though fearful lest he had been followed.

"What under the sun ails you, Jimmie?" asked Jack, in a low tone, as the other reached his side. "Have you gone clean daffy, and are you seeing things that no decent, self-respecting boy ought to see?"

"H'sh!" whispered the other mysteriously; and then after another quick look in the direction from whence he had just come, he went on hurriedly: "They're roight over there, Jack, me bye, both of 'em as big as loife, wid the sassy little motor boat alongside in another cove; and Jack, they belaves us to be officers of the law, come to take thim till the bar of justice. I know it, because I heard 'em talk!"

CHAPTER XI.

TURNING THE TABLES ON THE BANK ROBBERS.

"Whew! that's stunning news you bring, Jimmie!" said Jack, looking keenly at his companion, as if suspecting that possibly the other might be imagining things.

"I give ye my worrd of honor it's the truth, the whole truth, an' nothin' but the truth," affirmed the other, raising his right hand in the most positive manner.

"You saw the men, then?" demanded Jack.

"I was that clost till 'em I could have coughed in their ears, on'y I didn't, d'ye moind," replied the returned scout, in that convincing whisper of his.

"And the boat—it looks like ours, does it?" continued the skipper of the *Tramp*.

"Two peas in the pod couldn't be more aloike. And sure, didn't I hear the gossoons talkin' an' whisperin' atween thimsilves about us two."

"You did?" exclaimed Jack, more astonished than ever at the sudden daring exhibited by the Irish lad. "What were they saying, Jimmie?"

"Jist as ye warrned me, thim smarties they do be hearin' what I called out till yeas about the other boat," replied Jimmie. "And that makes 'em decide we're in the employ of the polace, wid the intintion of running thim to a finish. Glory be, but they're mad clane through, becace a couple of boys dast chase 'em."

"Mad, are they, and at us?" repeated Jack, as he began to gasp the situation. "And do you happen to know if they mean to slip away again, like they did a couple of nights ago?"

Jimmie shrugged his shoulders in his knowing fashion. Probably he also winked, though Jack failed to catch this part of the performance.

"Wan of thim do be for slippin' off, and showin' a clane pair of heels; but the other sames to be a wicked sort. He swipes his fist jist so," making a furious gesture as he spoke, "and will be hanged if he goes till he taches thim silly fools a lesson."

"Meaning us, I suppose?" Jack asked, softly.

"Nothin' else, me laddybuck. I heerd him say as how burnin' our boat wouldn't be too harrd a job; or tyin' the both of us till the trees here, and lavin' us to shout till we got black in the face. Ugh! he's sure a divvle, all right, is that smooth-faced young thafe of the worrld. And I'd loike nothin' betther than to be turnin' the tables on him, so I would."

"Well," said Jack, quietly, "perhaps you may, Jimmie."

Jack Stormways was ordinarily a peaceful lad. All his schoolmates were agreed on that score. And yet once he felt that he had been unjustly treated he would fight at the drop of the hat.

They had done nothing to injure these two young rascals; and if let alone the chances were Jack would never have gone out of his way to inform the public officials as to what he knew about the robbers of the Waverly bank.

But when he heard that they were planning to do him and his comrade an ugly turn, something within seemed to rise up in rebellion. If they wanted war to the knife they could have it.

"Whirra, now, an' do ye mean that, Jack, darlint?" demanded Jimmie.

"Of course we could escape by going out of this in the night. But I object to running a dangerous river in the dark; and I also don't like the idea of being chased out of a comfortable berth. So I'm going to stick here a while longer; and try to give the other side a little surprise, if so be they come across lots to bother us."

"That's the kind of talk, Jack," Jimmie whispered, excitedly. "Americans should niver turn their backs on the foe. I'm riddy to back ye up in annything ye say. Do ye want me to lade the way to where they sit clost by the wather where the other boat swims?"

"Not at all," replied Jack. "If there's any aggressive movement made, it's got to come from their side, not ours. Millions for defense, not one cent for tribute, you know, Jimmie. Now watch me get busy."

The Irish boy was filled with the most intense curiosity. For the life of him he could not give the faintest guess as to what his companion had in his mind. And consequently he watched every movement Jack made as though eager to solve the puzzle.

He saw Jack go aboard the boat, and when he came back again he seemed to be carrying some extra clothes.

"Fill up those trousers with dead leaves, trash, anything, so long as you make them bag out and look like they do when on you. Then button up the coat, and do the same with that. Do you catch on yet, Jimmie?"

"'Tis dummies ye are afther makin', be me sowl!" gasped the other, as he hastened to follow out the directions given him; and the grin on his face told better than words could have done how splendid the idea seemed to him.

"I've done it when I went to boarding school," said Jack, softly, while he worked, "and left it for the sophs to grab when they came to haze me; but I never dreamed then I'd live to see the time I'd try the same old trick on a couple of bank robbers!"

It did not take them long to finish that part of the job.

"Now," said Jack, "let's try and fix the dinky things under the blankets so they'll look like a couple of greenies sleeping sweetly, and dreaming of home."

Again his genius for arranging little details came into play. Jimmie was only too glad to turn over his dummy to the care of Jack; and it was not long before it looked as though both boys were lying there, lost to the world, with the fire burning cheerily close by.

"Nixt!" chirped Jimmie, filled with the excitement of the thing.

"We're going to hide, and wait for them to come. You hunt up a nice fat shillalah that you can use on the head of one of our visitors when they get here. Yes, that looks like the billy for you. And remember, not a peep until I say the word: 'Go!'"

"Yis, and thin?" demanded the eager one.

"Tap the nearest fellow on the head, just hard enough to daze him, mind. I'll be looking out for the other meanwhile, with the gun. And I really hope he surrenders peaceably, because I'd hate to fill his legs full of birdshot, you know."

"Oh! what luck we do be havin', Jack, bye. Sure, iverything is comin' our way, an' the others ain't in the swim at all; excipt that Buster made wan plunge, and hild on till the rope. Where do we hide? Show me the place, me laddybuck. Five thousand dollars the captain, he said, Jack."

"Hush! I'm not doing this for the coin, remember. These fellows have nothing to fear from me unless they come hunting trouble. Then they'll find it. People always do, Jimmie," Jack said, as he looked around to locate the best place where they could hide, and still be within reach of the spot.

"Right ye are," chuckled the other; "and especially whin they run against Jack Stormways."

"Listen, Jimmie," the other went on. "I've just thought of something. Look up, and you'll see that the tree is thick just above the place where the two babes in the wood are sleeping so sweetly. Now, if one of us chanced to be hiding up there, it would be the easiest thing in the world to drop down on the back of the chap as he threw himself on the dummy. How does that strike you?"

Jimmie shrugged his shoulders.

"If ye say the worrd, it's me that will climb up the tree, and lie low. And sure they used to say Jimmie Brannagan was a born monkey all but the tail, so they did."

"Then climb now," said Jack, "and keep as quiet as a mouse there, or sharp eyes might spy you. Remember, when I shout the word, drop like a brick on the nearest fellow, and be sure you flatten him out, even if you have to use the stick!"

He watched the Irish boy mount the body of the tree and clamber out along the limb that hung some ten feet from the ground, until he was directly over the spot where the two motionless figures lay under the blankets.

"That will do, Jimmie. You are well hidden there. Quiet now, and wait!" and with this whisper Jack left the open spot.

In seeking a hiding place he had two things in mind besides concealment. One was to keep close to the place where the fire burned lower and lower, so that when the proper time came he could be there to do his part in the program. The other lay in the line of keeping the boat under observation, for fear lest the enemy creep aboard and cause an explosion of some sort that would simply ruin them.

The minutes passed slowly. Jack had to guess at the flight of time; but it certainly seemed to have wings of lead. Still, an hour had surely gone, and as yet all was still.

He wondered whether Jimmie could have been mistaken about seeing and hearing the two bank thieves? Jimmie had something of a vivid imagination; but then Jack had never known him to make a blunder of this sort.

Ah! was that really a rustle he had heard just then? To tell the truth it did seem to spring from the quarter where he expected danger to appear. Jack raised his eyes for one last look at the hiding place of his confederate. All seemed as peaceful as a dream in that direction; and no one could possibly suspect that in the midst of that bunch of foliage a brawny lad was crouched, ready to drop like a plummet when given the word.

Yes, the sound was repeated, and as near as Jack could make out it seemed just what might be expected were an inexperienced person trying to creep through a thick covert. These two fugitives from justice might be exceedingly clever in their own field; doubtless they knew everything pertaining to the art of blowing open safes in country banks; but as woodsmen they had much to learn, ere they could crawl through brambles without making a swishing noise.

Jack held himself sternly in. When he found that his hand was quivering more than he thought necessary, he mentally took himself sternly to task and put a stop to such silliness, as he termed it.

The wonderful command which he had always possessed over himself had been the secret of much of his great success on the baseball field, when the whole game hinged on a single ball which he had to deliver to a heavy batter. And that batter usually struck out when the pinch came, for he proved to have less stamina than the opposing pitcher.

Now Jack could see the bushes moving, and knew that something was going to happen in short order. He hoped Jimmie would be able to master his end of the job without a blunder; for sometimes the Irish boy, no matter how willing, had a peculiar faculty for doing the wrong thing.

Jack had both the hammers of his gun drawn back, ready for business. He remained as motionless as a stone when he saw moving objects creep into the little opening alongside the cove in which the motor boat lay moored to a couple of trees.

Of course they were the two desperate rascals come to carry out their design of injuring the boat of the lads they believed to be in league with their pursuers, and possibly even harming Jack and his mate in person.

Several times they raised their heads to look around. Jack could see their faces at such times, for the fire was not yet dead; and somehow he fancied that the two were hard looking fellows, just of the stripe one would expect to find ready to attempt some daring, lawless deed.

Now they were crawling eagerly toward the spot where the blankets covered the two forms. Then it must be their intention to first secure the owners of the boat before attempting its destruction.

Jack steeled his heart against anything in the shape of mercy: These fellows were making the game, and they must take what was coming to them without whining.

No doubt of it but if the truth were told it would be found that Jack was pretty white in the face about that time; but his teeth were pressed hard together, and his heart knew no fear.

Now they were close upon the dummy figures, and Jack got ready to give the signal that would cause a movement above. But he expected to first see the leap made, so that Jimmie would have a better chance to drop on the back of his man.

It was at this most intense moment, when Jack's nerves were all on edge, that a sudden sound burst forth.

"Ker-choo!"

Jimmie had been almost choked from time to time with the smoke from the fire, and as luck would have it he broke out in a loud sneeze just as the two men jumped forward.

CHAPTER XII.

"LUCKY JACK!"

"Go!" cried Jack.

And Jimmie went.

Jack had seen the two men spring upon the blanket-covered dummies, and knew the cheat would be instantly discovered. A delay of three seconds just then would mean trouble all around.

Had that unfortunate break on Jimmie's part come about earlier, it must have played havoc with all Jack's cleverly arranged plans. But the men were even in the act of jumping and could not stop to investigate just then.

Before one of them, who was wrestling with the blanket and trying to sprawl all over the unresisting form beneath it, could grasp the situation, bang! came a heavy body down between his shoulders, with a force that made him grunt and flatten out like a pancake.

"Hands up! You are under arrest!" shouted Jack, as he brought his shotgun on a level with the head of the second man, just as the other tried to scramble to his knees after learning of the cheat under the blanket he had assaulted.

Jack was taking a leaf from the police book, and applying it to advantage. He knew just how thrilling those words had sounded in the ears of himself and Jimmie and believed in passing them along.

Jimmie, by the way, was engaged in rapping the back of his captive's head with the stout little cudgel he had picked up. At the same time he kept threatening to add to the force of the taps if the

other showed any inclination to resist.

"Do you surrender?" demanded the boy who held the gun.

"I guess we do. There don't seem to be anything else for us, the worse luck!" growled the fellow who crouched there on his knees and stared into the twin tubes of the threatening Marlin double barrel.

"Then lie down on your face, quick now!" commanded Jack, who had been thinking over what ought to be done in case they safely reached this point; and had made up his mind.

The desperate young bank robber hesitated. No doubt he was considering whether he might not take Jack off his guard by a sudden shout and a quick movement. And Jack guessed exactly what was passing through his mind.

"It wouldn't be safe for you to try it, let me tell you," he remarked, assuming as much fierceness as he could. "I've got my finger on both triggers, and this gun goes off mighty easy. You know what would happen to you then. Roll over on your face, and don't stop to think twice about it, either!"

As usual Jack had his way. There was something convincing about his method of argument that even this young desperado could not combat. And so with muttered angry words the fellow dropped flat on his face.

"Now, stay that way, if you know what's good for you," Jack went on. "Jimmie!"

"Yep! Sure I'm here, roight side up wid care, Jack, darlint," chirped the other, temporarily ceasing his tattoo upon the head of his alarmed victim.

"Get out your cord," continued the leader, steadily. "Make him cross his wrists behind his back. Then tie them hard together. If he tries any funny business you know what to do; and do it so that he'll understand what hits him, too."

"Indade I will that. D'ye hear the captain, mister? Give us your other paw, and do ye moind, I've me club handy to clip yees acrost the cranium if so be ye show anny disrespect till the law. Now, aisy loike, and the job's done. There ye are, and riddy for the nixt prisoner!"

Jack meanwhile kept the second fellow under his eye. Whenever the rascal made the least movement, as though tempted to rebel against the hard fate that had come upon him, a stern word from his captor was enough to make him cringe again.

So presently Jimmie mounted his back and treated him exactly as he had done the first victim. When Jack saw the job completed he drew a long breath of relief. The beads of perspiration stood out on his brow, such had been the terrible strain under which he had labored while all this action was taking place.

"Thank goodness, it's done with!" he exclaimed, as he allowed the gun to drop, and his muscles to relax.

"And now what are we to do wid these beauties, Jack?" asked Jimmie, as he also arose and stretched himself; for his long vigil among the branches of that tree had, as he declared, "tied him all up in a knot."

"Take them along with us and hand them over to the authorities at Memphis, if we get no chance nearer. Suppose you stay here with them just now, Jimmie."

"While you drop over to the other cove and see what they do be havin' in that motor boat of theirs," observed the Irish boy, cheerfully. "Just as ye say, Jack. Ye know bist, and I'm riddy to folly orders. But don't be too long, if ye please. It moight be lonely for me, I'm thinkin'."

Jack came back inside of fifteen minutes, during which time Jimmie had sat there by the resurrected fire, holding the precious Martin, and keeping a close watch over the two bound robbers.

"Ye found it, all roight, I say, Jack?" announced the guardian of the camp, as he noticed that his chum was "toting" a fair-sized satchel.

"Yes," the other answered, "this holds the stuff they carried off, and which Mr. Gregory, the president of that Waverly bank, will be mightily glad to get hold of again. But I know now just why they were so anxious to capture us."

"They did be thinkin' we was sint afther thim, so I belaved," Jimmie observed.

"That may be so," said Jack; "but there was another reason. They had need of our boat."

"But, by the powers, they had wan jist as good; how could they use both, Jack?"

"Theirs has got a big hole punched in the bow, and must have hit a rock just when they started to come into the cove. They had tried to mend it, but I guess that's a job for a practical boatbuilder and not for amateurs. We'll have to let it stay here, and take our prisoners along in the *Tramp*."

"So, that's the way the land lies, do it?" remarked Jimmie. "And whin they saw us come in this same night, to be sure they made up their moinds it was the finest bit of luck iver happened, changin' ould lamps for new."

Jack was not satisfied until he had examined the bonds of the two men and made them additionally secure. He also tied their ankles together, avoiding hurting them all he could, yet taking no chances, for he knew he was dealing with desperate characters.

