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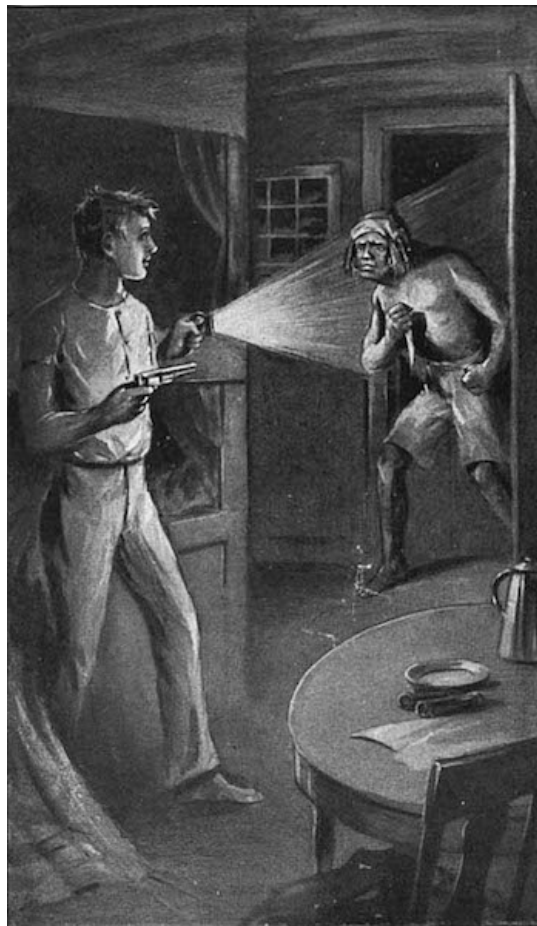
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RIVER MOTOR BOAT BOYS ON THE AMAZON; OR, THE SECRET OF CLOUD ISLAND ***



Frank's powerful searchlight showed the Indian, knife in hand, ready to spring.

The River Motor Boat Boys on the Amazon

OR

The Secret of Cloud Island

By HARRY GORDON

Author of
"The River Motor Boat Boys on the Mississippi,"
"The River Motor Boat Boys on the Colorado,"
"The River Motor Boat Boys on the St. Lawrence,"
"The River Motor Boat Boys on the Columbia,"
"The River Motor Boat Boys on the Ohio."

A. L. Burt Company
New York

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THE SIX RIVER MOTOR BOYS ON THE AMAZON

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The River Motor Boat Boys on the Amazon

The opening of a door cast an oblong shape of light over the forward deck of a motor boat, against which an April rain drummed fast or slow, as the uncertain wind came in swift gusts or died down to whispers. As the illumination traveled past the splashed deck, bringing out a pier and a warehouse, and a sluggish current pushing and fussing against the piles of a pier farther down, the tousled heads of two boys appeared outlined against the ruddy doorway. In a moment their voices cut through the wind and rain.

"Jule? Oh, Jule!" one of them shouted.

"Last call for dinner in the main cabin, young man!" added the other.

There was no reply, so the boys, after listening a moment to the pounding of the rain, the complaining of the river, the roar of the city which lay all around them, closed the door, producing the effect to one outside of obliterating the deck and the pier, the warehouse and the river, as if they had never existed at all.

"Jule will get soaking wet and take cold!" fretted a third voice as the door closed. "Besides, being on guard, he ought never to have left the boat!"

One of the boys who had stood in the doorway wiped the rain from his face as he listened and grinned at the other.

"No need to have a fit about it, even if Jule does get soaked," he said. "But he won't get wet," he added, entirely for the benefit of the one who had grumbled, "he'll be back here in a minute as dry as a pound of powder."

"How's he going to get through all that," with a swing of the arm toward the door, "without getting wet? I suppose you think he'll be able to dodge the drops!"

"Anyway, what's the use of getting him wet and sick in our minds?" cut in another, good-naturedly. "That won't help any. Most of the hard luck we've had lately never caught up with us—except in our minds!"

"Case"—Cornelius Witters where full names are insisted on—turned a dejected face to the others.

"He shouldn't have gone out," he grumbled.

"Speaking of hard luck that never caught up with us," said Clay—he had inherited from his parents, his only inheritance, by the way, the name of Gayton Emmett—"do you remember the time we lost \$50 by taking in a counterfeit bill?"

"Yes," laughed Alex—Alexander Smithwick on state occasions—"we lost the \$50 for one day and one night, until we could get to a bank. Then it wasn't lost at all, for the note was genuine! You know the story how a man hired a professional worrier to take trouble off his mind? Suppose we hire one? I reckon he'd have enough to do."

"Quit, boys!" Case broke in. "I know I've got a grouch a mile high to-night, but I'll soon recover. Wait until I get busy with the supper we're going to have, and you'll see!"

Case seemed ashamed of his complaining, so the boys silently accepted his implied apology and busied themselves preparing the supper he had spoken of. In the eyes of the lads that was Case's one fault. He was inclined to worry, and also to express his worries in the most depressing prophecies. But while they laughed at his premonition of trouble for the absent boy, they listened anxiously for the absent one's return.

Directly Clay took a handful of silver from a pocket and laid it in a shining heap on the table.

"I guess we'd better cash up," he said. "I got my last pay envelope from Slade & Co., to-day, and here's the coin. We must have more than \$200 by this time."

The other boys drew banknotes and silver from their pockets, and heaped their contributions on the table.

"Now, we'll put it with the other," Clay said, after it had been counted over at least half a dozen times. "Just where is our bank to-night? I don't seem to remember where we deposited last time."

"It wasn't in a bank," Case broke in, forgetting his promise to get rid of his grouch, "though it should have been. The idea of leaving \$200 lying loose in this old tub!"

"Now you're losing our money—in your mind!" laughed Clay. "How many times before to-night have you lost it, Case?"

"Well, it isn't safe, anyhow," insisted Case, "even with Jule here to watch it; and he runs out and leaves the boat alone after dark!"

"When will this professional worrier begin work?" asked Alex with a sly grin at Clay. "He's needed here right now. Case doesn't seem to be able to acquire any peace of mind!"

Case blushed, as if ashamed of his outburst so soon after having resolved to mend his ways, and moved toward the back of the cabin.

"I don't know just where Jule put the money last time we counted it," he said, making a great show of looking for it, "but I presume it is here somewhere."

In fumbling around next to the rear wall the boy came upon a roll of drawings, which he brought out and tossed on the table, his quest of the hidden money momentarily forgotten.

"Here's the map of the Amazon, boys," he said, unrolling the paper. "I brought it in to-night. As we leave to-morrow, we may as well run over it now. Here's where we strike the Brazilian coast, at Para, and here's where we camp on the Amazon, away up near the foothills of the Eastern Andes. I guess Jule will get well up there!"

"Of course he will!" Clay asserted. "Didn't Dr. Holcomb say so? I guess he knows."

"He's a brick, that Dr. Holcomb!" Alex declared. "Only for him we wouldn't be so near the roof of the world as we are now."

"I don't see any roof of any world!" observed Case, obstinately.

"You will if you stick with us," Alex continued. "The mountains and tablelands of South America, along there by Peru, you know, are often called the roof of the world. When you get up to the top of some of the mountains, you can't get any higher in this world, without going up in an aeroplane, and then you wouldn't be in the world at all, but out of it and above it."

"Well, we aren't very near it yet," Case replied.

"But we will be nearer it, physically, to-morrow night at this time," Alex kept on. "Think of it! Through the drainage canal like an arrow in this good little motor boat, down the Mississippi with a rush, into the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean sea and out again, and then along the coast to the mouth of the Amazon! Say, boys, do you know that the Amazon has a mouth a hundred and fifty miles wide?"

"What a campaign orator she would have made!" laughed Clay. "But, suppose we find the money before we look over the map."

The motor boat *Rambler* lay in a secluded warehouse slip in the South Branch, as the southwestern arm of the Chicago river is called, and the three hungry boys referred to and one other, Julian Shafer, the lad the others were now anxious about, constituted her crew and passenger list, all in one. Clay, Alex and Case were busy with supper arrangements, as stated, and all were listening for the approach of Jule.

The cabin, which was seven feet by nine, did not seem quite like home without him. The rain, which had come on with the going down of the sun, drove in spiteful gusts from the southwest, so that the two foot-square windows on that side were closed, but from the open casements to the north the odor of sizzling sausage and bubbling coffee traveled out on the wet winds of the April evening.

Many who passed the head of the driveway which led down to the warehouse and the pier where the *Rambler* lay stopped to sniff the fragrant reminder of what the world owes to its stomach, and to look in wonder at the odd little residence on the brown river.

A patrolman, rustling along in a rubber coat which came down to his great heels, swinging his nightstick petulantly, as if in protest of the storm, drew up at the entrance to the private way and glanced down at the boat and stood for an instant imagining how a good cup of that coffee would taste!

It was while he stood there that the door was opened, and it was while the light from the interior lay over the pier and warehouse that the officer thought he saw a slim figure skulking in an angle of the building. When he reached the place where the figure had stood, the light was gone and the angle was empty, with the rain beating against it in a particularly determined manner. So the policeman went on about his business.

The *Rambler* had lain in the slip by the warehouse all through the winter, and the boys had called her cabin, which was so low that they could stand upright only in the center, their "furnished, steam-heated apartments," being careful to speak of it in the plural. She was a trim little craft, twenty feet by seven over all, with the cabin extending over almost half of the interior of the shell, lengthwise.

The cabin was a strongly-built structure, with two foot-square windows on each side and one looking out at the stern, where a platform four feet by the width of the boat formed a floor for chairs, and also a covering for the gasoline tanks underneath. The front deck extended to the prow, the powerful motors and other machinery being mostly under it, near the middle of the craft, just in front of the cabin door. Under this deck, forward of the motors and apparatus for supplying electricity, were storage spaces for provisions and gasoline.

As has, perhaps, been gathered from the conversation engaged in by the occupants of the cabin on this night, the boys had arranged to take their winter "bachelor hall" out on a long journey during the summer. They were now ready to start on the trip they had long planned—no less an undertaking than a motor boat journey to the headwaters of the Amazon! In fact, the boat was already stocked with provisions, and the gasoline was to be taken on the next day.

The boys were all orphans, so far as they knew, having been in the first instance brought together by their homelessness. They had been reared in the streets of the city, selling newspapers and running errands and doing such odd jobs as boys can turn hand to. Often, when very young, they had slept together in hallways and in boxes in alleys. When arrived at the age of fourteen, they had secured employment in printing offices, and had of their own volition become regular attendants at night schools.

There are to-day thousands of boys in the large cities who are living just as these boys lived in their younger years, who sleep and eat where and when they can, and who are too often brought into crime by those who ought to teach them, from experience, that crime is never pleasant or profitable in the long run. Sometimes the law, in the guise of a fat-bellied, egotistical, greedy police officer, assists these wreckers of youth by arresting boys and seeing that they are sentenced to months of association with thieves.

These four boys, the three in the cabin and the one out somewhere in the rain, had fortunately been spared the attentions of police officers, and had grown to the age of seventeen with sturdy figures and fairly-well trained intellects—all save Julian Shafer, who had long been showing symptoms of tuberculosis.

It was the ill health of Jule that had at first suggested the trip to the Equator. The boy, ordinarily the merriest one of the lot, as full of pranks as a young kitten, had been informed by Dr. Holcomb that the climate of Chicago would bring his life to a close in two years' time, so the boys had planned to take him away. Unselfishly they had set their hands to the task, and now the first step was near completion.

It was while they were cudgeling their brains for some way of accomplishing the desire of their hearts that Dr. Holcomb had come to them, first as a physician for the ailing boy, then as a sincere friend. After becoming well acquainted with the lads, and after making a few investigations as to their habits of thought, their loyalty to each other, the good doctor had said to them, one bright night in early fall when they were assembled in his office:

"I'll tell you what, boys," he had begun, "I have a motor boat down in the South Branch which is of little use to me. I used to enjoy trips in her, and she has seen service on many of the lakes and rivers of the Northwest, but I'm too busy now to take the time to flirt with her. If you care to look

after her this winter, fix her up a little, and in the spring provision her for a journey to some tropical climate, you may have the use of her. What do you say?"

What did they say! What would any group of boys of seventeen say to such a proposition as that? They almost hugged the doctor, and the occupants of the other offices on that floor afterward complained that the doctor's patients were too noisy to be good pay! As for Jule, when he understood that it was all being done for him, he said nothing at all, but there was a moisture in his bright eyes, a tightening of his handclasp that night, which his chums understood.

"But you must save up at least \$200," the doctor had stipulated, "for I don't care to have the *Rambler* tied up in some foreign port for supply or repair bills. She will carry you anywhere, on ocean or river, if you learn how to handle her, and you needn't be afraid of being caught by anything of her size in a chase. Be good to her and she'll be good to you!"

So the boys had slept and cooked for themselves in the *Rambler* all that winter, to save more money, and had learned to run the boat, and had made many little repairs with their own hands. And now they had saved the sum required, had given up their positions, and were to sail away to the Amazon and the Andes on the morrow! It all seemed too good to be true!"

"The money," Clay said, after looking over the map, "is, I remember now, in the round box, with the tinned food, in a square box with a red cover. Get it, Alex."

Alex brought the box—and found it empty. The money was gone!

Yes, the hoarded money was gone!

The square box with the red cover was empty. The boys dropped back in their chairs and turned their eyes away, neither caring to read what was in the faces opposite. The money that had been ready for the hoard still lay on the table. Case was first to break the silence.

"Our professional worry man," he said, "would better start on his job to-night. He'll have a nice little task to begin on."

"Don't get sarcastic, Case," Clay remonstrated. "This may be one of the worries that won't catch up! Perhaps Jule has placed the money in a safer place."

"That's it!" cried Alex. "Of course that's it! Who would come in here and get our money?"

"Then, where is Jule?" demanded the boy addressed. "Why doesn't he come in and let us know where the money is?"

"Jule will be home in good time," Clay said, grimly, "and for the present it won't be healthy for anyone to suggest that he has done anything mean or dishonest. He'll be back, all right, and then we'll know all about it."

Case flushed furiously.

"Say," he expostulated, "I wasn't saying anything against Jule! At least I didn't mean to. I know that he's true blue. Perhaps he discovered the robbery before we did and chased off after the thief. Don't you ever think I'm blaming him!"

"Of course not," admitted Clay, doubtfully. "He's above anything of that kind, you know. He's as honest a boy as ever lived!"

"If he has put the money in another place," began Alex, but Case, still in bad humor, interrupted him.

"What a pleasant world this would be if there were no ifs or words in it! Someone said, not long ago, that if it wasn't for that word he could put Paris in a bottle! He meant, of course, if Paris was smaller or the bottle was larger. If he has put the money in another place!"