The fellow whom Jimmie had flattened out like a pancake had nothing to say, and seemed a gloomy customer. On the other hand, the second prisoner made out to be a nervy, reckless, happy-go-lucky sort of a fellow. He joked with the Irish lad, and pretended to be utterly indifferent as to his fate.

Still Jack distrusted him and meant to keep an eye on him pretty much all the time, until an opportunity came to hand them over to the authorities.

It was now about midnight. Both boys were tired, but too excited to think of doing much in the way of sleeping. So Jack laid out the balance of the night in watches, and during the six hours remaining he and Jimmie managed to pick up a little rest; though when morning came both of them were feeling, as Josh Purdue would have said, "pretty punk."

They managed to get breakfast, and both of the men were fed after a fashion, although the cautious Jack would take few chances of allowing them to have their hands free.

At eight o'clock the little *Tramp* put out of the cove, and once more breasted the brawling Mississippi flood that moved ceaselessly southward.

Jack kept near the Tennessee shore for many reasons. He wished to get rid of the two prisoners as soon as he could, and meant to go ashore when he came to the first good-sized town, where he had reason to believe the captured robbers would be properly taken care of, and the recovered valuables placed safely, awaiting the claim of the bank authorities.

On the afternoon of the preceding day they had heard many faint reports as of guns. Jack had looked the matter up, and was inclined to believe that these must be caused by duck hunters in the sloughs around Reelfoot Lake. Occasionally they saw flocks of water fowl on the sand bars; and Jimmie was wild for a chance to secure one for a meal.

"All in good time," laughed Jack, as the other kept asking why he did not try to pot some of the game. "We've got our hands full, as it is, Jimmie. Just wait until we lighten our load, and then you'll find me ready for sport."

Truth to tell, Jack had too great a load on his mind to think of pleasure. Until he had handed the prisoners and the plunder over to the authorities he felt in no humor for fun. Nor might it be a wise thing to have an empty gun along, even for a brief period of time. The ugly way one of the men looked at him every little while kept Jack constantly on the anxious seat; and he feared lest there might be some unpleasant surprise sprung on himself and Jimmie.

But noon came without their having made up their minds what to do.

"We're getting close to Covington," Jack remarked, after a bit, when Jimmie proposed that they have a cold snack. "And perhaps we can lighten ship there. Anyhow, I've about made up my mind to land and find out."

"And perhaps we may be saved all the trouble, Jack, darlint," remarked Jimmie, with one of his quizzical chuckles.

This, of course, caused the skipper to lift his head and look down the river.

"Oh! you mean that that launch is heading for us; is that it, Jimmie?" he asked.

"Here, take the glasses, and ye'll see the glint of brass buttons aboard the same," remarked the crew of the motor boat, holding out the magnifiers as he spoke.

Jack whistled, and then laughed.

"Well," he said, "that's good news you are telling me, Jimmie,—for us, I mean. Nothing could please me better than to be met half way by a posse of police just now. We've got a little surprise in store for them, I guess. But I'll have to go ashore after all, for I don't mean to let that bag go out of my possession without getting a receipt in full for all it holds."

The launch was coming full-tilt for them. Soon it was so close that they could see the several police officers who manned it, although they were apparently trying to keep under cover as much as possible.

Jack kept straight on for the other boat. He even tooted his whistle several times as though in greeting. And presently the larger launch came alongside.

"Looks like the boat all right, boys," observed the man who was in the bow, handling the wheel.

"Yes, and the description hits these two young scamps to a dot!" echoed another, as he laid hold of

the *Tramp* and started to clamber over the side; when he suddenly paused, and stared at something he had discovered in the bottom of the boat. "Hi! what d'ye think?" he cried. "They've got a couple of fellers tied up here, neck and crop. Pirates, all right, you better believe. And here's a bag that's got the loot in it, I wager. Keep 'em covered, will you, till I slip the bracelets on."

"Hold on, if you please, officer!" called a voice, as a gentleman in civilian dress suddenly appeared at the side of the police boat. "I'm afraid there's a little mistake here, after all. We've had a false clew. I know these boys, and they're not the ones we're after."

Jack stared, as well he might.

"Why, hello! Mr. Gregory!" he cried, perhaps with hardly the reverence he ought to show toward a bank president; but the astonishment of seeing the gentleman away down here, so many hundred miles from home, rather disconcerted him.

"Yes, it's no other, Jack," replied the other, smiling. "They wired me that perhaps if I hurried down I might be able to recognize the valuable bonds that were stolen from our bank, in case they turned up. We were told that a boat answering the description of the mysterious one in which the robbers took flight had been sighted on the river; and for two days now we've been watching. But it must have been your little boat they meant."

"Perhaps not, sir," said Jack, quietly. "There was another just like mine, and we have run across it several times. In fact, the two fellows who operated it are lying here right now; and that satchel contains all the stuff they stole from your bank, Mr. Gregory."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE "WIRELESS" IN TOW.

"What's that?" exclaimed Mr. Gregory, hardly able to grasp the astounding news that Jack Stormways so modestly launched at him.

"Why, you see, we camped in a little cove last night," continued the boy; "and as luck would have it, these fellows had entered another one close by. Seems that an accident had happened to their boat, so that, with a hole stove in her bow, they could not go any farther. So they figured on stealing our dandy little *Tramp*, you know, and leaving us to hold the bag."

The police officers looked at each other and nodded their heads, as if to say they knew a smart young fellow when they saw one.

"Yes, and naturally you objected to such a bold procedure, Jack, and determined to turn the tables on them; was that it?" asked the bank president, smiling broadly, as though he might be the happiest man in the country just then.

"Yes, sir," Jack made answer. "We set a little trap, and they tumbled into it. So we tied them up, as you see, though we tried not to treat the poor chaps too roughly while doing it, and have fed them as well as we could. I found that bag, and we expected to go ashore at Covington to turn the men and the property over to the right authorities. And seeing that it's yours, sir, will you please take it off my hands? I hope it's all there."

While the boats drifted down-stream Mr. Gregory, with trembling hands, opened the bag, and proceeded to hastily look over the papers. There were some thousands of dollars in bank notes tied up in packages; but he hardly gave these any attention, for the bonds represented the solvency of his bank.

"Good!" he presently cried, aloud; "I believe they're here, every one. I'm the happiest man going right now. And, Jack, shake hands with me, my boy. Your father will have cause to feel proud of you when I tell him how you've acquitted yourself."

"Don't forget Jimmie Brannagan, Mr. Gregory," said Jack. "He had as much to do with it as I did. Now, don't you say a single word against that, Jimmie, do you hear? And, Mr. Gregory, since you've got back everything, please go as easy as you can with these fellows. They're hardly more than boys, you see, and perhaps one more chance might be the making of either of them."

"That speaks well for your heart, Jack, although I'm afraid you're mistaken in the matter. But I promise you to get as light a sentence as I can for them. I ought to feel in a forgiving mood, for a terrible load has been taken off my mind this day, thanks to you boys."

"And how about that same reward we do be hearin' talk of, sir?" asked Jimmie.

"Jimmie!" exclaimed Jack, frowning; but Mr. Gregory only laughed.

"He's quite correct, Jack," he said promptly. "Jimmie knows his rights, and isn't afraid to press them. There was a reward offered for the capture of the thieves, and a larger one for the recovery of the stolen property. After you come back from this little excursion I want both of you to drop over and call on me. I'll have something for you worth while. Perhaps it may be an engrossed resolution of thanks from the directors of my bank; and possibly it may be something more."

So, after all, Jack did not set foot ashore at Covington when they arrived opposite the place. The two prisoners had been transferred to the police launch, with something more substantial in place of the cords that Jimmie had wound around their wrists; and after each of the officers had warmly shaken hands with the boys, Mr. Gregory gave them a last grip, when the larger boat was turned in toward the bank.

"Well, that was an adventure worth while!" remarked Jack, as he settled down to look after his engine and hit up a livelier pace; for Memphis was a long ways off, and that had been settled on as their next station.

"I do be having to laugh whin I think of poor Buster," observed Jimmie, with a broad grin on his good-natured countenance.

"Why about the Hippopotamus?" queried the skipper, without looking up.

"What d'ye suppose he will be afther saying now, whin he hears what happened till us again? Didn't ye listen whin he said, 'Oh, splash! nothin' iver happens till the wan of us save Jack and Jimmie!' And by the token it do same to be thru. We're the broth of boys that git in the ruction ivery toime."

"I wonder if Buster has been overboard again?" mused Jack, smiling at the recollection of the tremendous splash the fat boy had made the time he dropped into the Mississippi, and held on by the trailing rope.

"I do be thinkin' ivery toime a big wave comes along; 'there's Buster takin' wan of his headers again, and makin' the river quake!'" chuckled Jimmie.

So they beguiled the minutes while lunch was being prepared; which, since it was only a cold one, did not take much time. Then they sat and enjoyed themselves, while the *Tramp* bustled merrily on her way, and the speeding shore panorama interested them constantly, on account of the changes taking place.

Occasionally Jack consulted his maps, in order to find out what the name of some town they were passing might be, and in this way locate their position.

"Will we make it, do yees think?" asked Jimmie, after one of these periods of study on the part of the skipper.

"I think so; I hope so," replied the other. "Because, you see, we ought to pull up there and get ready for a fresh start. So far we've done just elegant work; but there's no telling what trouble is waiting for us below. The river gets bigger all the time, until there are places where you can hardly see across to the low shore on the other side. And those false cut-off channels will give us the time of our lives, maybe."

"Of course, ye ixpect that George will be waitin' for us all the while at Memphis?" remarked Jimmie a little later, as he swept the watery horizon to the south, and the shore line closer by with the fine glasses.

"Well, I suppose so," replied Jack. "That is, if he's managed to pull through without another blowout or breakdown."

"Sure, ye have another guess coming Jack, me bye, and that's no lie," remarked Jimmie, a smile beginning to creep over his wide face.

"Then you've seen something," declared the other. "Here, take hold of this wheel and give me the glasses."

He swept the shore line with a careful scrutiny.

"I see him," he remarked presently. "And it's just as you said, Jimmie; George is in a peck of trouble again with that cranky high-power engine. They've tied up to the shore and have got the red flag flying that was to be our signal of distress. Poor Nick; I can just picture him right now, grunting over all the misfortunes that haunt them, while the rest of us have had so little trouble. I'm afraid he'll waste away to mere skin and bones yet."

The *Tramp* was soon headed for the spot where they could see their comrades waving their arms wildly as if afraid the second boat in the race might pass them by.

"Same old story?" asked Jack, as he brought alongside and gripped the hands of the forlorn shipwrecked travelers.

"Rotten luck!" groaned Nick, shaking his head dolefully. "I'm pining away, fellows, inch by inch. Why, my clothes are ready to drop off me, I'm getting so like a scarecrow. Mebbe you don't believe me,

but it's a fact. And I'm that nervous I keep quivering all the time like a—a—"

"A bowl full of jelly;" burst out Jimmie. "Sure, I do believe ye, Buster. And as Jack and me sail along so cheerful loike, me thoughts often fly till ye, and I fain that only for that stubborn will ye'd have gone and given up long ago."

"What's wrong this time, George?" asked Jack.

"Oh! everything now," replied the disgusted skipper of the *Wireless*. "No use in my trying to tinker with the job. It will take a practical machinist to overhaul the plagued contraption. I guess you'll have to give us a tow to Memphis, where I can put a man to work getting this engine in some sort of shape."

"All right!" Jack exclaimed. "And the sooner we start the better, if we want to make it before dark. Get a line out, and we'll fasten to this cleat at our stern. Then we can talk as we move along; because Jimmie and myself have got a lovely little fairy story to tell you, to pass away the time."

Nick looked at the others suspiciously.

"Now, what's been coming your way, I'd just like to know?" he grumbled. "Never saw such luck as you have in all my life. 'Tain't fair, that's what. Here I have all the tortures, the scares and the duckings, too, when I've lost my swimming wings; and you fellows gobble everything that comes along in the way of fun."

"Sorry," laughed Jack; "but they will keep piling these things upon us. We have nothing to do with it at all, Buster. Only when it happens, we just have to get out of the hole the best way we can, you know."

"I just bet, now, you've met up with them old bank smashers again. Look at 'em grin would you, George. Ten to one they grabbed the fellers and recovered all that fine boodle we read about! It would be just like Jack's luck!"

"We did that same, thank ye, Buster," said Jimmie, assuming a proud attitude, with a hand thrust into the bosom of his coat, and his chest thrown out.

"They did!" shrieked Buster, falling back. "Do you hear that, George? Ah, me! why was I born under an unlucky star? Get busy now, Jack, and tell us all about it. Next to being a hero myself I like to hear about you doing big things. Reel off the yarn now, and don't you dare hold back a single thrill."

Of course the other boys were deeply interested in what Jack had to tell. They stopped him many times to ask questions, under the belief that he was not going deeply enough into details. But finally the story was told.

Toward four in the afternoon they began to realize that they were drawing near a large and busy city on the eastern shore. Boats could be seen upon the river, and cotton began to be in evidence everywhere.

"This is Memphis, all right," said Jack, as he looked through the glasses at the buildings on the high bank of the river.

"How long will we stay here?" asked Nick, who had some idea on his mind, as the others readily understood from his abstracted manner.

"A day or two," replied Jack. "All depends on how long it will take to have the *Wireless* engine overhauled thoroughly; and then you know, we have to wait until the other boys drop along. They may get here tomorrow. But what do you ask for, Buster?"

"Why, I was thinking that perhaps I might be able to find a pair at some store here. They would be apt to keep such splendid life saving things, I guess," replied Nick, anxiously.

"A pair of socks?" asked Jack, pretending not to understand.

"Sure, 'tis a pair of oilskin pants he manes," cried Jimmie. "Didn't ye say how the wans he had on filled out wid air the toime he wint overboard. 'Tis ilegant loife presarvers they make whin naded!"

"Oh! quit your kidding, fellows!" said Nick, in disgust. "You know what I've been shy on all this blessed trip. A pair of wings; not angel wings, but canvas ones, to keep a new beginner swimmer from sinking. I tell you I'd never lost all this flesh with worry on this cranky, wobbly boat if I'd known I had those jolly things along. I do hope I'll find them in Memphis."

"You just bet I do," declared George, with a sigh. "Because I've heard nothing else all the journey but your whines about those pesky missing silly wings. Get a whole dozen sets if you can, Pudding, and it'll make you any happier. I'll stand the bill, for the sake of the peace of mind it brings."

"That's just the way he goes on, fellows," said Nick, pretending to look deeply injured, but slyly winking at Jack. "I never can make a peep but what George comes down on me. I'm afraid he's getting dyspepsia. What do you think, why he even began to complain of my cooking."

George made no verbal reply, only pressed both hands across his stomach, and looked forlornly at

the skipper and crew of the *Tramp*, who shouted with laughter.

And in this fashion, with the derelict *Wireless* bobbing behind, they finally drew up at the wharf in front of the Memphis levee, where a score or two of black roustabouts and loungers flocked around them to look with evident delight upon the two neat little cruisers from the north.

CHAPTER XIV.

SIGNS OF THE SUNNY SOUTH.

"Me for a good juicy beefsteak for supper tonight!" exclaimed Nick, after they had found a boatbuilder's establishment, in the enclosed yard of which they could spend the night, their two crafts safely tied to spiles alongside a little wharf. It had been an understood thing that, as a condition of the race, no participant must be guilty of spending a single night under any but a canvas roof. Thus unless in case of sickness, they must not take shelter in a house of any type.

Consequently each night must be spent either aboard their respective motor boats, or on shore, with the canopy of heaven for a roof.