"I wonder why he doesn't come?" Alex put in. "We left him here to look after things, you know."

"He wasn't here when I came," Clay contributed. "Everything was just as you see it now, only there wasn't any supper cooking, as there is now. He never went off like this before."

There was an apparatus on board the *Rambler* for making electricity when the boat was under way, but, this being inoperative during the winter, the boys had caused the motor boat to be wired so the light came from the city lines. The cooking was partly done by electricity, the stove being concealed in a false couch at the back of the cabin. During the cold weather the cabin had been warmed by a tiny, soft-coal stove which now stood near the door, and some of the cooking had been done on that.

A smell of burning meat now filled the room, and Clay hastened to switch off the current. The coffee, neglected, was bubbling over on the coils of wire at the bottom of the stove, and he set the coffee-pot on the floor.

"I don't think I want any supper right now," he declared.

"I'm not going to lose my supper," argued Alex. "I've lost my job and my trip to the Amazon, but I'm not going to lose my supper. These sausages are all right yet."

"I haven't lost my trip to the Amazon," Clay gritted, his jaws setting. "Nor Jule hasn't lost his trip, or his one chance of life! I'll have to think out some way, but I'm going, and Jule's going with me!"

Alex and Case both sprang up and reached for the speaker's hands.

"And we're with you!" they cried.

"We're for the Amazon, too! No matter if I do get a grouch on now and then," Case continued, giving the hand he held an extra squeeze, "I'll show up right in the end!"

"I know you will," Clay said. "I know you're an all right boy, Case, he continued, "but you'd be a better companion if you wouldn't get such grouches!"

"If I ever get another," pleaded the boy, "just throw me out of the combination!"

"I'll set my white monkey on you, after we get into the jungles of the Amazon valley," laughed Alex. "Do you know I've got a white monkey there?" he added, with a look which he intended to be serious. "Surely I have! He'll throw Brazil nuts down to me. Do you know how Brazil nuts grow? I'll tell you. They grow in nests, like kittens, and when they get ripe the nest opens, just like a kitten basket, and there you are. The nuts fall to the ground and hunters gather them and bring them to Chicago and we put them on Christmas trees."

Alex was the most imaginative one of the party, and sometimes he permitted his quaint fancies to break into words. Just now he was doing his best to seem cheerful, but, after all, it was hard work. The money had meant so much to them. It had been gathered together dime by dime, and every dollar of it had meant, to them, an hour or a day on the Amazon. Now it was gone, and Jule—

But no one should say a word against Jule. That was a point settled beyond dispute. They could suspend judgment until he came back.

"I'm going to bring home a cargo of Brazil nuts," the boy went on, "all packed in an elephant's trunk. I'll sell 'em down on Water street and build a motor boat that can put the *Rambler* into her pocket. I wonder what Dr. Holcomb will say?"

"He'll just tell us to dig in and get more money!" Case observed.

"And that's just what we'll do," Clay added. Alex brought out plates and cups and began setting the table, which was not very large, and which was securely fastened to the floor in the center of the cabin.

"There's one thing lacking in Clay," the boy said, whimsically, as he rattled the dishes. "If you could take him apart, or look at him under x-rays, you wouldn't find any quit in him! The more things happen to stop him, the more he goes ahead!"

"That's right!" declared Case. "When I get grouches, and you get all discouraged and tell monkey stories to hide what's really in your mind, Clay just shuts his jaws together and goes right through!"

I guess this wouldn't be much of a boat club if it wasn't for Clay."

"Why, boys, there's nothing else to do in this case," Clay said, a flush of pleasure at such an endorsement. "We can't lie down before every little hill that looms up before us! We can't give up this trip, and leave Jule to die in this beastly climate. Now, can we?"

"Not in a thousand years!" cried Alex.

"That will do for you!" Case suggested, turning to Alex with a grin.

"Never said it!" insisted Alex. "We all agreed not to talk slang, so slang's cut out!"

"Slang is cheap," Clay remarked, to no one in particular.

"Alex will wash the dishes to-night, anyway, for talking slang!" Case decreed with the air of a judge sentencing a prisoner. "That was the bargain. If anyone talked slang he was to wash the dishes."

"And Case will assist," laughed Clay, "for he talked slang, too."

"What slang?" demanded Case.

"You said that will do for you, and that was slang!"

"All right! I'll help. But where do you think Jule is?"

He was about to say more, but Clay held up a hand for silence.

While the lads stood there, listening, the sausages and coffee on the table, over which a snow-white cloth had been spread, there came a choking cry from somewhere in the darkness which lay over the pier and the warehouse. The boys still listened. Perhaps the next cry would give direction.

Presently the cry came again, evidently from the head of the pier. The boys all headed for the door, crowding against each other in their efforts to get out. A third cry, which was almost a scream, caused them to block the doorway.

"That's Jule!" Case panted. "Let me out!"

"Wait a second, boys!" Clay advised. "That may be Jule, and it may not. Anyway, we mustn't all leave the boat at once. This may be a trick to get us away from it. You remain here and I'll go up the pier and call back to you if I need help."

Still another cry came, followed, this time, by the sound of blows and running feet.

"Someone is being murdered out there!" Case exclaimed, excitedly, as Clay dashed out into the rain. "I'm not going to stay inside and let someone be killed!"

Alex took him by the shoulder and drew him back as he started off.

"You'll obey orders and remain here," he said. "We can stand in the doorway and look out."

"I know it's Jule!" prophesied Case. "He's been out after the thief, and has been attacked. Perhaps he's brought the money back with him, and that's why they're attacking him."

"If it is Jule, and he comes in without mentioning the loss of the money, don't you say a word to him about it! What's the use, if he doesn't know, of telling him about it to-night? Let the kid get one more night's sleep before he knows what's happened!"

"All right," Case answered, "and perhaps we can tell by the way he acts whether he's the—whether he knows anything about it or not."

"Don't you say it!" warned Alex. "Don't you ever look at Jule with suspicion in your face! He's the one that will lose most by this, and you just keep your thoughts and your sneers to yourself."

"I never—"

"Oh, I know," Alex hastened to say, as they waited, anxiously, in the doorway, the rain beating in on their uncovered heads, "I know you don't really believe anything wrong about Jule. You'd fight for him if anyone said there was, just as quick as I would. It is only your grouchy way of looking at things. You go and imagine the very worst that can ever happen, and then try to make yourself believe that is the way of it!"

Case was about to tell Alex how right he was in his analysis of his character, how thankful he was that he was so well understood, when a call came from some distance up the street.

"That's Clay!" Alex exclaimed.

"I'm going up there!" insisted Case.

"You'll stay right here with me and watch," Alex declared, taking his uneasy chum by the arm and holding on tight.

It was dark up at the end of the pier by the side of which the *Rambler* lay, but farther up, on the north and south street which paralleled the river, a corner lamp threw spears of light toward the stream.

There was no one in sight. Even what could be seen of the thoroughfare under the lamp, and this was not much, seemed deserted. Rainy, windy nights are not popular with pedestrians in Chicago any more than elsewhere.

Even the occupants of vessels tied up at piers above and below the motor boat were silent in cabins or asleep in their bunks. A dull, heavy roar came out of the city, telling of activities in the noisy loop district, but there was little more than the dash of the rain on the deck where the boys stood listening and waiting.

Presently they saw a figure detach itself from the shadows at an angle of the warehouse, where it seemed to have been hiding, and step into the lighted space. There it acted queerly, walking up and down, up and down in the rain! It was too dark for the boys to see the face.

"I don't believe it is Jule, though," Case said.

CHAPTER III.—THE BROWN LEATHER BAG

While Alex and Case waited in the doorway, watching the figure near the warehouse, the circle of light in the street beyond, the whole gloomy prospect along the pier, the shrill voice of a police whistle cut the heavy air. The boys started nervously.

"It wouldn't be strange if Clay got into trouble up there."

This from Case, who was still in his despondent mood, and was, as Alex had explained, imagining the worst and making himself think that was what was coming!

Alex nudged him with his elbow, in gentle reminder of his failing, and nodded toward the head of the pier. Through the falling drops, they saw the figure which had recently left the shelter of the warehouse coming toward the boat.

"Whoever it is," muttered Case, "he's alarmed at the police whistle, and is coming down here to hide away!"

"Oh, Case——"

Alex got no farther with his protest against his chum's idle croakings of evil, for the figure was now almost at the pier, a few yards from the prow of the *Rambler*. It was moving slowly, in spite of the storm beating upon it, hands in pockets, chin buried in a turned-up coat collar, eyes on the ground.

When almost to the head of the pier the boy, for such the queer-acting stranger appeared to be, turned sharply about and went back over the course he had taken, head down, eyes evidently searching the ground. This was repeated three times, then the ring of footsteps above caused him to seek the shelter of the warehouse again.

Then Clay dashed into view, running at top speed and bending low as if to better resist the storm, or to avoid any attack which might be made upon him. The boys could see the silent figure standing in the shadow of the warehouse, standing there in a listening, observant attitude. The thought came to Alex that this might mean peril to Clay, and so he called out to warn the skulker that help was at hand.

"Hurry, Clay!" he shouted.

Clay did not reply, but dashed on at increased speed to the rotting planks of the pier, and was soon inside the cabin, shaking the rain from his clothes like a great dog just out of a pond. Alex closed the door and locked it.

"Did you see Jule?" Case asked, eagerly.

Clay shook his head. His excursion into the storm had evidently proved a disappointment to him, but he made an effort not to show it.

"Of course not," he replied. "How could I find Jule out in all that smother? He's warm and dry somewhere."

"Did you see the boy skulking by the warehouse as you came in?" asked Alex. "He's been there, watching the boat, ever since you went out."

Clay shook his head.

"There's something odd going on around here to-night," he said. "I don't know what to make of it. Whew, but I'm all out of wind!" he continued, dropping down into a chair and taking off his soaked shoes.

"Where did you go?" asked Case. "What was the cop blowing his whistle for. Why did you have to run?"

"One at a time," panted Clay. "When I got out there I found a man and a boy fighting at the end of the pier. At any rate the man was trying to get something away from the boy, and the boy was letting into him with teeth and nails. The boy was calling for help. That's the sound we heard, only it was faint, on account of the man trying to choke him."

"What sort of a boy was it?" asked Case, thinking of the figure he had seen walking to and fro under the light and skulking into the shelter of the warehouse when Clay came running up.

"Wait a minute," Clay panted, "and I'll tell you all about it. Say, who's going to give a cup of that hot coffee? My tummy has a hole in it as big as a rainwater barrel."

"That's pretty close to slang!" warned Case.

"Not so you could notice—that is, not intended as such," corrected the boy with a grin as he took a cup of steaming coffee from Alex's hand and sat back in his chair with a look of contentment on his face.

"Now what about it?" asked Alex, when the cup was empty.

"Well, when I ran up, the man gave a vicious yank and got something away from the boy. It looked like, a leather bag. The boy let out a great cry and fell flat down on his face. I saw his face just a minute, looking like a snowflake in the mud, it was so white and so small.

I thought the thing which had been taken from him must mean a lot, to cause him to look like that, and so I left him lying there and chased on after the man. It looked to me like a case of highway robbery, and I just ached to get my hands on the man."

"What is that in your hand?" asked Case, indicating a brown object which was half concealed in Clay's coat-sleeve, but which dropped down to his palm, and lay with an end resting there.

"Never you mind!" Clay answered, with a chuckle as he drew the object up the sleeve and out of sight. "Just wait a minute. I overtook the man, who couldn't run at all, but lumbered along like an old cow, and tripped him up by— Oh, you know how to drop and catch a fellow by the ankles! He went down kerflop in the muck, where wagons had broken the pavement and cut the earth into a puddle. I didn't stop to see if he was hurt, but picked up the thing I had seen him take from the boy and started back with it.

"When I got back to the place where I had left the boy, with his pale face in the dirt, he wasn't there, so I just brought the object along with me, for safe keeping, of course," he added, with a laugh as he drew a brown leather bag from his sleeve and held it up to the light.

"That's certainly a brown leather bag!" exclaimed Case. "What's in it?"

"Guess!" was the provoking answer.

"It must be something valuable, with all the fuss that's been made over it," Alex suggested. "Open up!"

"Do you know what's in it?" asked Case.

"Of course I do; I peeked in as I came along."

"Well, what is it?"

"Diamonds!"

"Not real diamonds?"

"Certainly not!" Case ventured. "Just fake stones, like the glad-hand men carry. They couldn't be real diamonds, hustled about in the rain like this!"

"But they are real diamonds," insisted Clay. "If I ever saw the real thing this is it."

He untied the brown leather bag, pressed open the mouth with his fingers, and poured a gleaming current of diamonds on the table, where they rolled about like sparks of fire caught and held in captivity. Alex and Case stood dumbly regarding their chum, moving their eyes, presently, from his inscrutable face to the gems on the table. This seemed to them to be a leaf out of a fairy book. It was more fantastic, more unreal, than one of Alex's ridiculous imaginings.

"I wish Jule was here to see 'em!" Clay spoke, breaking the silence with a long sigh. "He can't be long in coming now."

"What are you going to do with them?" asked Alex.

"First," Clay answered, gathering up the stones and looking cautiously about, "I'm going to get them out of sight! Did you hear that motion at the door while they lay here sparkling with a "come-and-get-me" expression?"

"I heard nothing," Case replied, as Clay put the gems back in the bag. "Where are you going to hide them now? You know this isn't a very safe treasure house—this old boat."

"I think I have good reason to know that," replied Clay, looking ruefully at the box which had held the stolen money. "Guess I'll put them in the coffee-pot, for the time being. Anybody want any more?"

Both boys declared they did, naturally! So the coffee was poured and consumed. Then the pot was emptied and the brown leather bag was deposited therein.

"What was it you said about someone being at the door while the stones were on the table?" asked Alex.

"Did you see anyone there?" added Case.

For answer Clay nodded his head toward the single pane in the cabin door, which might have been a panel of black velvet, so heavily did the darkness press upon it.

"What did you see there?" he asked.

"Nothing at all."

Clay moved toward the door and listened between short steps as he walked.

"If anyone rushes the door," he said, amazing the others by the seeming irrelevance of the remark, "you both stand by to fight 'em off. They will be after the diamonds—understand. You hold 'em off and I'll grab the coffee-pot and run. They will go away without hurting you when they find out the gems are not here. After the row is over I'll come back."

"What are you getting at?" demanded Alex.

"You are surely getting ahead of yours truly in the monkey-story record! Who's going to rush the door?"

"Listen!"

As Clay spoke there was a light step on the deck outside, then a hand crept over the outer surface of the door and came, fumbling, to the knob, which turned a fraction of an inch under their eyes. The lads stood quite still. Clay's eyes were fixed on the coffee-pot, now standing within reach of his hand on the table. Case and Alex were closer to the door, against which there now came the brushing of wet garments.

"It may be Jule!" Case whispered.

"No, it is someone after the diamonds!" contended Alex.

There was no farther movement at the door, but the boys stood in the old positions, ready for whatever might come.

"What are you going to do with the diamonds?" asked Case.

"Oh, I don't know," Clay answered, almost fretfully. "I can't decide on a thing like that in a second—not right off the handle, you see. I found them, you know, and——"

"Finders keep and losers seek," half chanted Case.

"That's what's in my mind," Clay went on. "I know that it isn't just right, but I found them; and, then, I don't see no philanthropic person bringing back our stolen money."

"No one knows we found them," Alex suggested.

Then the three boys looked into each other's eyes and smiled.

"You know you won't keep them!" Case declared. "You know very well that you'll hunt the city, or the world, over for the owner if he doesn't come after them."

"You know you never meant to keep them," Alex added. "When I hinted that no one knew about them being here I didn't mean anything by it. You know I didn't."

"For just a second I meant to keep them," Clay confessed. "I was thinking what we might do with them, you see. If we kept them Jule need never know about the robbery. He really ought not to have left the boat, not with all that money here, you see, and so he'll blame himself just as much as if he had taken the money himself. But of course that was just an impulse. I really don't mean to keep them!"

"There's that hand moving on the door again!" whispered Alex.

"How do you know it is a hand?" demanded Case. "It may be the muzzle of a gun or the billy of a policeman."

"The only way to find out," suggested Clay, "is to open the door and see who's there."

Before this intention could be carried out, however, another element forced itself into the case. There came a shout from the shore and the sound of heavy footfalls on the planking of the pier.

"What's going on here!" demanded a gruff voice. "What's all this running round in circles about?"

There was no answer from the outside, and the boys in the cabin did not feel qualified to answer any such questions, so they remained perfectly quiet, until, in a second, the heavy voice came again.

"Come out of that, you wharf rat!" it said. "Come out where I can see you."

"That's a member of the river police," Clay suggested. "They always talk about wharf rats."

"Who is he talking to?" queried Case, puzzled. "The person on our deck, whoever he is," Clay decided.

Then the nervous sounds on the door continued, and a voice said:

"Will you let me in, please?"

"Sounds like a girl's voice."

This from Alex, who stepped forward as he spoke.

"Perhaps it is the boy I saw fighting the man on the pier," Clay suggested. "He looked pale and sick, and that voice doesn't belong to a healthy boy."

"I'm afraid of the police!" came the voice again. "Please let me in. I'll go away as soon as they are gone."

"Anyway," Clay decided, "risk or no risk, diamonds or no diamonds, I'm going to open the door and let him in!"

"Surely," echoed Alex, with a grin. "Let him in. We've been chased by the river police, ourselves, before now."

"Do you think the policeman saw you get the brown leather bag?" asked Case, "and if he did will he accuse you of stealing the diamonds?"

"We'll soon know all about it," replied Clay, unlocking the door.

The other boys made no protest, although the fear and dread of having gems which probably had been stolen—which, at least, did not belong to them—discovered in the cabin was in their hearts, so Clay swung the door open.

A slender, black-eyed boy of about sixteen stood there, an appealing look on his face. When he dodged into the cabin they saw that his clothing was shabby and insufficient for such a night, and that it was soaked with rain. He shivered as he stood by the table and motioned to Clay to lock the door. Before he could thank them for the hospitality so grudgingly extended, the policeman's strident voice came again from the deck.

"Here!" he said, angrily. Don't try to make a fool of me. You come on out here! You don't belong in there, you know. There's been robbery on the river to-day, and I want you."

"If you'll only tell him I belong here——"

The boy did not finish the sentence, for now the ring of the officer's club came on the door in good earnest, rattling the glass panel and echoing through the little space within like the crack of doom, as Alex afterward expressed it.

"Open up! Open up, or I'll break the door in! I want the diamonds you stole, and I want you!"

The boys looked at each other with apprehension showing in their manner, and the stranger seemed to sense that something not on the surface was going on in their minds.

"Well, officer, what do you want?"

Clay spoke the words with his head half out of the doorway, his eyes momentarily blinded by the gleam of an electric flashlight in the red, wet hands of a heavy man in the uniform of the Chicago police.

There was a short hesitation on the policeman's part.

"Where's the lad who just ran in here?" he then demanded, inserting his club into the crack of the door and forcing it wide open, in spite of the efforts of the boy to retain control of it. "You?"

"No," answered Clay, "I'm not the lad who just ran in here. What do you want?"

"You ought to know," was the insolent rejoinder. "There's been a diamond robbery somewhere about this pier, and I'm looking for the stones and the thief. Let me in for a look around, or it will be the station for yours."

Clay stepped aside, unwillingly, and the officer stooped down so as to clear the low doorway and brushed into the cabin. His great bulk, his fat red face, his arrogant manner, seemed to reduce the size of the small room by at least half. His helmet was running water, and he removed it and shook the drops over the table.

In a moment he flashed his light around, resting it longest, it seemed to the boys, on the coffee-pot sitting on the electric stove. It seemed to the imaginative Alex that he must see right through the tin to the brown leather bag, and through the folds of the brown leather bag to the stolen diamonds!

Next the policeman felt of Clay's clothes and sniffed suspiciously when he found them wet. He seemed disappointed when the garments of Case and Alex proved dry to his touch. His face brightened again when he found evidences of recent retreat from the storm in the clothes of the stranger.

"So you are the one who just ducked in here?" he said. "You're the lad I saw skulking behind the corner of the warehouse beyond not long ago. What?"

The stranger looked the policeman straight in the face with his black eyes, but made no reply. The chums looked on, wondering how they were to get rid of the incriminating coffee-pot.

They felt certain that the officer would make a search of the place and discover the diamonds.

Then they would, in all probability, be hustled off to the police station. They were still anxious about the strange absence of Jule, but, after all, right glad that the boy was not there to share this suspicion.

"Come," grumbled the officer, shaking the stranger roughly by the shoulder, "the game is up! Give up the diamonds and come along."

"I haven't got the diamonds," faltered the lad. "I don't know where they are. I'm not a thief. I belong here with these boys."

The officer turned to Clay, whom he now recognized as one he had often seen about the boat, and of whom he knew nothing discreditable.

"Does he belong here?" he asked.

Clay hesitated. The stranger looked so cold and hungry, and his eyes were appealing, and his manner asked for sympathy! He was sorely tempted to make a statement in his behalf which was not true, and which he knew would be regretted as long as he lived.

To deny the story told by the shivering lad would certainly cause his arrest as a diamond thief. The policeman might go away with his prisoner without searching the cabin if he was told that the lad had never set foot there before. In that case the gems would not be discovered in the possession of the occupants of the place.

It was certainly in the interest of the boys that the policeman should leave without searching the cabin, and yet the stranger stood so in need of protection that Clay could not for an instant decide what to do. Then he caught the eyes of his chums, fixed anxiously upon himself, and moved toward the stove where the diamonds reposed in the coffee-pot, surely an odd receptacle for so valuable a parcel.

"I'm going to tell you the truth, officer," he said, "though it may get me into trouble. I——"

The stranger stepped forward, interrupting his progress to the place where the stones were secreted.

"Wait," the boy said, "I'm not going to get you all into trouble. Officer," he continued, turning to the wondering policeman, "I told you a lie just now. I don't belong here with these boys. I've never been in this cabin before—before to-night. I've often watched the boat when it was lighted up on

cold nights, and when there was a smell of cooking coming from the windows, as there was to-night, but I don't belong here. If you'll take me away now, I'll be glad, because I don't want to get these boys into any scrape."

"So you have loitered about here nights, have you?" demanded Case, his sympathy for the lad turning to suspicion. "What were you doing out there by the warehouse a short time ago? Were you in here after our chum went away. Are you the thief who stole our money?"

Clay tried to check the boy, but his words poured out in a torrent of suspicion and reproach until the officer interrupted him.

"So ho!" he cried, "there's been another robbery in your vicinity to-night, has there? You've kept yourself busy, eh? How much did you lose, lad?" he continued, turning to Clay.

"Case shouldn't have mentioned it, because we really don't know, yet, whether it has been stolen or not," Clay explained, "but the sum we miss now is two hundred dollars."

The policeman whistled softly.

"Do you happen to have it with you, lad?" he asked, facing the stranger with accusing eyes.

"I never took it!" insisted the boy.

"Search him!" cried Case, who seemed determined to say and do exactly the wrong thing that night.

"He doesn't look like a thief," Clay suggested, glad to be able to say something in the dejected lad's favor.

"Much you know what a thief looks like!" said the officer.

"I don't believe he is a thief," declared Alex. "I don't believe he ever stole the diamonds!"

"We'll pass it on to the judge," grinned the policeman. "Many's the innocent face with a black heart behind it. So I'll be taking the boy to the sergeant, and asking you boys to come to the trial."

A fierce dash of rain came against the cabin windows and a burst of thunder for an instant drowned all other sounds. When the quick shock of it was over the policeman was outside, pushing against the wind and rain with his prisoner.

"What kind of a dream is this?" asked Alex, whimsically.

"A dream of a thief!" responded Case.

"Oh, quit it!" interposed Alex. "I think sometimes you haven't got common sense. I don't believe that boy ever stole our money."

"What was he hanging about for, then? I shouldn't wonder if he did worse—if he attacked Jule and left him lying dead somewhere."

"You always go to extreme, Case," smiled Clay. "What I'm thinking about now is that the policeman went away without searching the cabin and finding the diamonds! He says they were stolen to-day. Well, if he had found them here what would he have done?"

"Pinched us!" exclaimed Alex.

"You'll wash the dishes in the morning for that, Alex," grinned Case. "That's slang."

"Not!" retorted the other. "That is what the policemen call it themselves. They say 'pinched,' and that brings the word into legitimate use. Guess I know slang when I hear it."

"Is that the boy you saw fighting at the head of the pier?" asked Case, in a moment, of Clay.

"Not a bit like him," was the reply.

"Well, what was he watching the boat for?"

"He explained that. He was lonesome."

"Then why couldn't he have gone home?" grumbled Case. "I just think he knows something about where Jule is, or why he went away. I wish we had asked him."

"I'm getting anxious about Jule," Clay said. "There may be some connection between his absence and the robbery."

"I'll just bet he took the money with him when he went away!" exclaimed Alex. "If he had to go away somewhere, and there was no one to leave in the boat, that's just what he would have done."

"When he comes," Clay advised, echoing Alex's request, "don't say a word to him about the money. If he has it, or if he put it away in another place, he will say so soon enough. There's someone else on the deck!" he added, as a quick step was heard.

"This seems to be a sort of reception night," Alex laughed. "Wonder who the new person can be? Why, it's Jule!"

This last sentence as the door opened and a boy much smaller than the others bounded inside. He was covered from the crown of his red head to the soles of his feet with oilskins, which, dripping, made small lakes and rivers on the cabin floor.

Alex darted forward and began pummeling the boy on the shoulders with his fists.

"Where have you been?" he cried. "You've given us a bad evening, old man. Come. Tell us about it."

Jule took off the oilskin coat, leggings, and hat quite deliberately and turned his attention to the electric stove where the coffee-pot was still sitting.

The boys stood watching him with eager eyes. Would he say anything about the money? Had he taken it with him? Had he placed it in a more secure hiding-place? The questions were in their faces, although not spoken, and Jule saw that something unusual was going on.

"Where did you get the oilskins?" asked Alex, glad of any excuse to break the pregnant silence.

Jule lifted his red eyebrows with a comical grimace and walked toward the coffee-pot. He was small and thin, and his freckled face was pathetically wasted as to flesh, but his blue eyes were bright and merry. As he moved toward the electric stove—the one place the boys wished him to keep away from just then—a racking cough convulsed the emaciated frame for a moment.

"Wait!" Alex exclaimed, as Jule recovered from the spasm of coughing and reached for the coffee-pot. "Wait! I'll get you the coffee!"

"I've already connected with it," answered the boy, taking the pot by the handle and shaking it.

The three stood by, waiting. After all, they thought, it did not matter so much if he did know about the diamonds. He would have to know sometime. The only reason why they objected to the

gems coming into the case immediately was that the boy would become excited and forget to tell whatever he knew about the money.

"I'm going to ask him, plump out!" whispered Case to Clay, as Jule lifted the pot and balanced it in his hand, as if to see what the chances were for a full cup.

Clay restrained the impulsive boy by a motion of his hand. Jule did not seem pleased with the investigation of the coffee-pot. There was a bumping sound inside instead of the swish of the stimulating liquid he sought. He lifted the lid and looked in.

They saw him take out the brown leather bag and hold it up between his eyes and the light. Then he shook it, bringing forth from the bag the musical tinkle of the gems. After a second's hesitation, he started to open the bag, but Alex snatched it away from him.

"Not until you tell us where you have been," grinned Alex, dangling the bag before Jule's eyes. "Not until you tell us where you got those oilskins. Not until you tell us everything about what you've been doing to-night! Then we'll let you know what's in this bag!"

CHAPTER V.—THE BOY FROM PERU

What Alex really wanted to say was: "Not until you tell us whether our money is safe." But he restrained his tongue and rattled the contents of the bag alluringly.

"That's a funny thing to keep in a coffee-pot," Jule exclaimed. "What did you make the coffee in to-night? What is in the bag?"

"Tell us!" insisted Clay.

"Well, after I saw you coming, down by the warehouse, you know," began the boy, nodding at Clay and dropping into a chair, "I went on down to Madison street and got to Doctor Holcomb's office without getting wet at all. The oilskins he sent me did the business—kept me dry as tinder in all that rain."

"So he sent for you, did he, and supplied the oilskins?"

It was Clay who asked the question. There was hope in the lad's breast now, for Jule would not be apt to go so far away without taking some precautions regarding the money.

"Oh, I told you all about that," Jule went on, impatiently, as if reciting something already well known. "I remained here until I saw you coming, over there by the warehouse," the boy continued, turning to Clay, "then I went out to meet you, so as to tell about my going away to see Dr. Holcomb. When I got to the end of the wharf you were not there, but in a moment I saw you at the corner of the building, and called out to you to watch the boat while I went to see the doctor."

"Did you wait until I got into the cabin?" asked Clay, turning away so that the astonishment in his face might not be seen.

"Oh, yes, I made sure you were in the cabin before I went away," was the disheartening reply. "I wasn't going to leave the boat, not with all our money in it, alone for a minute," he went on.

Case opened his lips to speak, but Clay gave his arm such a pinch of warning that he immediately closed them again without speaking a word of the hot sentence that was in his mind. The blow had fallen. There was nothing more to say!