"Well, for once I'm with you, old chap," grinned George; "and since you're such a good judge of prime steak, I appoint you a committee of one to go forth and forage. But remember that it ought to be an inch thick, and a yard or two long! That's the way I feel right now about it."

"Count us in on that deal, too," remarked Jack, looking toward Jimmie, and receiving a quick affirmative nod. "Duplicate the order. And while you're about it, Buster, bring a couple of quarts of nice white onions along."

"Oh! my, you're just making my mouth water!" cried the deputy, working his jaws in an energetic fashion. "Why, I've been half starved on this trip, up to now, and something desperate's got to be done soon, if you want my folks to recognize me when I get back home."

"All right," said George promptly. "Just you drop that plagued cook book overboard the first chance you get, and take a few lessons from Josh. Then we'll have something that's fit to eat. Just make up your mind that I'm going to stand over you when this royal steak goes into the pan, and see that it's done right."

Accordingly Buster was dispatched to market for the party. He made a fairly decent job of it too; at least they certainly did seem to enjoy the steak and onions amazingly; and George even condescended to admit that, under the lash of his reproaches Nick was improving in his cookery.

"I begin to have hopes of you, Buster," he said, as he lay back after disposing of his fourth helping, unable to accept the last bite offered him by the fat boy, who was himself stranded.

"Thanks. I believe myself I am beginning to pick up some. Seems to me I weigh a pound or so more than an hour ago," grinned Nick, sighing as he contemplated the small remains of their feast, "though I do hate to see things go to waste."

"You may say that," remarked George when Buster made such a remark; "but I don't believe it, judging from the smug way your belt hugs you just now. I rather think you are fond of seeing things go to waist."

So they sat around and joked as the evening advanced. And the night passed without any disturbance; although it was a little odd for them to be so close to a city, and hear the various sounds that floated down to them in their enclosure below the bluff.

With the coming of morning they were up betimes. Breakfast taken care of in a little more elaborate manner than customary, on account of having more time, they considered what they should do waiting for the coming of the *Comfort*.

George set out to interview the boat builder, and have a mechanic get to work on his engine without delay. Nick on his part declared he had business in town, and would ask for any mail that might be waiting for the party at the general delivery.

They could give a pretty good guess that the fat boy still had the idea of hunting up another set of those swimming bags, which he hoped to fasten to his shoulders in times of need.

He came back when it was toward noon. One look at his despondent face told Jack the stout lad had met with a grievous disappointment.

"Nothing dong, eh, Nick?" he asked.

"A rotten old town, that's what," grumbled the other, as he disgorged what mail he had fetched with him. "Been to every sporting-goods establishment in the whole of bally old Memphis. What d'ye think, most of 'em didn't know what I meant when I asked for swimming wings? They looked like they thought me loony. One place they used to keep 'em; but the man said that the boys along the river learned how to swim when they was kids a year old, and nobody had any use for such silly things; so he dumped the last pair he had in the ash bin. Just think what measly luck! That was only two days ago. See what I missed by your old machine breaking down on us, George. I might have had that bully pair."

"I was thinking," said Jack, with a smile at the forlorn expression on his fat chum's face, "why you didn't depend on that cork life preserver. You couldn't sink, and if you flapped pretty hard I think you could learn to paddle after a bit."

"Oh! do you really think so, Jack?" cried the sad one, his face lighting up with a new hope. "It's awful good of you to crack your brain thinking up such a bully idea for me. And how silly that I never once jumped on that plan. I'm going to try it the very next time our engine kicks up a shindy, and holds us up."

"Well, you've got another think coming then," burst out George. "For this machinist assures me that after he's through with the engine it will run as smooth and regular as—well, that Old Reliable in the *Comfort*."

"What's the matter wid ours?" burst out Jimmie, his fighting blood up at once. "Sure, we've niver had wan bit of throuble up till now."

"Oh! all right. Consider yourself kicked then, ditto, Jimmie," laughed George.

At three p. m. the *Comfort* was sighted, sailing along on the current "like a big ship," as Nick declared. The conch shell lured the third crew ashore, and once more the party found itself intact.

Herb and Josh had no thrilling adventure to relate. Their voyage up to date had been a most uneventful one. And how they did listen with wide open eyes when Jack modestly narrated the astounding event that had overtaken himself and the crew of the *Tramp* since last seeing the others.

"It beats the Dutch," complained Josh, as the story was completed, "how some fellers are lucky. Why, we've got all our lightning rods out, but never a thing happened. We go sailing along like a duck in a mill pond; and it's nothing but cook and stuff with Herb here. I'm sick of the sight of grub, that's what."

"That will do for you," spoke up his skipper. "You know you've begun to feel like a fighting cock, so you said. And Josh, you ate twice as much the last supper we had as I ever knew you to before. I wager that before this trip is over you'll be rid of that feeling of indigestion that's been troubling you so long."

"That's right," declared Jack, cheerfully. "Nothing like a life in the open to tone a chap up, give him a sharp appetite, and make his food agree with him. Why, Josh, the fact is you look a hundred per cent better right now, don't he boys?"

"Sure he do that," said Jimmie, readily. "Look at the color in his cheeks. And, by the powers, his eye shines like it niver did before. Josh, ye're going to be a well man in a few days more, and kin ate a house widout falin' it, so you kin."

The machinist, under the spur of double pay from the impatient George, made it a one day job. True, he had to stay after dark to finish; but the boys gave him his supper; and before bedtime came he pronounced the engine of the speed boat as in "apple-pie" shape.

So after all they had not lost much time. Indeed, as it would have been out of the question to have started at the hour the *Comfort* arrived, Jack declared that they had no reason for complaint.

Promptly at eight on the following morning they set out. It was cloudy, and looked as though it might rain before the day was done.

George, anxious to test his rejuvenated engine, shot away at full speed, and as usual they lost him in the distance. Still, Jack had a suspicion that the skipper of the *Wireless* would not be apt to try for a distance record on this day, as he had done in the past.

They had talked with many negroes and whites while stopping at Memphis. The machinist had taken a keen interest in their race; and tried to give them all the information in his power about the lower Mississippi, between Memphis and Vicksburg. As he was something of a duck hunter he knew considerable about the flooded sloughs skirting the wide river.

He had also hinted about a disturbed condition among the planters. They were having an unusually great amount of trouble with vicious characters, mostly blacks; and several lynching bees had taken place within the preceding fortnight.

George had listened to these stories, and made no remark; but somehow Jack had a little suspicion that from now on the skipper of the speed boat would try to make it convenient to halt sooner, so as to allow the *Tramp* a chance to overtake them. Company under such conditions was a big part of the enjoyment; and George was, to tell the truth, a trifle timid when it came to trouble from human

sources, though reckless in other regards.

Several times during the day Jack took occasion to land on various pleas; so as to have a few words with people they saw gazing at them with open mouths. He even asked questions too, and learned that a reign of terror did actually exist through the country to the south, bordering the big river.

And hence, it caused Jack to smile when just about half-past three he and Jimmie heard the well known signal blast upon a horn, and looking ahead saw Nick standing on a point of land, beckoning wildly.

"Just what I expected," said Jack quietly; but he did not take the pains to explain what he meant to his boatmate.

So the *Tramp* headed in, to find that there was indeed a creek back of the jutting point, and that the *Wireless* was snugly moored to the shore there.

CHAPTER XV.

BUSTER TAKES HOPE.

"Hello!" called Jack, as he discovered George standing ashore near his speed boat, waving a hand at him. "What's all this mean? Had another breakdown already, after that dandy job done to your motor?"

"Shucks! No. Engine seems to be working to beat the band. But the fact is, Jack, I'm getting tired of camping with only a cemetery for company. Nick can't think of anything but eating; and those plagued old wings he misplaced somewhere just before we started on this run. So I made up my mind I'd hold up at this fine camping site, and spend a night with you fellows."

"Yes," cried Nick, as he came bustling along, "and you'll be glad we held up, too, when you set eyes on the bully little smoked ham I bought from a coon this afternoon. I told George it was a shame some of the others couldn't be along to enjoy a slice; and do you know, he took me up like a flash, saying he'd been thinking the same thing. So when we ran across this place we drew in."

"What time was that, Nick?" asked Jack, smiling.

"I asked George, and he said half-past one," replied the fat boy, hastening to get out his prize smoked pork and exhibit the same to the admiration of Jimmie.

"That so? Well, you did make fast time of it," remarked the skipper of the *Tramp*. "No use talking, George, that engine of yours does the trick; if you can only depend on it from now on, the cup is going to be yours for a dead certainty."

"Barring some accident, such as being upset in the big waves from steamboats," remarked Nick, shaking his head dubiously at several recollections that did not seem to give him much happiness. "My! you don't know just how we wallow, and nearly flop over on our beam ends at such times. I think I lose six ounces of flesh every narrow escape we have from swamping; and I keep wishing I had——"

"Stop right there!" shouted George. "Didn't I say I'd jump you if you ever gave another peep about those blessed things. Use the wings nature gave you the right way, and you'll swim like a goose. Why, you just *couldn't* go under. You'd be like an empty bottle with a cork in the neck, floating around."

Jack and Jimmie were laughing heartily at this little passage between the nervous skipper of the speed boat and his plump crew. But Nick made no answer, only looked reproachfully at George, as though wondering to what lengths his ingratitude would take him.

A short time later the others were astonished to see Nick come forth from the interior of the *Wireless*, upon which the tent had been erected, disrobed, but still wearing the cork life preserver about his body.

The air was none too warm, for it was now about the start of November; but evidently Nick had made up his mind to put into practice the idea Jack had advanced, and over which he had evidently been brooding the live-long day.

He stepped into the water, drew his foot up as if its coldness chilled him; then with a firm look on his fat face, pushed on until he was waist deep. Then he turned an appealing look toward Jack, which the other could not find it in his heart to resist.

"All right, Buster," he called out, waving his hand encouragingly. "Just wait five minutes, and I'll be with you. Perhaps a little ducking may be a good tonic, and make us enjoy that fine home-smoked ham you grabbed."

Jimmie was ready to follow suit, but George declared he did not feel any too warm as it was, and for one, hardly cared to take a bath. So he busied himself in getting various things ready against supper time.

Jack was an obliging fellow at all times. He realized that this notion of learning how to swim had become the one dominant idea in the obstinate mind of the fat boy; and that the sooner he started to take lessons the quicker they would have peace.

Besides, now that the motor boat boys had organized a regular club, and expected to take numerous excursions on the water, it was only right that every member of the organization should know how to save himself in case of a spill.

And so he willingly started to show Nick how easy it was to float in the still waters of the lagoon; also what little effort it required to kick his feet and swing his arms in a way to make forward progress.

George occasionally stepped to the bank to watch operations, and call out various things, sometimes sarcastic and again complimentary.

"Bully boy!" he yelled after seeing Nick actually keep himself afloat a whole minute amid the greatest splashing ever known. "You're getting it down fine, old chap! Keep going next time. Never mind if you use up all the water in the lagoon. Plenty more in the river, you know!"

Nick felt much encouraged, and that was half the battle.

"I'm going to keep at it every chance I get, till I've mastered all the kinks," he declared enthusiastically a short time later, as he came out and began to rub himself industriously with a towel. "Yes, siree, before this cruise is over I'll know how to swim even if I did lose them——"

"Beware!" thundered George. "It's as much as your life is worth to breathe that name again. From this time on you talk about cork aids to swimming. And I reckon that I'm just going to be pestered to death after this with whines, because I won't stop the boat every few miles to let this elephant disport himself in the water. Next trip we take, my man, it's you to the *Comfort*, hear?"

"Oh! I'd made up my mind to that long ago," replied Nick, coolly; "that is, if Herb will take me, and Josh wants to try balancing himself on an apple seed. Somehow I just don't seem to fit aboard a speed boat. I need elbow room."

The night coming on, they started supper. Of course, it was to be cooked ashore, for even the ardent lover of the narrow-beam boat admitted that cooking was a most serious problem aboard such a cranky craft, and he would be only too glad to make use of the camp fire that had been kindled.

Jimmie and Nick busied themselves, as they were supposed to be the cooks of the two racing craft; but the others were not averse to lending a hand at times. In this manner then, the meal was made ready; and had a hungry wanderer come within fifty yards of that spot just then he must have sniffed the fragrant odors of frying ham and boiling Java coffee until he would be almost distracted.

The four lads sat around the fire while eating, and laughed as they spoke of the many things connected with the cruise thus far.

"Wish the others could only happen along just now," remarked Jack.

"That would be nice," admitted George.

"Why, yes," came from Nick, always thinking of his pet subject; "it wouldn't be very much trouble to cut a couple more slices off that ham, and slap it in the frying pan. Kind of wish now, myself, I'd cooked a teenty bit more. Just feel as if a few more mouthfuls would finish me."

The others looked at each other and roared; for certainly Nick had devoured as much as any two of them; and seeing that Jimmie was a good feeder that was surely "going some," as George put it.

It felt so "comfy," Nick remarked, sitting there by the fire, that none of them seemed very anxious to go aboard and seek their beds. The sky was still clouded over, and the moon, now in its first quarter, hidden from view; which prospect of rain kept them from thinking of passing the night ashore, as they might have done had the heavens been clear.

Finally, however, Nick himself began to yawn in a manner that told how heavy his eyes were getting in the heat of the fire.

"I just hate to crawl in there, fellows," he grunted, as he slowly arose to his knees, for it was always an effort for the fat boy to get up, after sitting. "Makes me feel just like I'm in a coffin, to lie in such narrow quarters. Why, I tell you, the skin's clean off my hips and shoulders with rubbing against the sides of the boat. I'm going to be a physical wreck yet, that's what."

"Well, if you get used to it now, you needn't worry when the time comes to leave this old world," was all the satisfaction George gave him.

Jack lay there smiling, as he watched the fat boy heave, and finally plant one foot on the ground preparatory to getting up. He was never tired studying Nick, for he had an idea the other was not

altogether so stupid as he seemed; but that he carried on at times just to tease George.

And as Jack continued to watch, he saw Nick give a sudden start, while his hands shut in a nervous way. At the time he was apparently looking beyond the fire, and toward the neighboring woods; for they were camping in what seemed to be a lonely place, possibly miles from any human habitation.

Apparently Nick had seen something, or he would not have given that start. Jack immediately sat up and took notice.

"What's the matter, Buster?" as asked, quickly; and both the others, hearing what he said, also started up.

The fat boy turned his head around. Signs of great excitement could be seen in the working of his facial muscles, as well as in his staring eyes.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed, "it's a bear, fellows, as sure as you live!"

"What?" ejaculated Jack, as he made a dive for the Marlin, which he had, of course, taken ashore with him; while George also looked hastily around to see where he had laid his rifle.

"Where did you see it?" demanded Jack, gaining his feet.

"It's right inside that big live oak yonder!" cried Nick, pointing a trembling finger as he spoke. "It must be hollow, because I saw the beast poke his old head out. He ducked back again like fun when he saw me looking. A bear, fellows! Just think how many steaks he'd give us, if we bagged him!"

CHAPTER XVI.

ERASTUS, THE HOUSEBURNER.

"Hold on, George," said Jack, as he saw the impetuous one start toward the big tree that had such a profusion of low branches that it was hard to see distinctly under its canopy. "Go slow now. A bear may turn out to be a dangerous article if you only wound him."

"But we ought to get him!" declared the other, handling his repeating rifle eagerly.

"That's right," cried Nick, from the rear, where he had picked up a billet of wood and was making several vigorous passes through the air, as if getting his muscles in trim for the combat. "It would be a shame to lose the opportunity for unlimited bear steaks. I've always wanted to taste one; and you know we may not get another such chance. Why, he just wants to get in our frying pan; that's why he's come so close to our fire, fellows."

"Keep still," ordered Jack; and when he spoke in that way Nick knew better than to disobey.