Jule had mistaken some thief for Clay, had left the boat in his care, and the money had been stolen! There was nothing more to do except never to let the boy know what the mistake had cost—and to go about earning more!

The three boys took the matter calmly. Up to this minute they had all hoped and half believed that Jule had either taken the money away with him or hidden it in another spot. Now the last hope was gone. They gathered about the table, glad of something to engage their thoughts, exhibited the diamonds, and told how they came to be in their possession. Jule was enthusiastic over the find, as he called it.

"And now," Clay said, after the story had been told and the boys had expressed various opinions as to the ownership of the stones, "we may as well hide the diamonds away and make more coffee. Where shall I put them?"

"Why, with the money, of course!" exclaimed Jule.

"Not if you——"

Alex stepped on Case's toe and the remark was never completed.

"All right," Clay grinned, "I'll put them in the square box with the red cover, and put that into the round box. That is where the money was put, eh, Jule? You handled it last."

"That's where you'll find it!" the boy answered, and again the three turned away their faces.

Clay put the diamonds in the box and laid it away. Then more coffee was made, and rolls and sausages brought out, and all four fell to with keen appetites, Alex explaining that the previous meal that night had not been satisfying because of the absence of Jule, and because of the excitement of the policeman's visit and the arrest of the stranger.

There was no doubt in the minds of the three now that the boy who had been arrested had been the one Jule had seen by the warehouse, the one who had been seen to enter the cabin, the one who had taken the money!

The one thing in opposition to this theory was the fact that the boy had returned to the vicinity of the boat after taking the money—if, indeed, he had not remained about the warehouse during all the time which had intervened between the taking of the money and the arrival of the officer. Then, too, he had voluntarily entered the cabin, to escape from the officer. That did not look like the act of a guilty person.

"Who do you think this strange boy is?" asked Jule, at the conclusion of the story. "I like the way he spoke up to the policeman and said he had lied about belonging here. It is a sure thing he's honest, and never stole the diamonds. What do you think?" he demanded, turning to his chums.

"He may be honest," Clay answered.

"He's a thief!" Case thundered.

"He's all right!" insisted Alex.

"Anyway," Jule continued, with a grin at the diverse opinions of the stranger so expressed, "it is certain he saw Clay pick up the brown leather bag, and the chances are that he knew where the stones were when the policeman took him away. You say someone looked in at the window. Well, that was this lad, and he saw the diamonds on the table, and saw you put them in the coffee-pot. If he's honest he'll wait until he finds the owner of the diamonds, and then tell him where they are. If he is a crook he'll tell the police about seeing them here and get us all into trouble."

"They were here when he was arrested," Alex urged, "and he never said a word about them. If he knew about them, he would have told the officer, wouldn't he? I don't believe he knows anything about the diamonds or the mo——"

Clay gave the boy's leg a pinch under the table.

"Or the manner in which they came here," Alex concluded, trying to change "money" into "manner" and not succeeding very well.

While the boys talked, they were preparing their beds for the night. There were two of these, and they were almost like hammocks let down from the low ceiling, being attached to strong rods by

chains. When drawn up the bottoms of the beds looked exactly like the ceiling; when let down strong springs and soft mattresses were disclosed.

Case had already climbed into the one he occupied with Clay when a timid knock came on the door.

"Reception night!" gasped Alex.

"Perhaps it is the policeman come back after the diamonds," suggested Case. "That little thief has told about seeing them here, and we're all to be arrested!"

"Imagine one notch farther, and get us hanged for murdering the owner of the diamonds!" scorned Alex. "You certainly do let out the rankest prophecies! Shall I open the door, fellows?"

There was another knock, and the boy did not wait for an answer, but turned the key and threw the door half open. Then he dodged back, and the slender, black-eyed lad who had been taken away by the policeman entered the cabin. It was still raining, and his garments contributed tiny lakes and rivers to the damp spots already on the floor. He stood silent a moment, fumbling with his cap, wringing wet, and then found his voice.

"I thought," he began.

He stopped and looked toward the coffee-pot, still steaming. Alex lifted it and poured out a cup of strong coffee, which, together with a plate of cold beans and a loaf of bread, he set before the wet boy.

"I guess you're hungry," he said, unconcernedly.

The stranger fell to, but there was a look of amazement in his face which no one there failed to observe. Case thought the look meant that he was astonished to find that the diamonds were not in the pot. Clay believed that the lad was upset by the courteous treatment he was receiving. Alex understood that it was because of Jule's presence that the boy was so all at sea, mentally.

All the lads saw in the return of the boy some faint chance to solve the mystery of the loss of the money. "Perhaps," hopeful Alex thought, "he has repented and brought the money back with him." Clay watched the boy for a moment and said, tentatively:

"They didn't keep you at the station very long?" "No," was the confused reply. "I proved my innocence and they let me go. I came back here to let you know."

"Why have you been hanging around the boat?" asked Case, leaning over the side of his bed. "You were out there by the warehouse a long time to-night, and someone from the boat called out to you."

Jule looked up suspiciously, but Case went on:

"Then you came into the cabin."

The stranger shook his head.

"You are mistaken," he insisted.

"Let him alone!" Alex ordered. "Give him a chance to eat his supper, can't you. What's your name, kid?" he continued, forgetful of his own suggestion that the stranger be permitted to eat in peace.

"Frank Porter," was the quick reply. "I was born near the headwaters of the Amazon, in Peru. I came to Chicago to attend to some business, and haven't been able to get back."

The four opened their eyes in wonder. Here was a boy who had lived in the country they had planned to visit, and who knew all about the river they were so anxious to explore.

"Go on!" Clay said, eagerly.

"I heard that you boys were going to the foothills of the Andes," Frank went on, "and I thought you might let me go with you, only I could never find the courage to come and ask you about it?"

"And that is what you've been hanging around here for?" asked Case.

"Yes, sir."

"Well," Case continued, brutally, "it costs money to run this boat. Can you pay your share of the expense?"

"I haven't any money." was the dejected reply.

"You speak English pretty handily for a native of Peru!" Case taunted, while Alex frowned at the impudence of the suggestion.

"My father was a Chicago man, and my mother was a native of New Orleans," was the straightforward answer. "I know English and Spanish and a lot of Amazon valley dialects. I may be able to make myself useful on the journey. You'll need a guide," he added, hopefully.

Neither of the three dared hint, in the presence of Jule, how far away that journey now was! And Jule did not know!

"All right," Alex agreed, putting off the evil time when Jule would have to know, "you can go, and we'll let you stay here with us until we start. We'll need you. Isn't that right, boys?"

They all declared that it was entirely right, but Case's acquiescence seemed a little forced, though the boy's stay with them seemed to be only for that night. Nothing whatever was said about the diamonds, and Case took the precaution of putting them inside his pillow-slip before he went to sleep. It was daylight before the boys awoke, for the evening had been an exciting one, and they had had much to think over before they could sleep.

Clay rolled out of bed and turned the electric switch, for it was still dark in the cabin. The first thing that met his eyes was the rude bed on the floor which had been made up for Frank Porter. It was empty, and the cabin door was ajar. The boy had gone without a word of good-bye! Then Clay saw something else. It was a copy of an evening newspaper, open at the "lost and found" page. He read the paragraph to which a pencil-made hand pointed, and set up a great shout.

"Boys!" he cried. "Wake up and hear the blessed news! There's a reward of \$500 offered for the return of the diamonds, and no questions asked. We'll go in style, go to-day! What?"

"Why, of course we're going to-day!" came from Jule's bed. "Why not? Haven't we been planning on to-day right along?"

The boy bounced out of his bed. His three chums regarded each other with glances of understanding. They had almost forgotten, in the excitement of the moment, that, though all hope of getting away in the immediate future had been abandoned by them, Jule did not know.

"Of course, this very day!" shouted Case. "We will be ready in no time, just as soon as we get breakfast. Here, Alex," he cried, "you make coffee, and I'll run over and see Captain Joe. We'll have to tell him about it."

"If Frank Porter is going with us," Clay declared, "he'll have to be showing up."

Alex busied himself making coffee and frying bacon and eggs and Clay stepped outside with Case.

"Now, don't get a grouch on," he advised, "and tell Jule that he came near defeating all our plans.

He mistook someone for me, but that wasn't anything unusual. I've made mistakes about people before now myself. Just let it all go, and the kid won't have the thing to worry over."

"I wonder where he went last night?" Case said, doggedly.

"Why, he told us that he went to see Dr. Holcomb," Clay explained. "He'll tell us what he went to see him about when he gets ready. Now, don't forget and let the cat out of the bag."

"Don't you ever think I will," promised Case. "I'll go now and see Captain Joe, and tell him to be quick with the gasoline, and he'll have it on board before noon. Good old boy, Captain Joe."

"There never was any better!" echoed Clay. While they talked a stoutish, gray-haired man with a very red face and a wooden leg not at all concealed by his trousers came stumping down the pier, waving a pudgy hand in greeting.

"Morning, boys!" he cried.

"Morning, Captain Joe!" answered the boys, in a breath. "We were just going up to see you about the gasoline. We're off to-day, you know," they both shouted, talking so fast that neither sensed that the other was speaking.

Captain Joe came to where the boys stood and looked the motor boat over critically. He had been a sea captain for years, and was never so happy as when passing judgment on a vessel. Two years before he had met with an accident which had deprived him of one leg, and since that time he had gained a living by conducting a little ship and motor boat supply store not far from the slip where the *Rambler* lay. His practical suggestions had been invaluable to the boys in fitting out the *Rambler*.

"She looks fit as a fiddle," the old man declared, cocking his head to one side and running his eyes over the graceful lines of the craft. "When you get out into the ocean just keep her head on, and she'll sail like a duck. My! It would be a treat to go along with you!"

"We'll make an extra bunk for you, Captain Joe," Clay cut in, eagerly. "You know you'd be welcome."

"I'm too old, lads," returned the captain, "and besides. I've got my own little bread-and-butter shop to look after. But here," he continued, taking a packet sealed in oilskin from his breast, "here's a little present for you. I'm giving it to you with the understanding, though, mind, that you never open it until you find yourself in a tight place! There is a word of advice in it," he went on, "and it may cheer you up a bit when you open it."

Clay's face was very grave as he took the packet. "We'll do just as you say, Captain Joe," he promised, "and we'll think of you as often as you think of us! But we hope never to get into a tight place. You'll come and see us off?"

"Certainly—certainly!" declared the captain. "I couldn't let my boys sail away without being there to wish 'em good luck. I'll have the gasoline down here in an hour, and then off you go, and may every hope you have be thrifty and bud into two more—all coming into harbor with sails set!"

The old man stumped away, and the boys returned to the cabin. While breakfast was being eaten a knock was heard and Frank Porter's face showed through the glass panel. Alex opened the door and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Come on in," he shouted. "You're just in time for some of my world-without-end pancakes. No one else ever made such pancakes as these. You're just in time, for we're going to sail before noon."

The boys were so happy in their good fortune that all suspicions of the integrity of the lad were for the time forgotten, and he was given a very friendly welcome indeed. He explained that he had been out in the city for a walk, and had been delayed by an accident which had blocked a street and sent him a long way around.

"Now," said Clay, after breakfast, "I'll go up to this advertiser's address and get the reward for the restoration of the diamonds, and then we'll be all ready for blue water."

"I'll go with you," volunteered Alex.

"Not much you won't," Case put in. "You'll stay here on the boat and wash dishes as a penalty for talking slang."

While the boys argued Clay and Jule started away. It was a bright Spring morning, and the air was clear and invigorating, for Chicago. Jule threw out his chest as they walked along, taking in long breaths.

"I begin to feel well already!" he said. "Oh, I'll be well before we get to the Gulf of Mexico!"

"What did Dr. Holcomb tell you last night?" asked Clay, curious to know the reason for the visit of the night before to the office of the physician. Jule hesitated an instant, and then turned a pair of merry blue eyes on his companion.

"Don't you wish you knew?" he asked, provokingly.

"Oh, if it is anything private——" Clay began.

"It is a secret!" acknowledged the boy. "I'm not to tell anyone about it until we get back. I think it jolly to have a secret."

"I know," Clay guessed, "he said you were going to get well down on the Amazon. Huh, we knew

that before!"

"Guess again," laughed Jule, as they turned the corner of Madison and Dearborn streets. "I'll tell you—when we get back! But there is the Boyce building, and here is the name of the lawyer who advertised to give the reward for the return of the diamonds—and no questions asked!"

Lawyer Sharp had just reached his office as the boys entered. He met them with a smile and seemed to consider the return of the stones as a matter of course. He opened his safe and took therefrom a package of banknotes which seemed to have been placed there for that special occasion.

"I'm not to ask any questions, you know," he said, as Clay tendered the brown leather bag and received the money, "but I would like to know who sent you here with the diamonds. They are worth fifty thousand dollars, I presume you know?"

"No," answered Clay, "we didn't know that."

"I never knew there was that much money in Chicago!" put in Jule.

"But you didn't answer my question."

"I found the diamonds on the ground," Clay replied, not referring to the way they came there, "and saw the advertisement in an evening newspaper. That's all."

"Where did you get the newspaper?"

There was a twinkle in the lawyer's eyes, as if he, too, had a secret that was hard to keep.

"Why," Clay answered, "why——"

He turned to Jule with a puzzled look on his face.

"Where do you think that newspaper came from?" he asked, puzzled, too.

Jule shook his head, looking from the lawyer to the brown leather bag, now empty, the gems being in the lawyer's hand.

"I don't know," he said. "You found it on the boat, I take it."

"Someone must have placed it there," said the lawyer.

"It was marked," Clay explained, "with a finger pointing to the advertisement. Now, what do you think of that? Why——"

"Then someone put it there," Jule declared. "Someone who wanted us to get the reward! I'll bet it was Captain Joe."

"Or Dr. Holcomb," Clay continued.

"Very strange proceeding!" insisted the lawyer. "If anyone knew where the diamonds were, and saw fit to throw away \$500, he might have done that, but did this Captain Joe you speak of, or this Dr. Holcomb, know that you had the stones?"

"Of course not!" answered Jule. "No one knew."

"When were the diamonds stolen?" asked Clay.

"Early yesterday morning, though the loss was not reported then."

"Who stole them?" was the next question.

The lawyer laughed outright at this.

"If we knew," he said, "we'd have him in jail. But we don't know. We thought that, perhaps, the one who came for the reward might know."

"If you think that," Clay exclaimed, flushing with anger, "if you think I stole them, I will return the reward!"

"We don't think so," explained the lawyer. "If we did we'd have had a policeman here. Well, there's your money. I'm busy!"

The boys went out into the hall and took the elevator without another word being said. The lawyer's mood had been more preoccupied and not so friendly at the last.

"There is something queer about it!" Jule said, as they took a Madison street-car. "Lookout there!"

A young man who was running for the car slipped and came near falling under the wheels as the boy started up in his seat and involuntarily called out.