The fact of the matter was, Jack had a strong suspicion that while the fat boy may have seen *something* at the time he did, it could hardly have been a bear. He did not believe such a wary animal would have remained so long close to where a bunch of noisy boys had camped. And if he had been sleeping in the hollow of that big live oak he must have been scared away long since.

"Jimmie, throw a lot of fine stuff on the fire," said Jack. "We want more light here. That's the ticket," as the flames shot up, and the whole vicinity was illuminated. "Now, George, you keep close to me, and we'll advance until we can see if there's anything doing."

Jimmie snatched up a burning brand from the fire, and waving this above his head, he kept behind the two who had guns.

"That's a clever stunt, Jimmie," remarked Jack; and the others noticed that his voice did not seem to tremble a single bit, so well did he have his nerves under control right then.

"Guess it's all a fizzle," grunted George presently. "I can see behind the tree, and there's no bear there. Buster, you're a fraud."

"No, no, I'm dead sure I saw something that looked like a bear's head," said the other, vehemently. "Perhaps he's hiding inside the tree, fellows?"

At that George laughed harshly. He was still trembling from excitement.

"Well," he observed, "there's is a hollow in the tree all right; but the opening ain't over a foot across; and it would have to be a mighty thin bear that could push in or out of that."

"Wait," said Jack, quietly. "There may be a way to prove whether Buster has been fooled, or if he did see something."

He took the torch from Jimmie, and immediately pushed right on under the drooping limbs of the wide spreading oak.

"Oh! he's going to look for the tracks!" cried Nick, still hugging the neighborhood of the fire. "That's a bright idea, Jack. You're the swift thing, all right. But take care he don't jump out on you. I thought I saw something move right then. And if we don't get them bear steaks I'm going to be mighty sorry, that's what."

Jack paid no attention to what the other said. Already he was stooping down, and examining the earth, as he held the blazing torch close.

"Any bear sign?" asked George, who stood guard over him, rifle in hand, and dividing his attention between what Jack was doing and the surrounding gloomy woods.

"Not a bit," came back the ready answer; "and as I've seen the tracks of a bear more than once I think I'd know such a thing."

"Told you so," declared George, in a disgusted voice. "Another one of Buster's false alarms. That's the way he's been doing all along; seeing snags ahead when there wasn't one, and making me check up in a hurry, and that was hard on my engine."

"Go slow," observed the boy who was on his knees. "I said there wasn't any bear tracks, didn't I? But that doesn't mean Buster didn't see something."

"Goodness gracious! it wasn't a panther, was it?" gasped George.

"Oh! no, only a man," replied the other. "Look here, and you'll see the plain print of his foot and toes in the dirt; and an unusually big foot, too."

"Barefooted!" exclaimed George, bending eagerly over.

"That's so; but haven't we seen scores of negroes barefooted all along?" Jack said, positively.

"Then it was a coon. Say, why did he run away, then? Jack, you remember all they told us above about the troubles down here in the region around Coahoma county? Don't you believe that this fellow may have been a desperate negro, hunted by the Regulators, who want to string him up?"

Jack pretended to laugh, though George detected a vein of uneasiness in his comrade's manner.

"Oh! well," he went on, "I hardly think it's quite as bad as that, George. But still, he certainly did run away when he found he had been seen; and that looks bad."

"But what d'ye think brought him here in the first place?" George pursued.

"Huh!" grunted Nick, breathing in, "that ought to be easy to guess. Picture yourself hungry as all get-out, and wandering through these woods, when you suddenly get a sniff of the most delicious odors in the wide world. Wouldn't you make a bee line for that grub factory, and see if you couldn't sneak a share off? Huh! some people don't ever seem to understand the common failing of human nature."

"Is that it, Jack?" asked George.

"I think Buster hit the nail on the head that time," returned the other. "This man must have been drawn by the smell of our cooking. He's been watching us from behind this tree. Then when he saw that he had been discovered he got cold feet, and vamoosed."

"Then we'd better keep watch and watch tonight," said George.

"I meant to suggest that idea anyway," Jack answered.

"Gee! I feel sorry for that poor wretch!" Nick remarked. "Just think of having a chance to smell all the nice odors and get nothing. It's a shame, that's what!"

George laughed derisively.

"Listen to him, would you?" he cried. "He's so fond of stuffing himself, that he feels for a poor skunk that didn't know enough to keep out of trouble."

"Shame on you, George," Jack burst out with. "I think it does Buster credit. And I'm going to tie that half loaf of bread to the tree here, so if our timid black friend comes back, he can get something to keep him from starving."

"Better go slow," remarked George. "You may get in a peck of trouble that way, if this fellow happens to be that Erastus we heard about, who burned the house up in Tunica county here, and is being hunted far and near. Dangerous business, Jack."

"We don't know anything about it, only that there may be a poor chap nearly starved nearby. What do you say, Jimmie? I'd like to feel that I have backing enough," and Jack turned toward the Irish lad.

"Pshaw! no use asking *him*," snorted George. "Jimmie would give away the coat on his back, or his

last copper. Make it unanimous, then, if you want, Jack," for already the impetuous skipper of the *Wireless* was growing sorry because of his stand.

And so Jack did fasten the partly eaten loaf of bread to the tree in such a fashion that it could readily be seen should a hungry man come prowling around again during the night.

Then they went to the boats and sought rest, Jack dividing the night into two hour watches, during which one of the boys would be on guard.

But nothing came to pass that was out of the way during the period lasting up to the arrival of dawn. It did not even rain, for the clouds passed off, and the sun rose as if in for a good day.

Jack upon arising walked to the tree.

"Looks like it's gone!" called out Nick, who was poking his head out from the curtains of the boat tent. "Hope some wildcat didn't hook it, though."

"No fear of that," laughed Jack, "for bobcats don't leave a polite note of thanks behind when they steal a supper. Look here what I found, stuck to the bark of the tree with a splinter of wood."

He had a very much soiled scrap of paper, upon which someone had scrawled a few crooked lines. With considerable patience Jack finally read these words:

"Neber burnd no hows. My cozin Peck he doned it suah. But dey hangs a culld mans fust down disaways an den tries him fo de crim. Is innersent, I swars hit. I gotter de bred. I et it, case I mity ni starve. But I's innersent. Rastus."

"Well, what d'ye think of that?" shouted George, who had also appeared, fully dressed by now. "Better keep that letter of thanks, Jack. We'll have it framed, and hung in our clubhouse some day."

The others soon appeared, and preparations went on for breakfast, the fire being revived for the occasion.

Nick kept his eyes on the alert during the entire progress of the meal. Perhaps he was thinking of the poor, wretched fellow who was being hunted like a wild animal, and who knew not where his next meal might come from.

They had just about finished, with considerable to spare in the frying pan, when Jack held up his hand suddenly, exclaiming:

"Listen, fellows!"

But the sound was so close by that every one of them had heard it as distinctly as Jack himself; for the baying of a pack of hounds had been carried on the wings of the early morning wind from a point just to the north.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SHERIFF'S POSSE.

The sound undoubtedly gave each member of the quartette a strange thrill. It was one thing to simply hear the bark of an honest watch dog belonging to some farm in the country; and another to listen to those significant baying sounds which surely meant that the sheriff and his posse of man-hunters must be on the trail of some wretch, perhaps the same Erastus whom they had fed on the preceding night.

"Great governor! they're going to pay us a visit!" exclaimed Nick, jumping up.

"All right," remarked Jack, composedly. "I don't see any reason for being bothered by that. Let 'em come. For one, I'll rather enjoy seeing a Southern lynching bunch. I've read about 'em lots of times. And we've sure done nothing to make 'em want to swing us up. If there ain't too many, perhaps we can let 'em have some good coffee and a bite of fried ham."

"But—Erastus—," began George.

"We're not supposed to know a blessed thing about the fellow they accuse of burning a house," said Jack, sternly. "Just act as if you knew nothing—I mean you, Buster, for if anybody gives the secret away, it will be you. Mum's the word, now. There, you can tell from that they're heading down the river bank, and will be here right soon."

Jimmie started to brew a new pot of coffee immediately, taking his cue from Jack's suggestion. Jimmie had great faith in the soothing effect of a cup of that same prime Java, and believed that their

expected visitors would feel better disposed toward them if offered the olive branch.

Presently there was a great stir close by, short barks from a couple of dogs, and the gruff voices of several men. Then through the low-hanging foliage the posse broke upon the boys' vision.

There were just three men, one of whom was a sheriff, if the star on his coat denoted anything. He was a fierce looking-fellow, yet with a twinkle in his eye as he sniffed the delightful aroma of the coffee.

"Why, it's a passel o' boyees jest," he declared, as though somewhat surprised and disappointed because he had been hoping to come upon some fugitives who were being rounded up. "And look at the boats, will ye, fellers? Some tone to them craft, hey? Howd'ye, boyees! Room thar alongside yer fire fur three tired and mighty thirsty and hungry coon hunters?"

"Sure," replied Jack, pleasantly. "We heard your dogs, and guessed who you must be; for they told us up above that the sheriff was hunting with dogs down this way. So we put on a new pot of coffee, sheriff; and there's enough of this ham left to give you all a few bites, I guess."

At that the sheriff thrust out a long, brown and sinewy hand.

"That's white of ye, my lad," he said. "We appreciate such neighborly kindness, don't we, men?" and he turned to his companions, both of whom were lean looking, dark-faced fellows, heavily armed, and each holding one of the hounds by a strong leather leash.

"Yuh bet we does, Sheriff. I'm nigh tuckered out with hunger. And thet thar coffee, my! but she do smell orful fine," with which remark he proceeded to fasten the end of the leather thong to a sapling close by.

Jack noticed immediately that both dogs seemed uneasy. They would sniff the air and whine and pull at their collars, always in the direction of the big live oak. He really believed that they had caught the scent of the negro, who had been close by during the night. But the men were not smart enough to understand this, and imagined that the animals were only acting strangely because they scented something to eat.

"I hope they don't get a chance to wander over to that tree," was what Jack had passing through his mind about that time. "Because if they do they'll soon give tongue, and the men will know they've struck a fresh trail."

He devoted himself to entertaining the sheriff and his posse with accounts of the various adventures that had fallen to the lot of himself and comrades during their race for the Dixie cup.

"It's a great little job, this heah race of youahs, boyees," the sheriff remarked, after he had heard about the contest; "but you-all was saying somethin' 'bout a brace of bank robbers that bothered you. What happened to the same, if you are in a position to say? As an officer of the law I'm interested in all such doings, you understand, suh."

So Jack told of that night when the two escaping thieves, having their own motor boat smashed by a collision on the rocks, attempted to take possession of the little *Tramp*. He had the three men listening breathlessly until he announced the delivery of the two rascals into the safe keeping of the officers who came out to meet the boat from Covington.

"Shake again, young feller," the sheriff said, as he held out that lean hand.

"I will, if you'll promise not to squeeze quite so hard. You see I've got lots of use for that hand before this trip's done," laughed Jack.

Then he showed the few lines which had been given by the officer, in case the boys had any need to prove their honesty further down the river.

The ham now being ready, the trio of hunters started in. By the time they had satisfied their hunger the stock of provisions connected with the expedition had visibly decreased. But every one was satisfied. Even Nick glowed with ardor, for he was never happier than when watching someone "filling up"—next to eating himself, he liked to see others so employed.

Of course the three men were in a very happy mood when the breakfast had been concluded. They had not dreamed of such a feast half an hour before.

"Nevah will forget this, boyees, nevah," declared the sheriff, as he arose, and allowed his belt to loosen a bit. "It was clever of ye to treat us white. If so be the chance ever comes when we kin return the favor, call on us; eh, fellers?"

Both the others added their rude but well meant thanks. The delight of that coffee would doubtless remain a pleasant memory with them for a long time to come.

"Now we must git along," remarked the sheriff, as he picked up his rifle. "You see, we're after a passel o' convicts that broke loose from a camp back country a bit, where they was farmed out to a planter. We larnd they hit foh the river, like every rascal down hyah does as soon as he runs; and we 'spect to cornah the same with these fine dawgs this mawnin'. So long, boyees, and thank ye again foh the feed."

Jack waited to see if the discovery he feared would come. The two men unfastened the tied dogs, and when the animals tried to pull toward the oak they jerked the other way.

"Cum along thisaways, yuh fool dawgs!" one of them shouted angrily, as he again jerked savagely at the leather thong. "Down the river's the way we'uns mean tuh travel, d'ye heah? Nothin' doin' thatways; and the scrub's too thick. Git a move on yuh, Kaiser. We 'spect tuh raise a hot trail 'tween hyah an' Trotter's Point."

And so they moved off, the sheriff turning ere they vanished from view down the bank of the river, to wave his hand in farewell; to which the boys of course made a similar reply.

Then, when the posse had faded from view, the four turned and looked at each other.

"That's the time we were in the swim, Buster," said George, nodding, as if more than pleased. "You see it pays to stick close to these lucky fellows. If we'd gone on ahead now we'd have missed all this circus."

"Ain't I just glad we didn't though," declared the fat boy. "Don't care if they did clean up the last of my nice little ham; plenty more where that came from, so long as we've got the spuds in our jeans pockets. My! ain't I glad they don't happen to be chasing after me, that's all. Did you see the teeth of those hounds, fellows? I bet you they'd make short work of a poor escaping convict, unless he took to a tree like a squirrel, and waited to be pulled in."

"That's the way we all feel, I think," remarked Jack, as they stood there listening to the baying of the hounds, gradually becoming less distinct as the posse pushed further along the bank of the river. "They weren't just hunting for Erastus, it seems; but given half a chance and they'd have pulled him in. On the whole I'm not sorry we did what we did."

"I say the same," declared Nick, positively.

"Count me in, by the powers," remarked Jimmie. "Sure I know what it manes till be hungry; and I can understand in me moind how it fales till be hunted wid such savage beasts. Yis, I'm glad we gave the poor divile a chanct."

"Oh! well, I guess I feel that way too," observed George. "Only, you know, my dad happens to be a lawyer, and he's always taught me to be mighty shy about assisting a fugitive from justice, or as he calls it, compounding a felony. But in this case we believe Erastus to be innocent. That's right, boys, ain't it?"

"It just is," remarked Jack. "And if I thought the fellow would ever have the nerve to come back here to this spot, I'd be tempted to leave something for him—a dollar perhaps, to keep him from starving while he was getting out of the country."

"Well, time is getting along, and perhaps we'd better be packing up so as to be ready to start at eight sharp. Tonight we ought to make that place at the mouth of the Sunflower river, opposite the island in the big water, which is marked down as Station Number Five in the race."

George, as he spoke, whirled around on his heel. As he did so, the others heard him ewe utterance to a cry of astonishment.

"Look there, fellows, at what is in my boat!" he cried, pointing.

And the others, upon following the direction of his extended finger, could only stare at what they saw. Seated in the body of the *Wireless* and holding George's rifle, which had been incautiously left aboard while they ate breakfast, was a big coal-black negro, whom they could easily guess must be the accused house burner, Erastus!

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT THE MOUTH OF THE SUNFLOWER.

No one moved immediately.

Nick was gasping for breath; and the sound was not unlike that made by a porpoise in swishing through the water while rolling. Jack happened to have his gun in his hand, having just picked it up. But somehow he hesitated to raise it against a human being. And presently he was glad the idea had not taken possession of him.

The man in the boat waved his hand toward them, beckoning, Jack believed.

"Cum long ober hyah, sah. I'se done wanter say sumpin tuh youse all."

He called this out, with one quick glance toward the section of woods where the sheriff and his posse had last been seen.

Well, that did not seem very hostile, at any rate. Jack started toward the two boats, and seeing him carrying his Marlin, the negro immediately elevated both of his arms as high as he could.

"Dat means I ain't agwine tuh do yuh no dirt, sah." He hastened to call out, "I cud a stole dis yeah leettle boat, if I wanted tuh. Boss, dar's yuh gun. I might er held yuh off till I got clar; but I didn't wanter, sah. 'Case I done heerd all dat was sed, an' I knows as how yuh ain't gwine tuh gib a pore innercent niggah over tuh be hung foh sumpin' he nebber did do."

They reached his side, and Jack was more than impressed with the truth written on the fugitive's black face. Frightened Erastus certainly was, and with good reason; but he did not look like a bad man, Jack felt.

"Where were you all the time the sheriff and his men were here?" asked Jack, as a sudden suspicion flashed through his mind, remembering the frantic actions of the two dogs to get over to the big live oak tree.

The negro grinned until he showed two rows of snowy ivories.

"Right up dar in dat tree, boss," he admitted, "shiverin' all de time, 'case I 'spected dem dawgs'd break loose, and begin yelpin' at de foot ob de same. If dat had happened it'd be de end ob pore old 'Rastus, shore."

"Well, now, if that don't beat the Dutch," said Nick. "Say, Jack, there's some ham left in the pan, and some more coffee in the pot—shall I give the poor fellow the lot? Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, you know."

"Go ahead," was the reply. "Do you really mean what you tried to tell us in that little note, Erastus, and are you innocent of house burning?"

The negro assumed a very serious look.

"Mars," he said, half raising his hand as though upon the witness stand, and about to take the oath to tell the entire truth, "I reckons I's done stoled some chickens in mah time; an' p'haps done udder tings along dem lines, as I reckons I ortenter; but, boss, clar tuh goodness if ever I sot fire tuh a house, or eben a pigpen in all my life. Cross my heart if I done it."

"You said a cousin was guilty—was that right?" asked Jack.

"He done tole me he done it, boss. Dat's all I knows. But dey got arter me, an' w'en dat happens down heah, a pore nigger he better say hes prayers, 'case he's as good as daid. If I cud on'y git tuh nigh Friar's Point, mars, I'se gut frien's dat'd see me acrost tuh Arkansaw, whar I'd be safe. But dat sheriff, he between, an' dem dawgs, dey'd smell me right quick. If I on'y had a boat I cud do it, boss."

"All right, Erastus. Sit down, and eat what there is here. I'm going to talk it over with my friends. Perhaps we can think up some way to help you along. Because I'm of the opinion that a live Erastus over in Arkansaw would be better than a dead one in Mississippi."

So the negro set to work like a starved dog, waited on by Nick, who watched every mouthful taken, as though filled with envy and awe at the array of shining teeth and the capacity shown for cutting off a large wedge of bread and butter.

"Now, what sort of harum-scarum trick have you got up your sleeve, Jack?" questioned George, uneasily, as the three gathered in a group.

"I'll tell you," replied the other, positively. "I believe this poor fellow is innocent of any serious wrong-doing, but the fact that he's a cousin of the guilty party will get him in trouble if he's caught. Perhaps they'll string him up to save the expense of a trial."

"Well, that is a fact," admitted George, "because I've heard my father telling about it. As a lawyer he doesn't believe in such things, you know. But I can see you're thinking of assisting this coon down to the place he wants to reach. Sure you ain't going too strong when you do that, Jack?"

"I've thought it over," came the steady reply. "And I've made up my mind that in doing it I'd only be acting in the interest of humanity. The poor fellow is being hunted like a dog. If he could have a square show when caught I'd never interfere a bit; but you and I know he would never get it. As he says, once let a negro get the name down here, no matter how wrongly, and the game is sure to follow."

"And you propose taking him in your boat, to put him ashore above Friar's Point—is that it, Jack?" continued the other.

"Just what I do," came the reply.

"All right," remarked George at once. "If my boat was larger I'd say put him in the *Wireless*. I don't altogether approve of this compounding a felony business; but I'm dead sure my dad would tell me it was better to take the chances that way that have the nasty feeling that by your actions you've helped

hang an innocent person."

"Shake, George!" exclaimed Jack, pleased at this sudden change of mind on the part of his careful chum, son of a lawyer as he was.

It was so arranged; and when the fugitive was through eating he heard the decision of the boys with tears streaming down his ebony cheeks.

"Clar tuh goodness I never done no house burnin' in all my life, boss. An' if I'se kin on'y git clar ob dis kentry I nebber kim back no moah, nebber. I'se gut a brudder out nigh Little Rock, an' he owns a farm. I'll stay dar, an' wuk foh him till I kin send foh my fambly," he said, brokenly, as he kissed the hands of each one of the boys.

So Jack had him lie down in the bottom of the boat, where he could be hidden under some loose stuff. After that the start was made at exactly eight; and when they sped down the river at a rapid pace the negro from time to time poked his head out from his coverings to look in amazement at the buzzing little motor; and once even ventured to raise it until he could see how swiftly they were spinning along.

A short time after starting they had heard shouts and had seen their friends of the sheriff's posse waving from the bank. Jack had spoken to the concealed black; and for fully fifteen minutes the alarmed Erastus never so much as moved a finger, lest he in some way betray his hiding place to keen eyes on the bank.

Before noon came George, who had been in the van, fell back to say that from the indications he believed they were now not more than five miles above Friar's Point and that Erastus ought to be put ashore at the first available chance.

About a mile further on Jack discovered what seemed to be a secluded cove, and thinking that this might afford a fine chance for the hidden fugitive to go ashore unseen, the two boats steered for it.

Before having the black man leave, Jack thrust some money in his hand.

"There's an address on a slip of paper—no name, but just the number of the house in a certain town up north," he said. "And Erastus, if after you get settled, you care to write and let us know how you're coming on, we'd be glad to have you. We have taken big chances in helping you, and it would please us to find out that it wasn't a mistake."

Then Erastus gravely shook hands all around, after which he faded from their sight in the heavy timber.

"Wonder if we ever will hear from him again?" speculated George.

"If he gets safely across the river I believe we will," replied Jack, with a positive ring to his voice. "For he looks honest to me, though perhaps I've had only a small chance to know the Southern black. But we took the chance, fellows, and something tells me we won't be sorry."

They ate lunch ashore, seeing that they were together, and wanted to have some apparent excuse for landing. But no one disturbed them, and a little later the interrupted voyage was resumed again.

George stuck close to the *Tramp* all the balance of that day.

"Don't seem to pay to run ahead all the time," he remarked when Jack joked him on this score. "And, besides, it does seem as though you fellows have a monopoly of all the adventure. Hang the cup, anyway. It will remain a trophy for the club, no matter who wins. For all of me the blooming old *Comfort* may come in ahead yet, because, you know, we agreed on her having a big handicap on account of her well known slowness. I'm going to hang by you much of the rest of the trip, fellows."

"Well," remarked Jack, when the hour for the close of the day's run drew near; "I can see something away below there that looks like the mouth of the Sunflower river. We're getting in the neighborhood of that place, anyhow. Take a look yourself, Skipper George, and say what's what."

Upon doing so the other pilot agreed with him.

"There's the big island ahead, you see, and, according to my map, the river empties into the Mississippi exactly opposite that. Then, right along here is where we expect to make Station Number Five; and wait up for the rest."

As customary they now drew in closer to the shore, and looked for some favorable nook in which the boats could have a secure harbor during their stay, be it long or short.

And once that was found, not far from the junction of the two rivers, Jack made for a point where he set the red flag that, if seen by the pilot of the *Comfort*, would inform him that he had arrived at a stopping place, and that his comrades of the Dixie cup race were nearby.

Having attended to that duty Jack proceeded to take things easy; while the two rival cooks started to wrestle with the problem of what to have for the next meal; always a matter of more or less consideration among campers.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE LAND OF COTTON.

"Another day to be spent in idleness," remarked George the next morning, after the four campers had passed a comfortable night.

"Well, that was a part of the figuring when we started on this race," observed Jack. "We knew Herb and his jolly old *Comfort* would always be tagging behind. Besides, there's no particular hurry, since I only have to be in New Orleans by the beginning of December. To tell the truth, I'll be sorry that the long cruise must soon come to an end."

"Yes, that's a fact," admitted the other. "It has been a great thing for us all. I'm learning new things every day; and as for you fellows it's been a picnic. Perhaps there may be something stirring for Nick and myself before the end comes."

There was, plenty of it, as will be presently mentioned.

At ten o'clock the cry arose that the *Comfort* was in sight.

"What's that?" cried George, who was fishing around a corner, and had no opportunity to look upstream. "You must be mistaken, Jimmie; or else Herb has taken to running out of hours. Why, that would throw him only a couple of hours behind our run of the two days."

"Well," laughed Jack, "if you could see how the big boat is booming along out there near the middle of the river on the swift current, you'd understand it all. Why, he's got on to it that he can add many miles a day to his run by avoiding the slower water near the shore."

"I remember they tell us that fools and babes venture where even angels fear to tread," remarked George.

"I wouldn't apply that remark to Herb and Josh," said Jack, seriously. "On the contrary I think it shows wisdom. Their big and safe boat can run out there in perfect safety; but for you to do much of it, would be inviting trouble and a spill. But we must attract them in here, or they may go whirling past on the other side of the island."

So Jack fired his gun twice, while Jimmie and Nick set up a most dreadful squawking with the several horns possessed by the campers.

"They see us," announced Jack, immediately. "I caught something waving. And listen to Josh almost bursting his lungs to blow that battered old horn."

"And they've headed in, too," declared George, who by this time had his own marine glasses in use.

The skipper and crew of the *Comfort* arrived in fairly good humor.

"We're already picking up on you fellows," declared Herb, as he stepped ashore to stretch his stiffened limbs a short time. "From this on look out; I give you all fair warning. The *Comfort* is hot on your trail, and you've got to hump yourselves to keep on even terms with us. As the current grows fiercer so our chances improve. Once more allow me to state that the race is not always to the swift."

"Glad to find you so cheerful, Herb," laughed Jack. "As for George here, he's already arrived at the sensible conclusion that, no matter who wins the cup, it's going to remain club property, and will likely be kept at the club house, when we get one."

"Say, has Buster been able to swim across the river yet?" asked Josh, who never allowed a chance to get in a sly dig at the fat boy to pass him.

"Well, I was thinking about doing that job," returned the fat boy, calmly, but with a knowing wink at his companions; "but George here wouldn't hold up long enough for me to try it. When I want to paddle around, he says I've just got to have a rope tied under my arms so he can yank me back if I get too venturesome."

"That accounts for it, fellows," cried Josh. "I just had a suspicion that Pudding might be to blame for all the trouble that old chap told me about when I went ashore at noon today."

"Me to blame for what?" demanded the other, pretending to be annoyed.

"Why, you see," Josh went on blandly, "he says to me that when he was settin' there on the bank tryin' to pull in a few buffalo fish for his dinner, along came a tremendous wave. He vowed that it nigh washed him away, and called it a cloudburst or something like that; but now I understand just what it

was."

"Sho! you don't say," Nick remarked scornfully; "then suppose you tell the rest of us about this bright idea that came to you, the only one you ever had, I guess."

"Why, you see, that wave was started when you stepped into the river for your little sportive paddle. It kept growing bigger all the time as it rolled down the stream, till it nigh swamped the old fisherman. I'm almost afraid to hear what calamity may have happened to some of the lower parishes," grinned Josh.

"But what's this, Jack, you're saying about Erastus?" asked Herb. "Do you mean to say you chaps have run up against another adventure, while we were just sailing down on the breast of the bully old river?"

So after that the story had to be told, and Josh listened with open mouth as he heard about the sheriff and his posse, not to mention the dogs.

"Oh! what we do miss, Herb," he lamented. "That all comes of being on a slow coach boat. Next time I'm going to try my luck with one of the others, and let Buster have this soft snap."

"Hurray!" cried the fat boy. "If it wasn't for breaking up the race I'd go you right now. My! but wouldn't I have room to turn around in when aboard the *Comfort*? It's a case of a round man in a square hole right now, fellows. But he ain't going to stay round much longer, because, you see, he's getting all the fat rubbed off and will soon be a living skeleton. I'm going to look out for a job in some freak museum after this trip."

"If you do then, it'll be as a champion eater or the fat boy," laughed George. "Your appetite keeps on growing frightfully, and I'd like to bet you weigh ten pounds more now than when you left home. I can tell it by the way my boat groans whenever you step aboard. And she sinks below the line I marked when we started, in spite of the half ton of grub we've devoured."

"Oh! George, you frighten me," declared Nick, in mock alarm.

"Well, what's the programme for today, fellows?" asked Josh.

"It's Saturday," said Jack.

"Yes, and we agreed not to run on Sunday if we could avoid it by being together," George added.

"This is a fine camp," Jack continued. "And we're only a few miles below Friar's Point, in case we need a few supplies in the way of eggs, butter and such things," Josh cut in.

"What say, fellows, shall we camp right here until we are ready for a fresh start on Monday morning? Buster, are you willing to remain?" Jack went on, as the president of the motor boat club.

"Me? Oh! I could squat here for a week, provided of course that there was always plenty of provisions to keep us alive," came the immediate reply.

"George, what do you say?"

"Stay."

"And Josh, Herb, Jimmie, are you willing to make it unanimous?" Jack went on.

"Sure I am," replied Josh; "and both Herb and Jimmie are nodding their heads. So that settles it. Hurrah for Sunflower Camp, and a good rest."

They always looked back on that camp as one of the peaceful ones of the trip. Nothing out of the way happened to disturb them. Jack and George took a run up to Friar's Point to pick up a few needed things; but in reality to learn in a quiet way if anything had been heard of Erastus, the fugitive whom they had assisted because of their tender hearts.

Finding the friend whose name Erastus had given them, they made cautious inquiries and were pleased to learn that he had just returned from a visit across the big river in a dilapidated sailboat he owned, and which neither of the white boys would have ever dared navigate out upon the broad bosom of the Mississippi. That was as much as Henry would say, but they could read between the lines that the fugitive was safe over in Arkansas, where his life would not be in danger.

While here in this camp of course Nick insisted on having some more swimming lessons. He was the happiest fellow in the wide world when he actually found that he was able to make progress, still aided by Jack and the cork life preserver. By degrees, however, his teacher meant to insist upon his depending entirely on his own powers; and it would not be long before the cork would be discarded and Nick a full-fledged swimmer.

Monday came, and with it a cold storm. But they had made up their minds, and were not to be kept back by such a little thing. So at eight a start was made, all of them donning their oilskins, and Nick also wearing a most expansive grin. Josh was forever calling it the "smile that won't come off," and everyone knew that it was the pride of being able to keep himself afloat that made Buster so happy.

George was tempted to speed ahead, forgetting his resolve. So presently each of the three boats moved along in lonely state, miles separating them by the time afternoon arrived.

Jack and Jimmie found shelter in one of the false channels or cut-offs that had now begun to be frequent sights along the way. It was a very wild night they put in, and more than a few times Jack wondered how their comrades might be faring, only hoping that they were as comfortable as himself and Jimmie.

All night long the heavy seas banged up against the shore, driven by a strong northwest wind that reached the proportions of a gale at times. The boys were more than thankful that they were not exposed to the fury of the storm, but had a snug harbor where they could ride it out in safety.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CASTAWAYS OF THE SWAMP.

"Looks like we made a big mistake in trying to navigate that short cut the planter told us about, Jimmie!"

"How long we been in this scrape, I'd loike to know, Jack?"

"Well, this is the third day now we've been pushing and poling around, sometimes thinking we must be getting back to the river again, and then finding ourselves deeper and deeper in the slough. The worst of it is our grub heap looks mighty low, Jimmie," and Jack glanced seriously at his companion.