"That was a close call!" Clay exclaimed.

"But he got on," Jule said. "There he is, on the back of the car."

"Why," Clay whispered, "I saw that man in the lower hall when we went up to the lawyer's office, and again when we came down. See that scar on his cheek? Looks as if he had been wounded there. Well, I noticed that both times."

"Perhaps he was thinking of getting the diamonds or the money away from us," suggested Jule. "He'd have a good time doing it!"

"Oh, I guess not," Clay replied, but he was not quite easy in his mind until the young man—a dark young man in a greenish suit, with little black eyes and a tiny mustache, turned up at the ends, left the car at the bridge.

The gasoline was on board long before noon, Captain Joe having seen to that personally, and then all was bustle as the boys headed down the drainage canal for the Mississippi. The last familiar figure they saw as they got under way, the motors ticking merrily under the hatch on the deck floor, was that of Captain Joe, standing on the pier and waving a white handkerchief from a pudgy hand.

The boys were delighted with the trip down to the Gulf of Mexico, and agreed that if they could ever afford it they would some day take a leisurely journey down the Mississippi in the motor boat.

The *Rambler* passed through the Caribbean sea without mishap, though the boys were more than once reminded of the advice of Captain Joe, to "keep her head on." It was rather more difficult navigating the eastern coast, but there were no serious accidents, and Jule gained in health every minute. On the way down Frank, now a welcome member of the party, gave the boys lessons in Spanish, and many a friendly tilt they had over their pronunciation of the tongue spoken principally in South America.

One evening in early June the lights of Para gladdened the eyes of the boys, for there, away to the north, ran the current of the mighty Amazon!

CHAPTER VII.—A BOAT FROM THE SOUTH BRANCH

The boys had headed the *Rambler* for Para, which is some distance south of the mouth of the Amazon, for two reasons. The first was that supplies could be purchased there cheaper than at the towns in the interior of Brazil, as the city is the principal commercial port of that country. They had put in a good supply of gasoline at New Orleans, but there was not near enough in the tanks to attempt the navigation of the long stretch of water ahead of them. Besides, their supply of provisions was running short.

There are several cities of good size along the Amazon and her tributaries, but excessive freight rates would make purchases there too expensive for the lessening supply of ready money. Trading vessels from all parts of the world make a highway of the Amazon, cargoes being put off and taken on more than two thousand miles from the Atlantic coast. In fact, navigation of the river and its branches ends only at the gorges of the eastern Andes.

Para is a modern city in many ways, and boasts a population of something over a quarter of a million. It is sixty-five miles from the coast, on a river of the same name, three thousand from New York, and three thousand from Buenos Aires. The river there is something like twenty feet in depth, but so sloping are the shores that most of the loading and unloading is done with the aid of lighters.

The second reason for the decision to enter the Amazon by way of Para was that the great waterway of South America is treacherous. In the language of the native Brazilian Indians, Amazon means "boat destroyer." There are monster tidal waves at the mouth, and the wash from above so reduces the depth that vessels are frequently stranded on bars of sand. In addition to these difficulties, there are numerous islands in the river, which is fully fifty miles in width at a distance of a hundred miles from the coast, and it requires the service of an experienced pilot to keep the direct course.

The route to the foothills of the Andes is considerably longer by way of Para, but the boys were in no hurry to bring their pleasant excursion to a close, and the above reasons were considered sufficient for the choice they made. Besides, there would be an opportunity to view the lower Amazon on the way down.

When the lights of Para came into view that night, the boys decided to anchor a short distance above the city and remain there through the following day, purchasing the needed supplies. Then, on the second morning, they could proceed westward, passing through the estuaries and streams which connect the Para river with the Amazon, and so on to the mountains. The point of junction with the Amazon is to the west of Marajo island, a body of land larger than some of the New England states.

The *Rambler*, therefore, came to anchor in a slip well to the west of the city, and, after partaking of supper, the boys set out to see the sights of the first foreign town they had ever set eyes on—that is, the first foreign town of importance which they had seen at close range. Case was left on board, and when the shore party returned he sat on the prow of the boat, watchful and alert.

"What did you see in the city?" he asked, as the boys began letting down the bunks.

"Same old story," yawned Jule. "Nothing but houses! I can find just as queer places in Chicago as I saw there."

"Good old Chicago!" exclaimed Alex, a flood of memories brought up by the mention of the name.

"Homesick?" asked Case, with a provoking smile.

"Not a bit of it! I guess I can like a city, and think of her, and the good times I've had there without wanting to go straight back to her! This is good enough for me right now."

"Did you try your Spanish on anyone?" laughed Case, presently. "If you did, you probably had to take to our heels in order to keep out of jail," he continued.

Case and Alex had indulged in many a good-natured squabble over the pronunciation of certain Spanish words, and each had predicted all kinds of trouble for the other when the time to use the language came.

"Sure I talked Spanish," replied Alex, a whimsical smile spreading over his face. "I delivered an oration in the city hall! Didn't I, Frank?"

Frank Porter and Alex had become fast friends. They bunked together and planned mischief together. In fact, Clay and Case were having rather a busy time with Alex, Jule, and Frank. Jule's health was improving so fast, and he was so full of animal spirits because of his new lease of life, that he kept things moving pretty lively, while Frank and Alex were always engaged in some mischief, not necessarily vicious mischief, but just fantastic enough to keep the company stirred up most of the time.

Frank promptly backed Alex up in the ridiculous assertion that he had made, and was as promptly chased off the deck by Case, who growled at the pranks of the boys one minute and joined in with them the next. It was close on to midnight when Case moved over to where Clay sat and began a whispered conversation with him.

"Did you see anyone you knew in Para, that is, anyone besides your own party?" he asked.

"That is a strange question," Clay responded. "Of course I did not. Why do you ask?"

"One more question," Case went on. "Have you seen anything since you came here with a familiar look to it?"

"Of course not. We are a long way from anything I know the look of, except what came with us."

"Look around you now," advised Case, "and see if there isn't something familiar in view."

"In the boat, you mean?"

"No, in the river."

"There's the water!" laughed Clay. "That looks familiar."

"And the ships?"

There was a moon nearly at the full, and a soft light lay over the river and the sleeping city beyond. Clay arose and looked over the scene and then thoughtfully seated himself again. Case regarded him expectantly, but waited for him to speak.

"I know what you mean," Clay said. "What about it?"

"That's what I don't know."

"When did you first see it?"

"Of course you mean that smoky little steamer with yellow and green on her stack? That is what I am referring to."

"Yes," Clay answered. "That is the only familiar thing in sight, so far as I can see."

"You remember where you saw her last?"

"Yes; in the South Branch. She lay near us the day before we left on this trip."

"Well," Case went on, "you asked me when I first saw her—here, I presume you mean—and I'll tell you that she came puffing in just after you boys left for the shore. You were still in sight, on a pier, when she anchored, and they got out a boat and rowed over after you."

"Whew!" whistled Clay, in astonishment.

"That's why I asked you if you saw anybody in Para that you had ever seen before."

"Did you recognize any of the people who went ashore in the boat as persons you had seen before—in Chicago or elsewhere?"

"Yes; there was a man, a youngish man with a scar on his cheek, his left cheek, almost under the ear, with little black, piggy eyes, and a tiny black mustache, with the ends turned up. He seemed to be giving orders to the others. Ever see him before?"

Clay remembered that morning in Chicago, when he had secured the reward for restoring the diamonds. This was the man who had run after the car which Jule and himself had taken at the corner of Madison and Dearborn streets. He stated the incident, briefly, to his companion.

"Why, I saw that same man on the steamer in the South Branch," Case exclaimed. "That is why I noted his appearance so carefully here. He wore a greenish suit in Chicago."

"He had such a suit on when I saw him that morning," Clay said.

"Well," Case mused, directly, "he's come after us?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"We might have delivered the stones to the wrong party."

"Nonsense!" cried Clay. "The advertisement would have brought the owner and an officer to the place where they were to be returned and the reward given out. A crook wouldn't advertise in that open way. This fellow is not on any legitimate business, if his errand here is concerned with us."

"But why should he follow us?" persisted Case. "That is just what I don't know," puzzled Clay. "We have nothing he could rob us of, except the boat, and that doesn't belong to us. We haven't done anything anybody could take offense at, or consider hostile."

"Well, he's here," Case concluded, "and it is up to us to keep a sharp eye on him. There! He's returning to the steamer now."

As the boy spoke a boat put out from a pier on the south shore and proceeded swiftly toward the steamer with the yellow and green stack. It was not light enough out on the river to enable the boys to recognize any of the faces in the craft, but Case put his hand on Clay's arm, warning him to remain silent until the rowers came under the prow light of the steamer.

"That's the man!" he said presently, as a light from the deck of the steamer struck fairly in the faces of those in the boat.

"Yes; that is the man!"

"I hope we aren't going to have our whole trip spoiled by anyone sneaking after us like this and making trouble!" Case wailed.

"We'll have to meet whatever comes," Clay reminded the other. "And now," he continued, "we'll set a watch on deck for the night. In the morning we'll take on our supplies as early as possible and get under way. We'll soon find out whether this fellow is following us, or whether his appearance here is merely a coincidence."

"I'll watch to-night," Case volunteered, but Clay had other views. The conversation with Case had brought back to his mind something Frank Porter had said on the night of his first appearance at the *Rambler's* pier. There certainly was mystery connected with the boy's sudden appearance, with his watching about in the storm for a view of the *Rambler* and her crew, with his anxiety to get back to the country he had left with the boys as companions.

So he explained to Case that he was not at all sleepy, but might be on the next night, and so persuaded the boy to go off to his bunk, with the understanding that he (Case) should watch next if it was thought best to station a guard. As soon as Case was asleep, Clay went to the cabin and quietly awoke Frank Porter.

"Come out on deck," he instructed the boy, "I want to talk with you."

In five minutes the lad was out on the prow, standing by Clay's side, his face white, his figure looking weak and irresolute.

"I know what you're going to say," the boy began, without waiting for Clay to open the conversation. "I have been wanting to see you alone ever since that boat," pointing to the steamer, "anchored near the *Rambler*."

"You recognize her?" asked Clay.

"The Senorita? Oh, yes, I saw her dropping anchor here just as we reached the dock to-night, on our way into the city."

"And you saw the boat pulling for the shore?" "Yes; don't you remember I loitered behind the others, and that Alex came back for me?"

"Yes; well, you saw a man in that boat you knew?"

"Yes, sir; a man I know and fear."

"Have you anything more to say?" asked Clay, wishing to give the boy the chance to tell whatever story he might have to tell in his own way.

"Yes," was the quick reply. "I'll be short and quick with it, too. I want you to put me ashore here and go on without me."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Everything."

"You haven't the least idea that we'll do a thing like that, have you?" asked Clay, pitying the dejected boy from the bottom of his heart.

"I thought you might be willing to do so."

"But why?"

"Because you will all get into serious trouble if you don't. That man—I can't tell you why—followed me from Peru to Chicago. He persecuted me in Chicago. You saw the plight I was in when I came to you on that rainy night! I was hungry and cold and afraid. You boys fed and warmed me and took me into your lives. So I'm not going to let you do anything more for me if it will make trouble for you."

"But if we leave you here," Clay urged, "this man of whom you are in fear will have you at his mercy, won't he?"

"I presume so, but he won't set any traps for you."

"Can't you tell me why he is following you?"

"No, sir."

"Then," Clay declared, "you go back to your bunk. You're going to remain with us, and if trouble comes we'll fight it out together."

"But you don't know," began the other, but Clay hustled him away!

Then he sat for a long time in deep thought on the dark deck.

CHAPTER VIII.—AN ADDITION TO THE PARTY

The river is wide at Para, and there are always dozens of steamers and trading vessels anchored off the city. This night was no exception. There was a little group of vessels lying within hailing distance of the motor boat. The one nearest, perhaps, was the steamer which Frank had called the *Señorita*, not a large boat, but one having the appearance of great speed.

There was little stir of life on the river, and Clay watched light after light go out in the nearby craft with a sensation of loneliness. Now and then, it is true, he could hear a voice coming over the water, but usually the words spoken were in an unfamiliar tongue. The air was dry and warm.

The moon, passing farther to the west, had encountered a bank of clouds, and was visible only a part of the time. In these darker intervals, whenever the listening boy heard the rattling of an oar it seemed to him that the boat in which it swung was stealthily approaching the *Rambler* with some sinister purpose in the hearts of those within her.

He knew that Frank was not asleep, for he could hear him tumbling about in his bunk, and more than once he started up with the purpose of calling to the lad and having the truth of the danger which hung over him clearly defined, but each time he sat down again, reluctant to press him on so delicate a subject. His idea was that, at sometime during the night, something would occur which might give him an inkling of the threatened danger.

Just before daylight, what he half feared, half hoped for, took place. During a dark moment he heard the bunt, felt the jar, of a prow against the side of the *Rambler*. He sat still and listened, his only motion being that of an arm to bring his automatic revolver into position for use.

Presently the light boat tipped a trifle to the east, as if some heavy body or bodies were keeling her over by clinging to the railing which ran around the deck. Whispered words in Spanish followed, and then the soft pad of a naked foot on the planks.

Clay's purpose in remaining inactive at this time and permitting the intruders to gain the deck was to allow the invasion of the *Rambler* to proceed without interruption until the object of the visit was made known by some unmistakable proceeding. For all he knew the object of the intrusion might be larceny. In that case he did not wish to take a human life, as he would be almost certain to do should he open fire with his automatic revolver.

Presently the footsteps moved in the direction of the cabin door, which was wide open. The bulk of the cabin could only be outlined in the darkness, and the creeping figure could not be seen at all. The deck seemed empty save for himself, only the soft pat-pat of naked feet showing the presence of another.

The restless tumblings in the cabin had ceased, and Clay was under the impression that Frank had dropped off into slumber, but in this he was mistaken. He was already rising to his feet to switch on the light in the cabin when another light shot out of the doorway like a bullet.

It proceeded from a powerful electric searchlight, held in Frank's left hand, and showed a weapon in the right. Straight out of the doorway it flashed, bringing into the center of a white circle the dusky face and evil eyes of a native Indian, such as Clay had observed on the streets of Para that evening.

The Indian was crouching low, his shoulders hunched as if for a quick spring, and a knife flashed back the light, a knife clutched in his right hand, already half lifted. The object of the night visit was no longer in doubt. Clay stepped forward, but quick as he was the Indian was too active for him.

There was a sudden movement and a splash in the river. When they cautiously peered over the railing of the deck, a second later, nothing was to be seen in the water below. Even the boat in which the Indian had reached the *Rambler* had disappeared. Frank threw the rays of his light far up arid down the current, but no bobbing head came within its circle.

"It is of no use to look for him," the boy said. "He can swim beneath the surface as handily as on top."

"But where is the boat?" asked Clay. "I distinctly heard one strike the *Rambler*."

"It was probably taken away at once," answered Frank. "The Indian was to do his work on board and take to the river. Lucky thing you were on guard."

"It strikes me," Clay returned, "that I had very little to do with it. You heard him at first?"

"Yes; I hadn't been to sleep. I anticipated something of the sort. I warned you to-night in order that you might be prepared for anything."

There was a short silence, during which both boys turned their heads toward the *Señorita*, only a few rods away.

"I have a notion that we'll hear something doing on board our honorable escort, in a minute," said Frank, lightly. "They'll want to know why he fell down on the pleasant task they set him."

"You think he came from the steamer?"

"I have no doubt of it."

They waited and listened a long time, but no sounds of any kind came from the *Señorita*.

"They are too clever to permit him to return after a failure," Frank concluded. "Now you see what you're up against," he added. "Are you ready to set me ashore in the morning?"

"Hardly," smiled Clay. "We started out together, and we'll stick together, if I have my way about it. We'll get our supplies in early and be out of sight of Para long before night."

"If I have my way about it," Frank said, with an air of determination, "you'll leave me behind. It would be a poor return for all your kindness if I should get you all murdered."

"Promise me that you will make no attempt to leave us without my consent."

"But——"

"Will you promise?"

"Yes, but you don't know what is ahead of you if I remain on the boat. We are going into a wild and lawless country, and——"

"I understand. See! It is getting light in the east. There will be no further trouble to-night, so we may as well go to bed."

"I'm afraid I won't be able to sleep," suggested Frank.

"Then sit here and watch," Clay advised, "and remember, old man, I hold you to your promise!"

"You may trust me!"

The voice was low and steady, and Clay knew that the boy meant just what he said, so he went off to bed and slept until nine o'clock. When he came out on deck, rubbing his eyes, all the boys were there save Alex. Case and Frank, mindful of Clay's wish to get away as early as possible, had attended to getting the supplies on board, and the *Rambler* was ready to set her nose against the streams leading to the Amazon. Clay learned all this while preparing his breakfast.

"But where is Alex?" he asked.

"He is still on shore," replied Case. "I told him not to go away, but he rushed off when I was away. Now we'll have to go into the city and get him out of some scrape."

"You are mild in your prophecy of evil this morning," laughed Jule. "Ordinarily you would have had him hung, drawn and quartered for trying to rob a bank."

Case hung his head and smiled at the reference to his failing.

"Well, he ought to be here," he said.

"I should think you would go out of business as a prophet," laughed Jule. "All your prognostications fail. See! This one fails, for here comes Alex now. What is that he is carrying?"

"Looks like a large Brazilian monkey," replied Frank.

"And the kid has an escort, at that!" roared Jule. "Just see the mob chasing after him!"

"That is a dog he has," Case exclaimed, looking at the advancing boy through a glass. "If it isn't a half-grown, white bulldog. I'll wash dishes for a month. Must be heavy!"

"Well," Clay grinned, "Alex is making a try for the running record, if it is heavy. Look at him cover the ground!"

"Better say, 'How that boy did run, than here he lies!'" hummed Jule.

"I guess he's got good cause to run," Clay observed. "Looks to me as if that mob meant business. You don't suppose he stole the dog, do you. Case? Why doesn't he put him down?"

"Just like him to steal a dog and get the boat held up here for a month," Case answered. "Then the rainy season will come on, and we'll not enjoy the trip at all."

The boys all laughed heartily at this new manifestation of Alex's failing, and the boy turned away from them and jumped into the little row-boat, now ready for the rescue, attached to the prow.

"Here!" shouted Jule, "don't go off that way! I'm going with you. You can't fight that mess alone."

But Case was pushing off, and the next instant was rowing with long, steady strokes toward the pier down which Alex must pass to reach the river front.

The next minute Frank, who had planned to go in the boat, was in the water, headed in the same direction. The race on shore was now drawing to a close.

Clay called out to Case not to leave the boat, but to hold it ready for the pursued youngster to leap into, but this was unnecessary, as Alex reached the end of the pier before the boat could be forced there. Frank was swimming like a duck in the water, but was slowly being swept down stream.

Alex turned for an instant and faced a collection of a score or more of disreputable-looking men and boys who were dashing down the pier after him. Then he lifted his face with a grin, gave out a long "Whoop" of defiance and took to the river.

He still held the dog in his arms as he leaped, and, Alex being obliged to loosen his hold in order to swim, that thoughtful animal immediately clawed his way to the boy's half submerged shoulders and set up a howl which was as plainly a request for sympathy and assistance as could be imagined.

"Hang to the pup!" called Jule.

But the dog, showing intelligence beyond his years, seemed to realize the insecurity of his perch and sprang for the boat, now advancing swiftly toward the swimmer. The mob on the pier drew up at the very edge of the water and contented itself by showering both boy and dog with a volley of broken bricks and clubs. Case caught the dog as it struck the rim of the boat and drew it inside.

By this time Alex was within reaching distance, and was assisted in, his clothing torn and dripping. Once in the boat, he turned toward his pursuers, placed his thumb on the end of his nose, and swung his four fingers derisively in the air.

"Come on in!" he shouted. "The water's fine!"

A mixture of blackguard English, Spanish, and Indian, accompanied by another volley of bricks was the only answer. Then, having expressed his indifference to the attacks of the mob, Alex turned his attention to Frank, who was soon drawn out of the water. The dog was the first one on the deck of the *Rambler*.

"Start her up," Alex grinned. "There's more coming."

"Now you've gone and got us into another row!" grumbled Case, panting from his long pull at the oars. "You've stirred up the whole city, I guess," he continued, as an addition to the mob on the pier swung around a corner.

"Well, I had to bring the dog, didn't I?" demanded Alex, with a most annoying smile. "He's my dog. I've named him Captain Joe, for the good old sea captain!"

"It strikes me you'd better get the *Rambler* out a little farther," suggested Jule. "Those muckers on shore are getting a boat."

This seemed to be sound advice, for three boats instead of one were being started away from the pier. Clay set the motors going at full speed and headed for the other side of the river. At the same moment the *Señorita* shipped anchor and headed shoreward, with the evident purpose of picking up the approaching boats.

"Let her out!" advised Alex, patting the wet dog on the head. "If they catch us, with the help of that steamer they'll want my dog."

"Where did you get the pup?" asked Jule, trying to make friends with Captain Joe, a heavy, ugly, red-eyed, white bulldog about a year old.

"Bought him," replied Alex, "and then they tried to steal him away from me. You'd better get a move on, Clay!"

The *Rambler* was now headed up the river at her best speed, and the *Señorita* soon dropped back. As she turned to take up her old position Captain Joe, who seemed to understand that he was now a dog of great importance, put his paws upon the railing and barked an insulting farewell to her and the members of the mob she was taking on board.

"That's a fine dog," said Jule.

"You bet he is!" asserted Alex. "I saw him doing tricks up in town and bought him of a boy, and then an old man came along and claimed him, and I bought the dog of him, and then another man came along and said the dog was his, and I bought him again, and then another man came along and said the dog was his, and I bought him again, and then another man came——"

"To be continued in our next!" shouted Jule. "Serves you good and right for going off without me. Now, tell us what took place."

"Why," Alex went on, making a wry face at the *Señorita* as the *Rambler* shot around a point of land and was slowed down a trifle, "I'm telling you about it. I bought Captain Joe off a boy, and a man came along and claimed him, and I bought him off him, and then another man came along and claimed the dog, and I bought him——"

Jule chased Alex and his dog into the cabin and left them there to recover from the effects of their bath.

"That lad certainly needs a mental tonic!" he exclaimed, as he went on deck again.

"I don't doubt that he is telling the exact truth, in his whimsical way, of course," Frank argued, in defense of his friend. "That is an old trick in this country. You buy something of one man and another claims it. Alex would have been buying that dog yet if he had remained on shore. He just had to run for it or lose the dog."

"He needs a dog about as much as I need a cupola on top of my head," Case put in.

"I don't see how we've got along without a dog as long as we have," grinned Jule.

"What sort of a river is this Para stream?" asked Case, as the *Rambler* pressed on through what seemed to be a lake anywhere from ten to fifteen miles in width, with a row of long islands hugging the south shore.

"No river at all," Frank replied. "It is merely an estuary, as you will see when the Atlantic tide meets the current coming down from the west. And the river that runs into this estuary isn't the Para at all. It is the Tocantins, a stream a thousand miles long. Why this body of water is put down on the maps as the Para river is more than I can say."

About dark, after a run of sixty or seventy miles, the boys came to the island which sits at the mouth of the Tocantins river. At nine in the evening they anchored in front of Cameta, which is a small town on the west side of the Tocantins. Here they decided to spend the night.

"It seems like we were never going to get to the Amazon," Jule complained, as the lights of the town vanished for the night.

"We are still at least two hundred miles from the Amazon," Frank replied. "Across there, to the North, is Marajo island. We will sail along on this side of it all day to-morrow, probably, on an estuary fully as wide as that we have been following. Then we will come to a region of bayous from 50 to 100 yards in width. There are trees two hundred feet high in there, and the forest is so thick with tangled vines that one can scarcely get through it. Then we will come out on the Amazon, not far from Gurupa, a place of some importance. Then, after we pass the mouth of the Xingu river, we will be fairly on our way to the foot of the Andes."

"Well, hurry up!" broke in Alex, snapping his fingers at Captain Joe, "this honorable puppy wants to get his paws into the earth again."

For two days the boys sat under an awning which had been spread over the hot forward deck and feasted their city-bred eyes on the luxuriance of the tropical forest. It was all new and strange to them. In some places the boughs of the great trees met over their heads, making a green bower of the bayou through which they were passing.

Now and then a native Indian glided past them in a canoe made of some light wood. These natives are dark as negroes, but their hair is long and straight. They are not at all warlike.

The night before reaching the Amazon the boys tied up in a bayou and put all lights out early.

"If the *Señorita* is sneaking along after us," Clay said, "we must know it. This is as good a place to fight it out as any other."

"They will never fight it out in the open," Frank declared, moodily. "They will wait for a chance to blow us out of water, or to knife us from behind."

The *Rambler* was dark and still at midnight, and Alex was on watch, on the forward deck with Captain Joe sniffing the heavy air at his side.

"What do you see, old boy?" asked Alex, as the dog ran, whining, toward the prow.

Captain Joe lowered his ugly-looking muzzle and appeared to be looking down into the water. Alex groped about in the darkness for an instant and then called Clay, speaking very softly, "so as not to queer the act that is coming on," he explained.

"What is it?" whispered Clay, as the two crouched in the prow, looking into the dark bayou.

"Watch the dog," advised Alex.

Captain Joe appeared to be quivering from nose to the tip end of his stumpy tail. His ears were lifted as Alex patted his head, and his teeth snapped between snarling lips. He whined softly as Alex restrained him from jumping into the dark water.

"There's an Indian about," Alex whispered. "I bought him of an up-river Indian he seemed afraid of, and every time we've passed one he's acted like this. Seems as if the Indian he's scenting is in the water—probably swimming toward the boat."

While the two stood there in silence, listening for some ripple of water to give them the location of the sewer, the quick, sharp ring of a steamer's exhaust came to their ears. They listened for what seemed to them to be a long time, but the sounds came no nearer.

"That's the *Señorita*," Clay commented, "and she is undoubtedly waiting back there in some bay for a report from the mucker who has been sent on ahead to see what the prospects for a midnight murder are."

Captain Joe was growing more uneasy every minute, and Alex was having a hard time holding him. His sharp claws were making too much noise on the deck, and the boy tried to throw him over on his side.

"Lie still!" he commanded, but Captain Joe had other notions of what was best to do under the circumstances. He wiggled away from the boy's hands in the dark and sprang into the water.

"Now you've done it!" gritted Alex. "Wait until I get you back on the boat!"

There was now a great splashing in the water, terminating in a shriek of terror and pain, and Clay turned his searchlight on the scene of the disturbance. Two heads were seen bobbing about in the water, one of an Indian, the other of the dog.

"Get him, Captain Joe!" cried Alex, overlooking all caution in the excitement of the moment.

There was a plunge and a cry and both heads disappeared. Directly the flashlight showed the dog's head on the surface, swimming toward the boat. The Indian was nowhere in sight.

"He dove under and got away from the puppy," Alex explained, as he leaned far over the side of the boat to assist Captain Joe on deck. "Did you lose him, old boy?" he asked patting the dog on the head.

"I'm afraid not," Clay observed, turning his light on the dog and disclosing bloody water dropping away from the jaws.

Alex bent over his pet and saw a long knife wound on the shoulder.

"They sure got together in the water," he said. "I guess that is a good Indian now!"

"It is a terrible thing to take a human life," Clay said. "I hope the poor fellow got away."

"So he can come back some other night when we're not watching!" cried Alex. "If he hadn't been trying to get us he wouldn't have been here, and wouldn't have been hurt."

Captain Joe moved back to the cabin and lay down to lick his hurt.

"You'll have to keep him chained," Clay suggested, with a smile at the interested face of the boy.

"Huh!" cried Alex. "You keep your old Indians chained!"

There was another long silence. The flashlights were off, and the dog lay asleep at the cabin door. Then the puff-puff of a steamer was in the air, and the sound of churning water. As the boys listened the sounds grew fainter.

"They've gone back," Alex ventured. "They've given up all hope of getting us to-night. I wonder why they are after Frank, and why he is so close-mouthed about the matter?"

"Whatever the difficulty is," Clay said, "there is likely to be more incidents like this before we get back to the South Branch."

"Are you going to stop at Gurupa?" asked Alex, disappointed at the reticence of the other.

"We must have more gasoline," was the reply.

"Why, we filled the tanks at Para!"

"Just so, but one of the tanks sprung a leak, and we've got just about half enough for our needs."

Alex gave a low whistle of amazement.

"And we've got too little money to let it run out of the tanks without getting us anywhere," he said.

"When we fill the tanks," Clay said, dejectedly, "we'll be just about out of money."

Another long whistle from Alex.

"What are we going to do?" he asked.

"Just keep on going."

"But we can't run without gasoline."

"We'll have to take in some sort of a cargo and trade along the river," suggested Clay. "We may be able to get through in that way."

"It will be fun!" exclaimed Alex.

"We might sell Captain Joe," hinted Clay, with a laugh, "if we could find anyone to buy him."

"I guess not!" exclaimed Alex, indignantly. "If it hadn't been for Captain Joe we might all have been murdered in our beds!" No, sir; we'll starve before we'll sell Captain Joe!"

Clay chuckled, respecting the boy's loyalty to the dog, and nothing more was said on the subject.