They had been tempted to take the advice of a friendly planter on the day after the big storm. In fact, to tell the truth, it was Jimmie's urging that had influenced the skipper of the *Tramp* to enter the opening that yawned before them, and allow the current to swing them along at a swift pace.

But by degrees, after twisting and turning until they lost all trace of their bearings, that treacherous current had died away until they found themselves in a lagoon that seemed as still as death.

They had tried to navigate by means of their propeller. Then, fearful that the supply of gasolene might become exhausted they had resorted to the pole. Two days had passed and so far as they could see they were worse off than ever.

Now and then they came to dry ground on which they set foot with renewed hopes that were soon dashed again. Jack managed to pot a few gray squirrels, and they cooked them by a fire made in a hickory ridge. If it came to the worst Jack said they could catch fish, or shoot some of the numerous raccoons that eyed them inquisitively.

"Then there are plenty of muskrats in sight," he had added; at which Jimmie held up his hands in horror, until Jack explained that if properly cooked the "musquash" of the Indian was considered very good food and eaten by many French Canadian trappers in the Northwest and Canada.

"Of course," Jack went on, when Jimmie became curious as to how they had lost the right channel, "it's of much more importance how we're ever going to get out of this network of watercourses than how we came here. But, honestly, I'm afraid we made a mistake in the beginning."

"Took the wrong cut-off, do ye mane?" asked the other.

"That's just what struck me, Jimmie. And now, here's the third night ahead of us and we no nearer escape than in the beginning."

"Sure I do be thinkin' they ought to be happy," remarked the Irish lad, after they had gone on pushing for another half hour.

"Who do you mean?" asked Jack.

"Herbie and Josh. Don't ye say, Jack, all this time we're flounderin' around in this place the *Comfort* is gaining eight hours ivery day."

"That's so, on us," Jack went on, thoughtfully. "But then there's George to contend with. I suppose they're all waiting at the next station and wondering what under the sun has happened to the steadygoing *Tramp*. The only thing I'm bothering about is the chance of our being stuck in here for weeks. That would keep me from being present when that plagued will is read, and I'd lose my share of uncle's money."

"Oh! don't worry about that, me bye," returned the cheery Irish lad. "Sure, we're bound to run acrost some native cracker sooner or later, who will be moighty glad for a few dollars to guide us out of

this nasty place. But howld on, Jack, me arrms are that tired wid pushing through the mud they fale riddy to drop off."

"And as night is coming along I suppose we'd better try and find some patch of land on which to camp. A fire would cheer us up. How many matches have we got with us, Jimmie?"

"Och! that's the silly thing for me, Jack. I meant till till yees whin ye wint shoppin' in that little place of Friar's Point till lay in another stock; and sure it shlipped me moind intoirely. The supply is bastely low, so it is. I don't think we've got more'n a dozen or so lift roight now."

"That's bad," remarked Jack; and immediately added, seeing the gloom on Jimmie's freckled face, because it had been his fault: "But we won't worry about it. If it comes to it I believe I know how to make a fire without matches. I've seen an Indian do it, and even succeeded myself once with a bow, a pointed stick and some tinder to ignite. Besides, long before a dozen days we expect to be out of here."

"If we only had Buster along I wouldn't moind so much," remarked Jimmie, with one of his old time flashes of humor. "For do ye say, he'd last a week or more in a pinch."

When they finally discovered a dry piece of ground the night was almost upon them. The moon, more than half full, hung up in the heavens; but on account of the thick growth of cypress and other trees they could not expect much light from that source.

"Looks more like a real swamp than anything we've struck yet," declared Jack, as he looked around at their ghostly surroundings, with the trailing Spanish moss festooning many of the trees.

"Wow! what's that?" shouted Jimmie, as something went into the dark water with a tremendous splash.

"I didn't see exactly," replied Jack, immediately; "but honestly I believe that must have been our first alligator taking a plunge."

"An alligator, was it?" echoed the other, nervously. "But why did he want till make all that splash, Jack, darlint?"

"Why, we scared him when he was snooping on the bank, and he thought the safest thing to do was to dive. Right now perhaps he's floating on the surface of that black looking lagoon yonder, watching us. He never saw a motor boat before, and perhaps we're the first whites that have invaded his home here. But jump ashore and take this line, Jimmie."

"Sure, do ye be thinkin' there moight be another of the same waitin' till grab me by the lig? I'm towld they loike an Irish lad bettther than anything, save a black wan."

"Oh, rats! Here, wait for me," and with the words Jack was on the shore, ready to make the hawser fast to a convenient tree.

Then Jimmie, shamed by the boldness of his boatmate, consented to join him. A fire soon flashed up, fed with some of the handy fuel.

"Things don't look quite so bad with a cheery blaze, eh, Jimmie?" asked the skipper of the marooned *Tramp*, as he glanced around at the weird picture that met his eyes in every direction.

"Troth, they moight be worse, I suppose," the other admitted grudgingly; for already they were on short rations, and it may be remembered that Jimmie was blessed with an appetite second only to the wonderful capacity of Nick.

"Tomorrow, remember," Jack went on, as he busied himself in various ways, "I'm going to begin to hunt in earnest all the while we're looking for an outlet. We may even find a fat wild turkey on one of these same hard timber ridges. I understand they're known to frequent such places."

"What if we happen till run acrost a bear?" suggested Jimmie, anxiously.

"Well, the chances are the bear would be ten times more scared than either of us, and put for the canebrake at top speed. Even if he tried to attack us, you must remember that a charge of shot delivered at close quarters can penetrate almost as well as a bullet. And I should aim for his eyes, or back of his fore leg."

Jimmie sighed heavily.

"Sure, I'd loike a bear steak just as much as Buster said he would; but p'raps, Jack, darlint, we'd better be contint wid 'possum, 'coon or muskrats."

"Oh! just as you say, Jimmie. But we haven't run across our bear yet, so we can't tell just what we'd do. In cases like that, you know, a fellow has to be governed by circumstances. Suppose the beast was mad, and insisted on coming at us on his hind legs, ready to squeeze us like they often do? I would have to shoot then, wouldn't I?"

The supper was soon in progress. Jimmie begrudged everything that they were compelled to cook. He would remark that the coffee was only going to last for five more meals; that the rice seemed low,

and as for sugar, he doubted whether it would hold out much longer.

But Jack was not to be disheartened, and had a laughing answer for each one of these dismal prophecies.

"I do believe that the less ye have to eat the better it tastes," declared Jimmie, as he sat there polishing his pannikin, in which he had just had a third helping of rice, eaten without either milk or sugar this time.

"That's right," laughed Jack. "And the smaller the amount of grub, the more you think you feel the gnawings of hunger. Suppose, now, we were cruising on a salt lagoon and our drinking water ran low—why, your throat would feel parched all the time, just from imagination."

"Well," grinned the other, as he glanced around, "small danger of that botherin' us here, Jack, darlint. We do same till have plenty of water. And there do be fish in it, for I seen 'em jump."

"Oh! we'll not starve, make up your mind to that. There are wild ducks in places, too, and lots of squirrels on the hamaks, after the nuts. We could live here two months, Jimmie, and thrive. I know a few things that would come in useful; just put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"Well, I feel better, now that I've had me fill," declared Jimmie, getting to his feet to step over to the boat; but he had not gone five paces than Jack heard him give a shrill yell, as though he had stepped on a rattlesnake or been jumped on by some hungry wildcat that had been concealed among the dense branches of the live oak tree under which the camp fire burned.

And as Jack sprang hurriedly to his feet, snatching up the handy Marlin gun, he saw Jimmie leaping toward him, wildly waving his arms like flails.

CHAPTER XXI.

BUSTER FACES STARVATION.

"Look out, Jack! They's wan a comin' for us roight now! And he's a big wan, I'm tillin' yees!" cried Jimmie, gasping for breath.

"One what?" demanded Jack, failing to see any dreadful dragon in sight, either on the land or the near-by water of the black lagoon.

"An alligator, it is, and sure the granddaddy of the tribe. I jist had a squint of the baste sneakin' along through the water. He manes till surprise us, and it's a foine supper he'll be afther havin' I'm thinkin'," Jimmie went on, hurriedly.

"Where was this?" Jack asked, wondering whether the Irish boy could be joking, or if he had really seen something to excite him.

"Look beyant the stump on the edge of the water, over yander. There, did ye be savin' that now? Don't till me I'm blind agin, Jack. It's movin' this way; sure it do be comin' right along. Och I wirra, listen till that, would yees?"

No wonder Jimmie fell back in dismay, for a most outrageous noise suddenly broke forth, such as certainly could never have been heard in that swamp before. But Jack immediately recognized it as the attempt of Nick to blow the old tin horn that was carried aboard the *Wireless*.

He shouted at the top of his sturdy voice in reply, and saw the shadowy moving object head straight for the fire.

"Here's a couple of poor chaps lost in the wilderness," laughed Jack as the other boat came closer.

"Oh! we've only come to find you," retorted Herb.

"Have you finished supper, fellows?" bellowed the fat boy.

Jimmie had by now recovered from his fright. He even pretended that it had all been assumed, and that he knew from the start the nature of the suspicious black object which he had discovered creeping toward the fire.

"Listen till him, would ye, Jack?" he exclaimed, coming forward to where the speed boat meant to land. "Did ye iver know such a gossoon in all your loife? Is it supper ye're afther wantin? Sure, ye'll not find anny too much grub aboard the *Tramp* roight now. But such as it is, ye're as wilcome to as the flowers in May."

Whereupon he started in at once to cook another supply.

"It's lucky ye kim, me byes," he remarked presently, while the others were sitting about, warming their hands at the fire, and waiting for supper. "Now, by the same token, we'll not be facin' starvation so soon."

"Don't count too much on that, Jimmie," observed George, making a face. "I guess you forget who was with me these three days, and how he can stow away stuff? Why, we're cleaned out of everything. I was even talking of cooking our moccasins for soup a while back. For, you see, my gun's a rifle, and somehow I haven't been able to knock over much with bullets. We hoped to see a deer or a bear; but nixey up to now."

"Glory be!" exclaimed the sorely dismayed cook of the *Tramp*, as he considered what an enormous amount it took to keep Nick going, and he remembered the scanty stores still remaining in the larder.

"What brought you in this out-of-the-way place, George?" asked Jack. "Now, don't go to joshing and pretending you knew we were here, because you didn't. Ten to one you met that planter, too."

"Meaning Mr. Tweed, the gentleman with the crooked nose, and the long, thin mustache?" George went on.

"That's the man," laughed Jack. "You quizzed him, too, about a short-cut, and he posted you. Then, just as we did a little later, you made a blunder and ran into the wrong channel. Confess now."

"That's just what we did," grinned George. "And ever since I've been listening to the complainings of Buster. Oh! he's starved to death twenty times, in imagination of course, since we blundered into that false cut-off. I had to finally threaten to tie him up and gag him if he didn't stop. And after that he watched me like a hawk. I guess he thought I meant to eat him up."

"Well, it was very suspicious," admitted Nick, soberly, "because, you see, he even pinched me several times; and I got a horrible notion in my head that he was trying to see how fat I was."

Then the others burst into a roar, in which Nick himself finally joined, unable to keep a straight face longer.

They sat up long that night, trying to lay plans that gave some promise of fulfillment, and take them out of the labyrinth of channels.

"If we stay here much longer Herb is going to have a walkover about winning the silver cup," George remarked, half complainingly.

"Sure, perhaps he do be matin' up wid the same smooth spoken Mr. Twade," observed Jimmie, with a broad grin.

His suggestion brought out another round of laughter.

"Then be on the lookout tonight, Jimmie," warned George. "And if you see anything that looks like a big alligator swimming toward us, don't pour in a broadside too soon, for it may be the old *Comfort*. Misery likes company, they say. And just to think of us running across you fellows here, when our last grain of grub had gone."

"Not much danger of them striking the planter, for they keep to the middle of the river, while we hugged the shore," Jack observed. "But when morning comes, I'm going to try the plan I spoke of last."

"I think it a bully one, Jack," affirmed Nick, always full of confidence in the leader of the expedition. "And if anybody can pull us out of here it's going to be you. The worst of it is I dasen't go swimming in this black water. It's just cram full of snakes."

"Well," remarked Jack, seriously, "I wouldn't advise you to try it. Those snakes with the mottled yellow and brown backs are water moccasins. They are a nasty lot, and can strike to beat the band. They say that they poison a fellow so that he may never get over having a running sore. I hit every one I see on the head with my setting pole."

"And I will, after this," declared Nick.

"Well, if you know what's good for you, I just guess you'll be satisfied to sit quiet, and let me do the pushing," remarked George, meaningly. "For every time I gave you the job we came near having a turn over. Excuse me from a swim in this horrible looking water."

During the night there were several alarms. Once an alligator did actually try to invade the camp, doubtless under the impression that it might secure something worth while devouring. It happened, too, that Jimmie was on guard at the time. His yells, accompanied by the double discharge of the shotgun, brought the others to their feet in wild dismay.

They were loth to accept the word of the sentinel that he had actually shot at a scaly invader until he pointed out the spot. Then Jack, with a brand from the fire, made a hasty examination.

"Jimmie, you're a truthful boy," he declared, "for I can see where a lot of the shot ploughed up the ground; and here's where claws dug into it. Yes, and as sure as anything, you hit him, too, for here's a trail of blood leading to the water's edge. I thought I heard a splash as I jumped up."

And Jimmie, with this complete vindication, drew himself up proudly, as if to dare any one to doubt his veracity after that.

"But if you see another alligator," Jack went on, "please don't shoot at him, when a shout or a firebrand will chase him back to the water just as well. Because, you see, we may need every shell I have along, in order to keep the wolf from our door. They count for just so many 'possums, 'coons or muskrats."

That worried Jimmie very much, and he looked sad. For to shorten their chances of securing game would mean a scanty supply in the larder; and Jimmie's appetite persisted in calling out at least three times a day for attention.

Morning found them in a more cheerful frame of mind. Breakfast was eaten, and now that four had to be fed from the scanty stock of provisions—George declared that Jimmie and Buster made it equal to six at the very least—the hole made was shocking.

"I move we don't have another meal today," was the startling announcement from Nick, as he finished the last morsel left in the kettle.

"Well," said George, "you'll find the rest of us willing enough. But let's get a move on. We must find a way out of this today sure."

They started out, filled with confidence. Jack's plan was tried in several different places; but without any success.

"Say, there don't seem to be any current at all," remarked Nick, as he watched the dead leaf that had been thrown on the water, and which failed to move save as the faint breeze dictated.

"But we're going to keep on trying all the same," declared George, firmly. "Sooner or later we'll strike a place where it does show life. Then we'll just follow after it, and in that way discover an opening where this water joins the river again."

"That's the talk," said Nick. "I like to hear that kind of stuff. It shows that George is there with the goods. Just see how he uses that pole. I tell him he'd make a bully old gondolier over in Venice."

"Oh! yes, you're a regular old jollier, Buster," scoffed George, who had seen the fat boy wink slyly toward Jack. "You just think to keep me in a good humor while I slave away, and you sit there like a king, giving orders."

"Well, you won't let me stand up and push," complained the other.

"Not unless I'm hankering for a spill. Lead the way, Jack. You know more about these things than the rest of the bunch. It's up to you to be our Moses and get us out of the bullrushes."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DISCOVERY.

"Oh, joy! she moves!"

It was late in the afternoon when Nick gave utterance to this shout. For the twentieth time the test had been made, and they could see the leaf traveling away from the side of the *Tramp*.

Evidently there was a gentle but decided movement to the water, and this could not be caused by the breeze, because that had long since died away.

So, with hope once more stirred into life, they started to follow the drifting messenger. Its speed gradually increased. In half an hour there did not seem to any longer be the slightest doubt but that it was in a genuine current.

When the night began to settle in they were so eager that Jack lighted one of his acetylene lamps, and kept the now quickly moving leaf under observation.

"Listen!" exclaimed George, suddenly.

"It's the music of the river, that's what!" cried Nick.

And that turned out to be the truth. None of them had ever believed they would welcome the sight of that vast billowy flood with one-half the joy that possessed them as they broke through the overhanging branches and saw the moonlight falling on the mighty Mississippi.

So they pulled back a bit, and made themselves just as comfortable as the conditions allowed.

There was now no longer any fear of a great famine in the land. In their pockets they had money; and somewhere not a great distance below they would strike Greenville, where, doubtless, supplies could be purchased in any quantity.

So the little Jewel gas stove, and the battery of lamps on board the *Wireless* were put to splendid service in getting up a supper to celebrate this rediscovery of the Mississippi.

"I don't believe De Soto ever felt one-half the happiness that we experience," Jack remarked, as they sat in their respective boats, fastened side by side, and discussed the meal.

"That's right," declared Nick, between mouthfuls. "Because, you know, he wasn't used to much, and in no danger of having his supplies cut off. It comes harder on a fellow of today to starve than it used to. That is, it seems so to me."

Nobody objected to his way of putting it; for truth to tell every one of the quartette felt delighted with the final outcome of their adventure.

They made an early start, for after all there was hardly enough food left to provide for a scanty breakfast—at least Nick called it that, though the others felt that they had had quite enough.

Arriving at Greenville, a committee was appointed, consisting of Jack and Nick, to go ashore and lay in some fresh supplies as well as have gasoline ordered brought down to the boats. Jack also made inquiries, and learned that a boat answering to the description of the *Comfort* had been noticed passing down in the middle of the river several days back.

"The tortoise has gotten ahead, fellows," he reported, when he once more joined his chums, laden down with supplies, as was also the willing Buster.

Nobody cared much now. Somehow the fever of the race had departed from George's veins. He even declared that from now on he meant to stick with Jack and enjoy the pleasure of some company besides that of a fellow whose one thought was cramming.

"But you see that I'm not infallible as a guide," laughed Jack. "Don't I strike the wrong channel as well as you?"

"That's so," returned George; and then he added gallantly: "But you got us all out of the blessed hole neatly, Jack. Goodness knows what would have become of Buster and me if we hadn't struck you."

"Now, I know what you're thinking about when you look sideways at me," declared Nick, pretending to show alarm. "And after this I ain't never going to allow myself to get alone with George Rollins. I tell you, fellows, he's got cannibal blood in his veins. He scares me, the way he acts."

It was not a great ways after noon when they saw a red flag waving at a point ashore. Then came a blast from the fog horn owned by Josh. He and Herb played it for all they were worth, because this was the very first chance they had had on the entire trip to welcome their comrades to a camping site.

Great was the joshing that followed the landing of the two missing boats. And the skipper of the staunch *Comfort*, as well as the crew thereof, laughed as though they would take a fit when they heard what a mess of it the others had made in trying the cut-off so warmly recommended by the planter, Mr. Tweed, who meant well, of course, but came near wrecking the whole expedition.

Their next stop would be in Vicksburg; and when the start was made in the morning George never got out of hailing distance of the *Tramp*. Sometimes he would be ahead; but if so, he would slow down and allow the other to overtake him.

Another strange thing occurred on this day's run. At no time was the big *Comfort* hull down in the distance. It seemed that, by taking advantage of the swift water away out there in the middle of the river, Herb's craft could overcome the difference in speed between the *Tramp* and herself.

And when at about half-past three the leaders found a place to draw in for the night, reliable old *Comfort* came booming along not fifteen minutes later.

Apparently, then, there was now no reason for their separating. This idea pleased them all, for they liked the social life of the camp, where they could exchange yarns, compare notes, josh each other as the whim seized them, and lay plans for future cruises of the motor boat club.

Vicksburg was reached without mishap on the next leg of the journey, although on account of staying in camp over Sunday, it was Monday afternoon when they looked upon the city made famous during the Civil War by Grant's persistence and strategy.

At the mouth of the big Yazoo George came near having a serious time of it; for his cranky little speed boat was caught in a swirl of mingling waters, and came within an ace of swamping. Only for the action of the frightened Nick in throwing his great bulk the other way, just by instinct, the *Wireless* would have gone completely over.

And Nick was always proud of what he was pleased to term his quick wit in an emergency. It took the place of those wonderful "wings" in his conversation; and often George had to threaten dire things unless he called a halt in his boasting.

On Tuesday they put out together, and that night lay over about half way down to what had been marked as Station Number Eight. Here a storm kept them shut up a full day, so that it was Thursday again before they proceeded.

On Saturday afternoon Jack announced the glad tidings that he believed they had crossed the border of Louisiana. The others celebrated that night with an extra grand feed, since Nick had managed to purchase a couple of chickens from a man he met when George was tinkering with his engine, and the crew had gone ashore to stretch his dumpy legs.

Now that George did not try to push his speed boat to its limit he seemed to be having an easy time with the engine. Either that, or else the machinist up at Memphis had done a "corking good job," as the master often declared. And on the whole George was coming to realize that there could be much more pleasure and satisfaction in taking things moderately, than in being in a constant rush and nervous turmoil.

Nick was in an especially fine humor that evening. Jack had been in the water with him after they arrived at the camping place, and, to the great delight of the fat boy, he had discovered that he could actually swim about as he pleased, and without wearing that cork contraption at that. He was fairly hilarious with joy.

George had been noticing him, with something like a smile on his face. Whatever was on his mind, he did not say anything until supper had been dispatched, and they were grouped around the fire, chatting as usual.

Then George gave Jack a nudge on the sly.

"Watch me," he whispered.

A minute later he called out to Nick, who had just climbed to his feet to go after his blanket, as he said the ground seemed cold.

"Wait a minute, Buster," he said; "if you're going aboard, just get that book of funny jokes for me, will you? I think it's in the cubbyhole where we keep our oilskins, you know. And if you don't feel it at first, hunt around, even if you have to pull everything there is in there out."

Just three minutes afterward there was a whoop, and an excited fat boy came skipping off the deck of the speed boat, waving something wildly above his head.

"I've found 'em! Just to think of me putting the blessed wings so carefully away in that same cubbyhole, and then forgetting all about it? But you knew they were there all the time, I'm dead sure you did, George! And how cruel of you to let me waste away to skin and bone, mourning for them!"

"Well, you never asked me if I knew where you stuck 'em," retorted the skipper, with a big grin. "And, after all, I rather liked to hear you grunt about losing 'em."

"Yes, a whole lot you did, when you threatened to eat me, or throw me to the alligators if I kept it up. But I guess you were only bluffing, George. I don't think you could be quite that barbarous," said Nick, reproachfully.

"Well, what are you going to do with them now?" demanded the other. "You know how to swim the best ever; and sure you wouldn't be guilty of wearing those silly wings. And I refuse to carry the cargo any further. How about it, Buster?"

"Yes; we want to know," added Jack.

"They'll do for babies, but not fellows who have mastered the noble art of swimming, so make up your mind," said Josh, grandly.

Nick took one last look at the affairs he had once deemed so essential to his happiness. Then he calmly strode over, and amid the shouts of the rest, dropped the swimming wings upon the fire, where they were speedily reduced to ashes.

"You're right," he observed, moving his arms like a swimmer; "a fellow who has graduated has no need for artificial fins. I'm in your class now!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WINNER OF THE CUP—CONCLUSION.

"Can anybody tell me what day of the month this is?" asked Nick, who was making up some sort of private log, which would possibly afford his companions more or less merriment in future days.

"Why, that's easy," smiled Jack, who had been keeping the official log of the progress of events, partly because he was at the head of the club; and then again because he had a right good cause to know how time flew, since he was due in the Crescent City by December first. "This is Saturday, and we stay here until Monday, which will mark the twenty-first of November."

"That gives you another ten days to make the balance of the journey, and land a winner?" observed George.

"Yes," said Jack, "we'll take our time this week, moving along, and seeing all the queer sights of the levees that have been built to keep out the river when it is on the flood stage. Since we may never have the chance to get down here again we ought to learn all we can about things."

"And then pull into New Orleans next Saturday; is that the official program?" asked Herb, from across the fire.

They soon started talking of other things; and so the time flew until George finally discovered that Nick had actually gone to sleep resting on one of the skipper's feet.

"I wondered what ailed me," complained poor George, "and began to think I was getting paralyzed. Won't somebody please give this elephant a punch, and wake him up? He's got me pinned down so I'm just helpless."

Buster was finally aroused, and convinced that there were softer spots in which to take his nap than resting on somebody's feet. Then by degrees the camp became silent, save for the heavy breathing of Nick, who, whenever he lay on his back, was in the habit of producing the strangest noises ever heard, and which would have actually frightened almost any one, unless they knew the cause.

Sunday was always a quiet day with the boys. They just lounged around and rested up for the morrow. With Nick and Jimmie it meant a glorious opportunity to try new dishes; or to partake of something which Josh, the best cook in the whole outfit, got together.

Promptly on Monday they again started south.

There was no haste now. Dixieland had been reached, the air seemed balmy; and with the time allowance that had been given to the *Comfort* it was already an assured fact that Herb would carry off the prize.

Jack was secretly pleased. As his father had given the silver cup, he felt that he could not well carry it off with a clear conscience. And George really did not deserve it, after all the mishaps that had come about as a result of his lack of wisdom. On the whole, Herb had played the most consistent game, and done the best with the material he had in hand.

He often tried to get Jack to acknowledge that he had purposely lost himself in that false cut-off, just so as to eliminate himself from the race. On such occasions Jack would drag Jimmie forward to prove that they had discussed the chances of making a miss, and concluded to take the risk.

For several days they just moved along almost with the current, going ashore as the whim urged them, to see how cotton was grown and harvested, make the acquaintance of the Louisiana darkies, a different breed from any they had known on their long trip, and in the case of Nick, to pick up a few chickens, or buy some roasting ears that had survived the touch of frost.

It was thus on Saturday that the little flotilla came to New Orleans, and the race for the Dixie cup was officially declared to have ended, with Herb the winner in his steady, reliable big boat, the *Comfort*.

Monday, the twenty-ninth, Jack hunted up the lawyer with whom he had been in correspondence, and made his presence in the city legally known. At the proper time he wended his way with the judge to a quaint old house, where a few persons had gathered to hear the last will and testament of the singular gentleman who happened to be Jack's mother's brother, read.

Well, no matter what Jack came in for, it was a handsome sum, and many times what he had ever anticipated. Certainly, as the lawyer said, while warmly congratulating the boy from the north, it was worth coming after.

Considering what a glorious time he had had cruising down the Father of Waters, Jack believed that he would have been well paid to have even his expenses of the trip settled; but to get a fortune was a streak of great luck.

The six boys did not mean to cruise back again. The current of that mighty river was too sturdy to buck against in a little twenty-three-foot motor boat. When they had exhausted the pleasures of the famous Crescent City they made an arrangement whereby the three boats would be freighted back home.

That left them free to go where they pleased; and hence, after some wiring back home to get permission, they took a little run down through Florida [Transcriber's note: Florida?] as the guests of the fortunate heir to the fortune.

School would open after New Years, so they had to count on getting back before then. The sight of

the beautiful Indian river inspired them with a desire to some day come again to the sunny south, and spend a month or more nosing about on the shallow waters of that remarkable series of lagoons stretching along the entire east coast.

But meanwhile they had other plans in view for the coming summer, when, free from the trammels of school, they would be able to once more take their several boats, starting out on a delightful cruise in quest of adventure, and perhaps in the line of exploration.

To the delight of Jack, later on that winter he received a long letter from Erastus, written by his daughter, who, it seemed, had had considerable schooling, and was intending to be a teacher in the negro college at Tuskegee.

Erastus had his family with him, and was prospering finely. He declared he would never forget what the boys had done for him, and his entire family signed their names to the communication, which the boys put in the frame that held the other letter from the fugitive black, found pinned to the live oak after they had left food for him during the night he was being hunted.

By the time the participants of the race reached the home town again, they found that every boy within five miles was eager to hear of what strange things had befallen them during the long journey.

Not one had ever been further down the Mississippi than St. Louis, and then on a steamboat; so that the mystery of living close to the waters was unknown to the entire bunch. During the whole of that winter Nick was kept busy retailing the amazing things he claimed to have seen and done; until finally the rest of the club had to pass a resolution declaring that unless he brought this yarn-spinning to a stop he would surely be drafted to be George's partner again the next summer in the speed boat. And really Buster had such a horror of such a dreadful thing happening that from then on no one could get him to open his lips with regard to the Mississippi cruise.

"It's too much of a temptation for George," he used to say, after getting as far away from the skipper of the *Wireless* as he could, in the club room. "You see, he just can't help having that cannibal blood in him, for he was born so. But it's wicked in our tempting the poor chap so. Now, if he has a thin, scrawny fellow, say, like Josh here, along, he'll gradually overcome this savage appetite. Me for the bully old *Comfort* the next time this motor boat club goes on its vacation. You hear me say it, all. Herb and I have got that settled, haven't we, Herb?"

And the placid skipper of the big launch would laugh as he replied:

"Well, you did say that you admired my boat, because there was so much room to stow things away, particularly lockers for grub galore. But I guess you'll fit better in with me than in either of the other boats; so let's call it a go. Though I'll miss the fine cooking of Josh, I tell you."

"Oh! next time we'll probably cruise and camp together, and then we all can enjoy some of his wonderful cooking," Nick hastened to add, feeling that it might pay to flatter his old enemy a little, if he expected to profit by it in the future.

And here for the present we must take leave of our motor boat chums, in the belief that the record of their adventurous dash for the Dixie cup may have proved pleasant reading to our boys, who will be only too glad to meet them once again in the succeeding volume of this series, now published under the name of "The Motor Boat Boys on the St. Lawrence; or, Solving a Mystery of the Thousand Islands."

Shortly after the return of the club from their Mississippi cruise Jack and Jimmie had the pleasure of being invited over to take dinner with Mr. Gregory, the president of the Waverly bank. He gave them a copy of a resolution of thanks passed by the board of directors after his return with all the missing funds and securities that had been stolen.

There were also two checks, each of twenty-five hundred dollars, for the boys, Jack having insisted that it must be share and share alike between himself and Jimmie.

The boys deposited their money in a savings bank, where it would lie at compound interest, and be handy in case they were in need of funds at any future time.

THE END.

AN AWAKENING AT ALVIN.

Alvin is a small town in eastern Illinois, a short distance north of Danville, and is a junction of a branch of the Wabash system with the Chicago & Eastern Illinois railroad. The place is large enough to stand the racket of a small brass band, but not of sufficient consequence to support a hotel or bakery. It was evident that either the postal clerk running on the Wabash branch or some person in the Alvin post-office was stealing ordinary letters and rifling registers.

After a two-hours' consultation on the case by a committee of three, Henshaw, "Judge" Bedell, and myself, it was unanimously decided that the work was not being done by the postal clerk. It was too well performed. No living being on a railroad train, by any known or unknown art, could cut and reseal a registered package envelope as artistically as these had been cut and resealed. There was no record of any work of the kind that approached it.

Could it be the postmaster at Alvin? It certainly had that appearance, but he was a man who seemed as far above a crime of this kind as conception could conceive. He had not been disturbed. No one had written to him and nobody had called. His suspicions, if he had any, had never been aroused. But there was certain information about the office we must possess, and we must know more about him and his methods. Yet, it would not answer for an Inspector to call on him on any pretense whatever. What should be done?