The remainder of the night passed without incident, except that the occasional exhaust of steam told the boys that the *Señorita*, or some other meddlesome craft, was lying in the darkness to the south. In the morning, however, there were no signs of the pursuing boat.

Shortly before noon the next day the *Rambler* passed out of the narrow bayou she had been

following and speeded out on the Amazon, the river of their dreams! It is needless to say that the boys opened their eyes wide at sight of the famous stream, which is dotted with islands at that point, looking more like a lake than a river. It is so wide that the shores are only dimly seen from the center of the current.

In the afternoon they reached the little harbor where they were to buy gasoline. When, after some haggling and unnecessary delay, the motors were started again, Clay looked very sober.

"We're broke," he announced. "If we get any more gasoline we've got to earn it, in some way."

To the credit of the boys be it said that they received the announcement with due gravity, but refused to be much depressed by it. They declared that they could earn more money, never stopping to think that they were in South America and not in Chicago!

Straight to the west the mighty river lay, stretching to the blue skyline. They passed the Trombetas on the third day, and towards night came to the Madeira, into which Frank, who was at the wheel, directed the prow of the *Rambler*.

"Where might you be going, Frank?" Jule asked as, after half an hour, the boy turned the *Rambler* into a little creek perhaps five miles away from the mouth of the Madeira. "Which of the big streams that met back a ways is the Amazon?"

"This is the Madeira," Frank replied. "It is not as long as the Amazon, but it is some river for all that. I don't know that this creek has any name, but that won't prevent us tying up for the night here. I've a sort of affection for this place. You see, boys," he added, a grim smile on his face, "I stopped here on the way down from Peru. I wasn't exactly looking for sport here, either! While here at that time, I saw something that caused me to think we might pick up a cargo here now—something we can turn into gasoline and such tinned goods as we need. From now on, of course, we can get most of our food from the river and forest, as fish and game are plenty. I'll show you our dessert, directly."

The *Rambler* was soon anchored for the night in the creek, but the boys did not build a "cook" fire on shore, as the wild tangle of undergrowth came down to the edge of the creek. While Case was frying bacon and eggs and making coffee, Frank went ashore in the row-boat, "after dessert," he said, the motor boat having been anchored at least thirty feet from the bank. When he returned he carried an armful of green, tough-looking things, each weighing not far from two pounds. He passed one to each of his chums and sat grinning as they made cautious examinations and asked questions about the "fruit."

"They are custard apples," he said, after the boys had guessed for a time. "The natives call 'em chirimoya. Some of them weigh ten pounds. See, it is a pie, already made," he added, breaking open one of the "apples."

Inside was a delicious soft pulp, thickly sown with black seeds. It reminded the boys of the Indiana pawpaw. Jule said it was a banana, pine-apple, pear and strawberry all in one. Several were consumed that night and more collected for the next day.

"Besides these," Frank said, opening a second "apple pie," as he called it, "we'll find something worth while here."

CHAPTER X.—A CAMPFIRE IN THE JUNGLE

"What do you mean by something worth while?" demanded Alex, busy with pancakes at the electric stove.

"It probably isn't a dog!" laughed Jule.

"You let Captain Joe alone," commanded Alex, "or I'll instruct him to make a supper of you. He's some dog!"

"Where can any cargo procured here be disposed of?" asked Clay, hopefully, remembering the empty purse.

"There's a little town up the river where vessels bound for Europe take on cargoes," Frank explained, with a knowing smile, "and we may find something we can get rid of if we tell them we need the money."

"We need the money, fast enough," Case grumbled. "If someone hadn't let the gasoline run away we'd have plenty now! Wonder it didn't set fire to the boat!"

"Growl, bear, growl!" laughed Jule.

"Whose heard anything of the *Señorita* to-day?" asked Case, as they all lounged on the forward deck after supper.

"I think she must have gone back," Clay answered. "I haven't seen or heard her for two days."

"She hasn't gone back," Frank insisted. "She will follow us to the foothills, unless something unusual stops her. We are getting into her home territory now, and may expect trouble."

"What is all this about?" asked Jule. "Why so mysterious?"

Frank did not answer, and the boy continued:

"I wish the *Señorita* had blown up on the South Branch."

"How would you like to be on the South Branch to-night?" asked Case.

"This suits me well enough," was Jule's answer. "If there's any need of a guard to-night, who's in for it?" he added, looking about for more dessert. Frank was on his feet in a moment.

"I will watch to-night," he said. "On the way down from Peru, as I told you, I stopped here for a couple of days, and I think, as I said before, I know where we can find something that looks like money, if we watch closely to-night."

The boys looked over the darkling scene, over the narrow stream, over the broad Madeira, perhaps two hundred yards away, over the forest, crowding down to the rim of the little creek, and Case echoed the sentiments of all the rest when he asked:

"What in the world is there in here that we can get money for?"

"If we had some of this scenery on the Chicago wood market, now," Jule laughed, waving a hand over the landscape, which showed trees more than two hundred feet high, "we might be able to do business on a cash basis, but I don't see any sustenance in this."

"It strikes me that you took a queer location for your resting-place on the way out," Alex put in.

"Over there, a few hundred yards," Frank explained, "I found a pretty fair hotel—in a tree! It seemed to me, at that time to be about the neatest, coziest little hotel on earth!"

"Hotel?" repeated Clay, wondering if the strange boy was at last about to talk of the mystery which surrounded him, after a silence of weeks.

"You see," Frank continued, "when I came down the river I had—well, I had something in my possession which—there was something the other people wanted, you understand. They had followed me pretty closely from Cloud island, and I thought I'd drop in here and let them go by."

"And they did?" asked Clay, disappointed at the guarded tone of the boy. "Did they go by?"

"After three days," was the reply. "It was while I was hiding in the tree hotel I've been telling you about that I saw—well, that I came upon—or, rather, that I arranged for the cargo that we may be able to turn into money—when we come to the ships that are going to Europe!"

"I'd like to know what you're talking about!" exclaimed Alex. "There is about as much coherence to your explanation as there is to a railroad freight schedule. What was it you 'arranged for?'"

"Where is Cloud island?" demanded Jule, not waiting for the boy to reply.

Frank flushed, as if caught in some dishonorable evasion of the truth, and remained silent.

"How long will it take to get this may-be cargo out?" asked Clay, as much to break the painful silence as for any other purpose.

"Not very long," was the reply.

"Can we do it in the night?" asked Jule. "Say, but I'd like to go into that jungle in the night!"

"Then we'll take Captain Joe and go," asserted Alex.

Captain Joe wagged his stumpy tail as if seconding the proposition, and Alex began telling him what a fine gentleman of a dog he was. Captain Joe had already begun to fill out, he having been half starved at the time Alex rescued him, and was now a powerful fellow and as playful as a kitten. The boys were teaching him to do all sorts of tricks.

"You'd better keep the dog on the boat," Frank warned. "He'll only bark and attract attention to us."

"In that wilderness!" ejaculated Case. "Who is there in that bunch of tall timber to hear a dog bark?"

The boys talked over the proposed night visit to the jungle while they finished supper and washed and set away the dishes. Frank seemed to be of the opinion that he could best do what was to be done alone, though the others scoffed at the notion of his bringing out, single handed, anything that might be traded for gasoline and tinned goods!

It was finally decided that Case should go with Frank, and that the other boys should remain on the boat and listen for such signals as the shore party might send out. If help was needed in moving what Frank vaguely referred to as "his cargo," one long call was to be the signal; if there was danger, three long calls.

The waters of the creek would carry the motor boat only in the middle of the current, for the shores, besides sloping over shallows, were here and there lined with fallen tree-trunks.

"It looks like ruination!" Alex commented, as the row-boat was made ready, and from that moment the stream was known as "Ruination Creek."

Clay rowed the two boys ashore, saw that they were provided with automatic revolvers and flashlights, and then took the boat back to the *Rambler*. It was left ready for instant use, however, with weapons and flashlights on the stern seat.

"There's something strange about that boy Frank," Jule commented, as the two boys disappeared in what seemed from the boat to be a solid wall of green foliage, their flashlights showing only dimly through the heavy undergrowth. "I don't understand him at all. What kind of a cargo can he get in there in the darkness? And what is keeping him from telling us all about it?"

"I don't quite understand why he should make a mystery of the proposed cargo, as we are all equally interested with himself in the matter," Clay admitted. "I don't see why he shouldn't be as confidential with us as we have always been with him. He has never explained to my satisfaction why he was hanging around the warehouse in the rain that night on the South Branch."

"Why, he was lonesome, and homesick, and anxious to go along with us, yet afraid to ask," interposed Alex. "Anyway, he'll tell us when he gets good and ready. Don't let's knock!"

"That's slang!" Jule shouted. "You wash dishes!"

"Is that slang, Clay?" asked Alex.

"Well, it's a short and vigorous way of expressing a sensible admonition, so we may as well let it go," Clay replied.

"Sensible admonition! I'll write that down!" laughed Jule.

"And the finding of the diamonds! And the newspaper with the penciled hand pointing to the advertisement offering the \$500 reward for the return of the gems," Clay went on, "is another strange thing. Who could have placed the marked newspaper where it was found? You remember, Jule, that the lawyer who paid over the reward asked me how the newspaper came to be there, and I couldn't tell him!"

"No one had been ashore that morning except Frank," Jule said, "and he went away early, and might have sneaked back with the paper. It wasn't there the night before. It sure was either Frank or Captain Joe who put the paper there."

Captain Joe, the dog, worthy representative of a staunch old friend, put his chin on Alex's knee, at mention of his name, and wagged his tail as if promising to unravel the whole mystery as soon as he got time!

"I wish someone would offer a reward now that we could get," Jule grinned. "I think we could use a little old reward about now. Anyway, I don't see where all our \$200 and the \$500 reward went to. We must have been tossing money to the birds!"

Clay and Alex looked at each other with glances of understanding. Jule had never been told of the loss of the money.

"Funny about that reward coming just at the time it did, and just as it did," began Alex, but here a great chattering in the jungle cut the conversation short. There was such a rustling in the foliage, now invisible in the blackness of the night, and such a medley of whisperings and shrill cries that the boys involuntarily reached for their weapons. Then Jule laughed and turned on the prow light, for they had been sitting in the darkness.

"You'll see 'em in a second," he told the others, winking the light on and off to attract more attention. "There's a brigade of Brazilian monkeys in there, and the boys have stirred them up with their lights and noise."

"I doubt if we'll get a look at them," Clay corrected, "for the Brazilian monkeys are shy little chaps. Even Captain Joe seems to understand that they will not be at home to callers to-night," he added, as the dog wagged his tail and lay down again.

As the two explorers in the forest passed farther from the creek the protests of the monkeys died out, and all was reasonably still again. Clay moved over by the light switch so that Jule could not turn it on again, as he considered it safer to sit in the darkness. The bright prow light made too good a mark for a hostile gun, he thought.

While Clay, Alex, and Jule waited on the forward deck of the *Rambler*, still discussing the incomprehensible actions and silences of Frank, that young man, accompanied by Case, was plunging through the thickets lying south of Ruination Creek. Back of them rolled the Amazon, only a short distance away. To the east lay the Madeira, to the west the level plain ending only at the Andes.

They had proceeded perhaps half a mile when Frank stopped in a little opening and looked about with expectant eyes. The noises of the forest were all about them. Birds, suddenly awakened from sleep, cried out to each other from treetops, and hidden things scurried along under the dense foliage which everywhere concealed the rich black earth.

"It was right here somewhere," Frank said, "that I found the tree hotel, and it is right about here that we'll get the cargo if we get it at all. Do you smell anything unusual?" he added, sniffing the air.

"Only wood burning."

"Well, that means a campfire!"

"But who would be building a campfire in this wilderness?" demanded Case. "Perhaps the chimney of your hotel smokes!" he added, laughing.

"That is for us to find out!" Frank replied, and Case detected a tone of anxiety in his voice. "If anyone has been in here, looking around, why, my cargo—"

"What about your cargo?" asked Case, as the other stopped suddenly.

"Why, it will be gone," Frank admitted, in a moment.

Directly Case caught his companion by the arm and pointed straight ahead into the jungle.

"There is where the smoke comes from," he explained. "There's a fire in the thicket yonder, and men moving around it."

Frank followed the direction of the pointing hand and grasped his companion by the arm.

"We may as well go back," he whispered. "Those men are here because they know about my cargo. If we move silently, they will not know that we are here. Come along! They must not see me to-night!"

"I've got to know something more about this cargo before I give up hope of getting it," Case declared, stubbornly. "I'm not going to miss a chance of getting the money we need for any little interruption like this. Who are those men? Why are you afraid to let them see you here? Do you know why they are here? Ever see them before?"

"Why, it is too dark to see their faces," Frank explained, hesitatingly, "and we couldn't tell friend from foe at that distance, anyway," he added. "But the fact that they are here is enough for me to know! Come along! We're going back to the *Rambler* now, we can come again in the morning."

"That's the trouble with you!" Case whispered, reprovingly. "You are too much of a quitter!"

You were afraid to come on board the *Rambler*, that night on the South Branch. Now you're afraid to go on, because you see two men standing by a campfire! Well, I don't know where your cargo is, or what it is, and you all say I'm a kicker and a prophet of evil, but I'm going on in and find out why those men are camping in this jungle."

"I'm sorry you've got such a bad opinion of me," Frank said, slowly. "Perhaps you may change your mind, in time. As for going in there, I'll go, if you insist upon it, but I'm telling you now that you will regret it if you do."

The fire died down a bit, and the figures which had stood before it were no longer in sight. The boys shut off their lights, took firmer hold of their weapons, and stood considering.

But the decision was not with them, for while they pondered two forms rose up behind them and they were thrown to the ground.

Case and Frank were not permitted to lie on the ground long after being seized from behind and thrown down. Frank's searchlight was taken from his hand and directed upon his face.

"Humph!" grunted a rumbling voice.

"Only a kid!" grumbled a man who was looking over the shoulder of the one who held the light, at the same time holding Case to the earth with a heavy knee.

When the light shifted Frank saw two burly figures with thick breasts and short necks, with faces masked by great straggling beards. The men were dirty and unkempt, and their clothes were torn into tatters, probably, the boy thought, by contract with the jungle.

The lads struggled in vain. Their weapons were taken from them and then they were hustled toward the fire they had observed from the bush. It was a roaring fire, built of some gum-running wood, and the heat and smoke of it well-nigh blistered the faces of the prisoners and stifled their breath.

After being roughly searched, the captives were bundled against the bole of a great tree which stood some distance from the fire. They were so dazed at what had taken place, at the tragic change of situation, that at first they did not sense what was going on around them. Then they saw as hideous an object as they had ever set their eyes on bending so close to the fire that it seemed to them that the flesh must be cooking on his repulsive face.

One of the men gave this object a stout push in a moment and sent him whirling in the direction of the tree.