The postmaster was a druggist, and sold cigars; so we decided to fit out Bedell as a cigar agent and let him call in the regular course of business and do a little drumming and pumping. A fancy case was borrowed of a regular Chicago dealer, into which was neatly packed a sample box each of McConnell's Perfectos, Con. Mehoney's Shamrocks, Mrs. Kelly's Papposes, Carter Harrison's Best, Fred Hill's Favorites, and Tol. Lawrence's Prides. A team was procured two stations north of Alvin, and down into the sleepy hamlet Mr. Brooks, the agent of Chesterfield, Schoolcraft & Browning, quietly wended his way and presented his card at the Alvin drug store and post-office.

It was harvest time and mid-day trade was quiet, so of course Mr. Brooks found abundant opportunity to do business without being jostled about by applicants for tobacco and tanglefoot for medical purposes. His prices were the most reasonable of any agent who had called since the war; but that was explained by the fact that this house always surprised its customers with good goods and low prices, and this was Mr. Brook's first trip through that section, and his first visit to Alvin. As a result he remained three hours, sold two dozen boxes of Perfectos, four dozen Papposes, a whole case of Lawrence's Prides, and went to dinner with the postmaster.

When he reached Danville about four o'clock that afternoon, where he was to report to Henshaw and myself, he was radiant with the enthusiasm of well earned success. He had studied the Alvin postmaster as thoroughly as he did the ten commandments when a child; was present when the Wabash mail arrived and saw the postmaster distribute it alone for the Eastern Illinois going north; sold him a fine bill of goods, which was not to be delivered on account of the pressing business of the house for two weeks; saw the postmaster lock up the office and went to dinner with him, after which he returned to the office and saw the postmaster endorse the registers and lock out the mail for the Eastern Illinois, north; and everything had been done by the postmaster exactly as a thoroughly honest, upright, conscientious postmaster would do it.

There had not been the first false motion, word or suspicious circumstance, and he would wager his entire lot of samples that the postmaster was one of God's noblest works—an honest man.

He admitted, however, that the facts of the losses were stubborn and that the circumstances were peculiar, and, having now a good knowledge of all the conditions he thought the tests should be applied. It was accordingly arranged to remove from the Wabash mail every day for a week every registered letter of natural origin that would pass through the Alvin office, and substitute decoy or test letters.

These would remain in the Alvin office about two hours, when they would be placed in the postal car going north on the Eastern Illinois, where they could be hastily examined. It was more of a difficult task than the reader can imagine. The work of preparing the test letters, so that they would appear exactly like genuine ones that had been mailed at the various offices along the line of the road, occupied several days, but by the end of the week we were ready to begin on the following Monday.

Two lists of the letters to be sent through each day for six days, and a minute description of the contents of each letter, were prepared. Henshaw, who was to go along the Wabash and attend to the delicate task of removing the genuine and substituting the false ones, took one of the lists, and the other was retained by Bedell and myself, who were to examine the letters when they came from the office and were placed in the north bound car. It would necessarily become our duty also, in case anything was wrong, to strike while the iron was hot and secure the transgressor.

On Monday the letters came through in good condition. Tuesday and Wednesday brought no good results. By making haste we could usually get them out of the pouch and have them examined before the train left the Alvin station. By so doing it would give us an opportunity to step off the train, and thereby save time, if the examination proved that the letters had been meddled with.

On Thursday, while the train was still standing at the depot, we found our letters, examined them, and, as usual, pronounced them correct. The train pulled out and had proceeded probably a mile before we had opened the letters to examine the contents, when, to our surprise, we discovered that two of the eight had been rifled and the money was missing.

Quick as lightning the bell cord was pulled, and long before the engineer had come to a full stop, Bedell and myself could be seen walking hurriedly down the track toward the station. We entered the post-office as coolly as though we had called for a prescription instead of a thief, and found the postmaster handing out the mail that had just been assorted. Bedell did not look as Brooks did and so he was not recognized.

We waited patiently, listening to the torturing discords of the Alvin Silver Cornet Band that was practicing in the room above the store, till finally the patrons had departed, when I approached the postmaster and informed him of my unpleasant mission, which, was, in effect, that some person in the Alvin postoffice had, within the last three hours, abstracted \$67 from the two registered letters that I held in my hand, and that my friend and myself had called to recover the money.

"Merciful God," said the postmaster, "it is impossible. No person handled those letters but myself; there is my endorsement; so help me, I did not open them, and I swear with uplifted hand before my Maker that this is the truth." As I turned to Bedell, as much as to ask if he ever heard such a falsehood, the gentle summer breeze wafted in something that admonished us that the silver cornets were trying to catch the air of "Dan Tucker." Bedell, feeling sorry for the postmaster, the band, and me, turned to find relief by reading the labels on the bottles.

I told the postmaster that while I did not charge him with the crime I would like to have him satisfy, if he could, that the money taken from the letters was not then in his possession. To this he most cheerfully assented, and search was made not only through his clothes, but through every conceivable place about the office and store where it could possibly have been secreted.

At length we became satisfied the money was not there, but, of course, not satisfied that the postmaster had not taken it. I asked him if any person other than himself ever assisted in handling the mails, and he answered: "No one." "Does not some person other than yourself have a key that will unlock either of your store doors?" "Yes." "Who is that person?" "It is George Havens, the leader of the band." Turning quickly to Bedell, I said: "The leader of the band has a key to the rear door, and he steals in while the postmaster is at dinner."

Five minutes later the horn that once through Alvin's hall the soul of discord shed, now hung as mute on the band-room wall, as though that soul had fled, and George Havens had been called to account for appropriating to himself certain funds that had not been contributed for the purpose of buying instruments, music, and flashy uniforms. But George had been around the world some himself, and had learned a few airs and quicksteps not mentioned in the books. He was a hard nut to crack.

We labored incessantly with him till sundown, and had taken the horns and band-room apart, had been through his residence, with his wife's permission, from the bottom of the well to the top of the lightning rod; had torn up the floors of several neighboring buildings; had been through the brick-yard and the burying ground, and, in brief, had completely upset everything in Alvin looking for the \$67 which we did not find.

There could be but one conclusion. Either the leader of the band or the postmaster had the money, and we were agreed that it was not the latter. As a last resort we decided to take Havens to Chicago, and, possibly on the trip up, or during the night in Chicago, we might get something from him that would clear away the mists.

We reached the city at ten o'clock, without obtaining anything except the ride, and by 10:30 we had reached the office, where Stuart, whom we had informed of our coming by wire, was anxiously waiting to relieve us and spend the night with Havens. About four o'clock in the morning, Stuart's burning eloquence began to be felt, and, by sunrise, Havens in tears had confessed everything he had been charged with, and told how he stealthily entered the rear door of the office and committed the depredations while the postmaster was at dinner.

Stuart and Havens left for Alvin on an early tram to secure the money; and as they were digging it up in a grove a few rods back of the Alvin post-office, the friends of Havens, who up to this time insisted that he was innocent, concluded, from the appearance of the valuable articles that were unearthed, that the treasures of Captain Kyd had at last been found.

The postmaster, who was one of the finest gentlemen I ever met, was so effected by this terrible affair that soon afterward he sold his business and moved away. Brooks gave his remaining samples to Stuart, while poor Havens went to play B flat in prison.

CAUGHT WITH A SCRAP OF PAPER.

The post-office at Attica, Indiana, had been robbed. Unknown persons had entered it through a rear window sometime during Sunday night, and on Monday morning when the mailing clerk arrived, the stove was scattered in fragments around the floor, the letter boxes had been emptied, the safe blown open, its entire contents missing, and the room still retained a strong odor of powder.

It was a genuine robbery, and, for a place of the breadth and thickness of Attica, it was something much more than an ordinary, every-day affair. The postmaster had barely enough money left to wire for help.

When I arrived on Wednesday he informed me that no strange persons were seen in town prior to the robbery, but that on Monday morning about six o'clock, two young men called at the residence of Mr. James Beasley, a farmer residing about six miles eastward, and wanted to engage him to take them to Thorntown, a distance of about twenty miles as an Indiana crow flies. Beasley was a busy farmer, and, not being in the livery business, declined.

They then asked the distance to the nearest station on the Wabash railroad, and when Beasley informed them, they told him if he would hitch up and take them over they would give him a dollar and a half for his trouble.

Beasley said he would do it, just to be accommodating, and by so doing made a blunder. If he had told them he would do it for two dollars and a half he would have been engaged just the same, and Beasley saw his mistake, as a great many others do, when it was too late.

The only vehicle handy that morning was a small buggy containing one seat, and into this the three men placed themselves, Beasley in the middle, and proceeded to ride to the railroad. While Beasley was hitching up it occurred to him that it was very singular that two fine-looking, well-dressed gentlemen should call at his house so early in the morning and want to hire him to take them to Thorntown, and finally be satisfied with a mile and a half ride for dollar and a half, which was a dollar a mile, to another place.

His curiosity was thoroughly aroused, and when he got into the buggy with them he intended to look them over very closely indeed, and give them a few questions to crack.

Scarcely had they started before he asked them how it happened that they came along so early. "Have not been walking all night, have you?" he asked with a laugh.

The larger one of the two then told Beasley about his lovely home in Kansas; about his poor mother dying in Ohio; about being on the way to her funeral; about meeting Mr. Cushman, the other gentleman, on the train; about Mr. Cushman being on his way to Cornell University, and last, though not least, about the wreck on the I. B. & W., which compelled them to leave the train and get across the country to the Big Four or the Wabash. The reason he mentioned Thorntown particularly was because he had a wealthy aunt residing there, and he was thinking some of stopping to make her a short visit.

"But what do you carry in that roll, wrapped in light paper, sticking up through your inside coat pocket?" asked Beasley.

"A present for my aunt," was the laconic reply.

Turning to Mr. Cushman, the quiet gentleman who was on his way to college, Beasley asked: "What are you carrying those iron articles for in your overcoat pocket, that I'm sitting on; you are not going to open a hardware store in connection with the school, are you?"

Just then they came to a bend in the highway and the depot was visible only a short distance ahead, and just at that instant, without stopping to answer the question, Mr. Cushman and the big fellow jumped out, and the big fellow said they guessed they would walk the remainder of the way.

"All right," said Beasley, who stopped his horse and commenced to look for a good place to turn around. On his way back he said to himself: "they are a queer pair." They were soon out of his mind however, and in a few minutes more he was home attending to his chores, just as though he had not received one-fifty for almost nothing.

Tuesday morning the weather was a little lowering, so he concluded to drive into town and learn how many were killed in the I. B. & W. wreck. When he learned that there had been no wreck on the I. B. & W. or on any other railroad, he said to Mrs. Beasley: "How could those fellows, whom I carried yesterday morning, have had the audacity to tell me such a cold-blooded falsehood?"

A few minutes later when Mrs. Beasley had heard of the robbery, she answered the question.

In my interview with Beasley, he informed me that he looked the young men over very closely, and so firmly were their features impressed upon his mind that he could pick them out of ten or fifteen thousand. I had never met a more sanguine man. I arranged with him to take a few days' vacation, and, in less than an hour and a half after my arrival in Attica, I was waiting at the railroad station with Beasley for a train to take us to Indianapolis.

Thorntown, from Beasley's house was directly on a line toward Indianapolis, and, while there were many other stations nearer to Beasley's, Thorntown was the only one between LaFayette and Indianapolis, where every train that passed over the road was sure to stop. Here was a water tank whose supply was never exhausted, and this fact we assumed the robbers knew, as well as some others. They knew if they could reach Thorntown by Monday night they would be able to catch a south-bound freight that would land them in Indianapolis, and no one would be the wiser.

All day Thursday, we looked for the mysterious strangers in Indianapolis. We went everywhere

where such persons would likely be. A thousand men I saw who looked something like them, but every time I called Beasley's attention to them, he would say, "No." To the captains of the police Beasley described the men minutely. They could think of none who answered the descriptions in every particular. Beasley examined the pictures in the rogue's gallery and in every other gallery, and all without success.

The captains said they would wager their lives that the men did not belong to Indianapolis. If they were looking for them they should go straightway to Dayton, Ohio, "where," said they, "more thieves hang out than in any place in North America, with the possible exception of Windsor, Canada." It is true if these men belonged to Dayton, they would have taken exactly the same course to reach home that they would have taken to reach Indianapolis.

Friday morning bright and early found us in Dayton, waiting for an interview with the Chief. Presently he came, and to him and two of his assistants I told the story and Beasley described the men. They had a man there who answered the description of Cushman, the quiet gentleman, and they also knew one who answered for the large one, but they had not heard that he was out of prison yet.

Handing Beasley an album, containing the pictures of a few of the well-known notables, the chief asked him to see if he could recognize any of them. Scarcely had Beasley commenced to turn the leaves of the book before his eye caught a familiar face, and, jumping from his seat, he said: "That's the big fellow."

"This was Tettman," they said, "one of the most accomplished safe workers in the State, and the little red-headed fellow, whom you describe, is Reddy Jackson, a quiet hard-working robber, though not as renowned as the former."

The officers assured us that if these men were in Dayton, they would be only too happy to find and deliver them to us, and with this end in view every policeman in Dayton was notified to search for them, and to run them in if possible, while Beasley in high glee took a position on a prominent corner to scan the passing throngs.

About seven o'clock that evening word came over the wire to head-quarters that Tettman and Jackson had been safely landed in one of the station houses. It was quickly arranged to remove them to the county jail, a more secure place, and it was desired to have Beasley stand just outside the door of the station house, so that when the prisoners were marched out to enter the patrol wagon, he might get a good look at them under an electric light, and thereby make sure that they were the ones we wanted.

When they passed him he turned to the crowd, and with much complacency said: "Them's the fellows."

Afterward, while interviewing one of the officers who made the arrest, as the men were coming out of a notorious saloon, he told us that when he told Tettman that he wanted him, Tettman instantly put a piece of paper in his mouth and commenced to chew it. The officer did not like the looks of the operation and he grabbed the man by the throat and ordered him not to attempt to swallow what he was chewing.

After considerable of a struggle he secured a portion of the piece of paper, which he handed to me saying: "I don't know as it amounts to anything, but I was afraid it might, and so took the precaution to prevent its destruction; sorry I was not quick enough to get it all." The little scrap of paper contained the following memoranda:

12,427 at 2c. 248.54
3,240 " 4c. 129.
747 " 5c. 3
892 " 10c.
165 speci
400 du

On the preliminary examination before the commissioner in Dayton they fought bravely. Their case was managed by the best counsel that could be obtained, who attempted to prove that Tettman and Jackson were in Dayton the day before the robbery in Attica, the day of the robbery, as well as the day after.

In fact there was very little proof necessary for their side that they did not produce, but the quality, unfortunately for them, did not equal the quantity.

Beasley's straightforward story was accepted by everybody, and when we proved by the postmaster from Attica that the number and the denomination of the stamps stolen from his safe corresponded precisely with the number and the denomination as noted by Tettman on the little slip of paper, which he attempted to swallow, the case was closed and the prisoners were sent to Indianapolis for trial.

On the trial the same character of evidence was introduced by the defendants. Ours was also similar, though in addition to that introduced in Dayton, we proved that a novel and ingenious brace found on Tettman's premises in Dayton, which contained irregular and unnatural features, and which left the same impressions on the safe, was the only brace in existence that could have performed the work which the Chief of Police in Attica pronounced "exquisite."

The jury was out just five minutes, and two hours later the two distinguished travelers, who mistook Beasley for a chump, were enjoying a free ride to Michigan City, where they are still industriously working for the State, cracking pig iron instead of safes.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MOTOR BOAT BOYS MISSISSIPPI CRUISE; OR, THE DASH FOR DIXIE ***

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