"Watch 'em, Ugly!" he ordered, and the object settled down on his haunches and glared at the prisoners until it seemed that the evil eyes must pop out of his head.

The creature who had been called "Ugly" certainly appeared to merit the name. He was of medium height, black as a negro, but with straight, black hair, which was knotted and tangled until it resembled a net complicated by nature as well as by human hands. The boys knew from the looks of the mass that it had recently been anointed with some kind of grease, and that it held an odor all its own.

But the most striking thing about the stolid face which now leered at them over the barrel of an automatic rifle which lay in the fellow's lap was its seeming growth of horns. There were three of these, one at the fullness of the under lip, and two just above the corners of the cruel upper lip. These horns gave the fellow's face something of the appearance of such representations of Mephisto as the boys had seen in plays.

"No, that is not the Old Nick!" Frank whispered to Case, well knowing what was in the disturbed mind of his companion in captivity, "that is a Mura Indian, ornamented according to an ancient custom of his people. He belongs to a peaceful tribe, and may not be as fierce as he looks."

"Would he shoot if we made a break for the tall timber?"

"Probably."

"I'd like to knock those horns down his throat!" Case growled. "He has no right to keep us here. Would the horns grow out again if I should knock 'em off?"

Even in the serious plight the boys were in, Frank could not keep from chuckling at this, for the horns were of wood, and were held in place by being pushed through the flesh from the inside. When this was explained to Case his comment was that he would enjoy having the job of fixing the things on.

"He'd have a sore face for a time," Case declared, "just like I did when I had my teeth filled. We've got to get away from him in some way. We'll be murdered if we remain here, and we can only die in an attempt to get back to the *Rambler*."

"We may have to make a run for it in time," Frank answered, "but we may as well wait until we know more about what our capture means. I understand something of the Mura dialect, and will talk with him when I get a chance."

"Go on and do it now," urged Case. "I'd like to know what this pretty little scene is all about. What are those Englishmen doing in here, anyway, and what are they muttering about over there by the fire?"

Frank did not reply, for he was asking himself the very same question without finding any answer.

"Perhaps they're here after your cargo," suggested Case.

Frank shrugged his shoulders despairingly.

"That may be," he admitted. "That is what I fear!"

"Could they carry it away without a boat?"

"Y-e-s," Frank admitted, slowly. "Besides, they may have a boat."

"I'd like to know what kind of a cargo you're talking about," said Case, half-angrily. "It can't be much if two men could carry it through these jungles in their naked hands."

He looked Frank questioningly in the face as he spoke, but the latter did not fall into the trap. He maintained his accustomed silence regarding the character of the cargo he had entered the thicket to find.

"Ask him what he'll take to let us go?" suggested Case, directly.

"We haven't got anything to give," objected Frank. "You can't bribe a fellow with hot air."

"If I could," replied Case, sniffing at the heat of the fire and the heat of the heavy air that breathed out of the forest, "I could do some bribing. But this chap would rather have one of our searchlights than own the First National Bank of Chicago. Try him on that!"

"We haven't got any searchlights," answered Frank, dejectedly, taking note of their electric lights in the ham-like hands of their captors. "Those men have taken them. They seem to be preparing to leave, and perhaps I'll soon have a chance to talk with Ugly, as they call him. See! The men are pointing toward the boat I suppose they'll be going there next."

"I hope the boys will give them a red-hot reception!" Case exclaimed in so loud a tone that one of

the Englishmen turned and scowled in that direction.

"What you lads grumbling about?" he demanded. "If you want to keep whole heads on your necks, you'd better stow that chin. Ugly is a bit nervous to-night, and his gun might go off."

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Case, as calmly as the nature of the occasion would admit of.

"Keep you for pets!" roared the fellow, impatiently.

"This object in front of us looks to me like the kind of a pet a tough like you would want," Case answered, angrily.

The two men whispered together for a moment, paying no attention to the retort, and then one of them asked:

"How much petrol have you in your tanks?"

Case eyed the speaker with no little curiosity. His figure and dress, his lack of any orderly arrangement of his ragged garments, told him that he belonged to the lower grade of Englishmen, still his speech and manner indicated no little degree of refinement.

"What's petrol?" he asked, not that he needed information on the subject, but to keep the other talking.

"You call it gasoline in this blawsted country," said the other. "How much have you in the tanks of the *Rambler*?"

"What's it to you?" asked the boy. "You're not going to get the boat. If you go within reach of the boys' guns they'll blow the tops of your ugly heads off. Go on, if you want to! You'll see!"

"We really need a boat!" laughed the fellow. "And so," he added, "we'll take our chances and leave you to the polite attentions of Ugly while we go and get the *Rambler*, with your permission, of course!"

"Where is your own boat?" demanded Case. "Why do you have to steal ours. You aren't river pirates, are you?"

"Never you mind what we are, sonny," laughed the Englishman, "and never you mind about our boat. Perhaps, you know, we lost it on a reef at Cloud island!" he added, glancing keenly at Frank.

Frank dropped his eyes, showing either embarrassment or lack of courage, Case could not determine which. Once before, when Cloud island had been thoughtlessly brought into the conversation by the boy himself he had shown great confusion. There must be some mystery about Cloud island, was Case's conclusion, some mystery of which the Englishman as well as the boy had knowledge!

Plainly the name of the island had been used to bring to the boy's mind some unpleasant recollection, for it had not been necessary, in mentioning the loss of a boat, to refer to the island at all. Therefore, Case reasoned, the name meant something to the Englishman as well as to Frank, and the reference to it had been designed to warn or threaten the boy. He resolved to know more about Cloud island as soon as he found an opportunity to talk with Frank! In the meantime, he might be able to get something of a clue from the Englishman.

"What do you know about Cloud island?" he asked. "I don't believe you've ever been there. You're only river thieves!"

The Englishman, not at all angry at the epithet, glanced keenly at Frank, as if asking a question with his eyes, and the boy, who remained silent, studied the bearded face intently.

"I know enough about it, lad," was the significant reply, made directly to Frank, although he had not spoken at all.

"Are you going there?" continued Case. "To Cloud island I mean?"

"What else do you think I'm being roasted and eaten alive by insects in this blawsted wilderness for?" asked the other.

"Then why don't you move on and let us alone?" asked Case.

"All in good time, lad, all in good time!"

"We're going to move on up the river as soon as you go down," grunted the other Englishman, looking significantly at Frank.

With this declaration, which seemed to amount to a threat, the fellow turned to his companion and the two, after conferring together in whispers for a short time and giving the Indian instructions in a tongue unknown to Case, plunged into the thicket, taking the general direction in which the *Rambler* lay.

"Now ask Ugly what this is all about!" directed Case, as the backs of the two men disappeared from the ring of light given out by the fire.

Frank had little trouble in understanding the Indian, and the latter seemed willing to talk, so all the fellow knew of the purposes and movements of the Englishmen was soon in the possession of the boy. But the Indian watched the boys closely as he talked, keeping his automatic trained on them. He evidently stood in deadly fear of the Englishmen, and was resolved to do their bidding, even if murder resulted.

"The Englishmen engaged him as guide," Frank interpreted to Case, "to take them to Cloud island, at the headwaters of the Amazon. They lost their boat some distance below, and are determined to take possession of the *Rambler*. He is to shoot us if we try to get away, and is to have his ears cut off and his nose pulled out by the roots if he does not obey orders. That's all."

"That's enough, I think!" Case commented. "But they can't get the boat! The boys are there, and will put up a fight for it."

"The Englishmen will do their best, because they want to turn us back. Failing in this, they will kill us if they can."

"Look here!" Case demanded. "What is this all about? Have you ever seen those men before? Where is Cloud island? What mutual understanding concerning it lies between you and these men? You may as well tell me, for I'll have it out of you."

Frank gave unsatisfactory replies, and a sullen silence fell between the two chums.

"I wonder if they will find the boys asleep when they get to the *Rambler*?" Frank asked,

anxiously, after a time. This was no time for anger between them.

"They surely won't!" answered Case. "If they do find the boys asleep they'll find Captain Joe there with the goods I say," the boy added, "I've a good notion to take a hop-step-and-jump for the *Rambler*. I could get there before they did, and make it a sure thing that the boys would not be asleep. I believe it is worth trying."

"Ugly would put half a dozen bullets into you before you got a dozen feet away," Frank objected. "See! He's suspicious of us now."

"He hears something in the forest back of us," Case observed. "I wonder if he will shoot if I turn around to see what it is? It might be a wild animal, you know."

"Watch him! Watch Ugly!"

Frank uttered the cry as he arose to his feet and pointed with one hand toward the guard, now also standing on his feet, the gun lying on the ground. There was a look of terror on the man's ugly face which would have been comical if it had not been so expressive of abject horror. The fellow's eyes "hung out like a hat pin," as Case afterwards expressed it, and his mouth dropped agape, as if there were no strength in the fellow to control the action of his jaws.

"For the love of Madge!" cried Frank. "What does the man see?"

"I'm not going to stop to answer that question!" Case replied. "It's me for the *Rambler*!"

Ugly did not even notice the lads as they started away. He stood perfectly still for an instant, then turned and ran, diving head first into the thicket as a swimmer dives into an oncoming breaker. Case and Frank paused by the fire and looked back, to discover, if possible, the danger from which the fellow had flown. What they saw was a face and a hand of fire, lifting from the ground, behind the tree, pointing and nodding in the direction Ugly had taken.

CHAPTER XII.—A PLOT AGAINST THE RAMBLER

In the meantime, the three boys on the *Rambler* were becoming a bit restless, and not a little anxious too. The Brazilian night was dark, and there was a whisper of wind in the trees. The water lapped the shores and the sides of the boat unceasingly, as if uttering a warning to them to be up and away. It was almost unbearably hot, too, for they were nearly under the equator.

"I think I know what the kid is thinking about when he talks of a cargo," Alex said, presently. "He has often talked to me about gathering Brazil nuts and taking a load out to some shipping point. They bring good prices in New York."

"Do you mean these three-cornered nuts?" asked Jule.

"Sure! The ones you whittle the shells from with a knife, and find a solid, triangular piece of meat on the inside. They grow in big clusters which look like hornets' nests, and they break open the heads of the Indians when they fall from the tree. A ton would bring nearly \$400 in Chicago, and that would help some, especially as we'll probably get back there broke and hungry."

"When did you take up Case's role of prophet of evil?" asked Clay.

Alex laughed and said no more at that time.

"I've got a better guess than that," Jule began, then. "He is going after rubber. They tap trees and a white sap runs out, and they cook the sap in smoke, over moulds, and make rubber coats. I'll wager he's got a cache of rubber in there."

"I wonder where the rubber trees first came from?" asked Alex.

"Oh, they came down from the mountains."

This from Jule, who had been reading books about South America all the way down—books presented by Captain Joe.

"A few million years ago," Jule went on, glad of a chance to air his knowledge, "a sort of Mediterranean sea covered all the Amazon basin. The mouth of the big river was away up to the west there, near the foothills. Then the rains of the long years washed the soil down into the valley, inch by inch, and the rivers pushed it along until the continent east of the mountains was formed."

"Must have taken a long time to wash this continent down!" yawned Alex.

"I said millions of years, didn't I?" reproved Jule. "And the continent isn't finished yet. Do you comprehend that, boys? The continent isn't finished to-day! Not after millions of years!"

"That's about the length of time Case and Frank have been gone!" declared Alex, nudging Clay to watch Jule display anger at the irrelevant observation.

"The continent won't be completed for millions of years," Jule went on, not at all put out by the alleged witticism. "The Amazon alone is carrying enough sediment to the Atlantic every day to make a cube of earth five hundred feet each way. How long will it take all the rivers running down from the Andes to wash the hills into the sea? Perhaps you can tell me that, Smarty?" he added, tapping Alex on the head with his open palm, whereat Captain Joe rolled up his red eyes, though the boys could not see them in the darkness, and emitted a series of low growls.

"Where will it all end?" asked Clay, musingly.

"When there are no more mountains," Jule answered, proudly, sure of his ground. "The mountains will be washed into the seas, and the seas will fill up, and then the world will be finished."

"I wish this night was finished!" Alex broke in. "I wish Case and Frank would come back, cargo or no cargo."

"I think I'll go a little way into the forest and see what they are up to," Clay suggested, and Alex and Jule were on their feet in a moment.

"That's just what we'll do," Jule cried. "We will go look 'em up!"

"But we can't all go and leave the boat alone."

"Why, the boat won't run away!"

"Someone might run away with it, though."

"Tell you," Jule suggested, "we'll leave the prow light burning, so we can see if anyone goes near it, and then we won't go out of sight of the light. How will that answer?"

"Fine!" Alex panted, trying to pull Captain Joe back into the cabin. His highness, the dog, did not relish the notion of being locked up in the hot little coop while the boys had a run on shore, so he drew back with all his strength.

Alex won at last, however, and the door was closed on the indignant bulldog. To speak the truth, Clay was rather glad that the boys had chosen to accompany him to the shore, for it was dark and uncanny in the forest. There was an indication of rain, though it was in the midst of the dry season, and a strange odor which they could not account for came to the nostrils of the lads.

"A Brazilian forest," Jule said, as they left the row-boat tied up in a thicket and faced the jungle, "is about the most mysterious place on the round earth. Down here where we are, in the basement, it is always twilight, even at noon of a sunny day. We see only the stems of plants and creepers and the boles of the trees. The beauty, the blossoms, the colors, the magnificence, is all at the top. Someone said that the only place from which to view a South American forest in all its glory is from the top of a mountain, or from an aeroplane."

"There isn't much magnificence down here," Alex answered. "Here, Jule, what you got in your clothes that smells like matches, and what you sneaking off there alone for?"

"Never you mind!" Jule replied. "You just stick to your guesses and let me alone. I'm going to give those boys the scare of their lives. I'll teach them to go off and stay like this!"

"You stay here!" commanded Clay, but the mischievous boy was already gone. They heard him pushing through the underbrush for a time, saw the round eye of his flashlight as it swept aloft, and then the jungle was once more still—save for the natural life within it—and dark.

"Shall we go on in after him?" asked Alex. "He may get into trouble, and he's none too strong yet."

"I think we would better remain here," Clay replied. "If there is danger we will hear the signal

agreed upon."

"Frank says he remained hidden in a tree in there for some time," Alex remarked, then. "Now, what was he hiding from, and how did he get down here? If he came in a steamer, and the steamer was waiting for him outside, that wouldn't be hiding at all. Might as well try to hide while riding on the neck of an elephant!"

"Have you ever thought that Frank may be the one who put the marked paper on the *Rambler* that morning?" asked Clay, irrelevantly.

"Yes, I have thought of that, but why should he have done it—if he did? If he knew where the diamonds were, why didn't he arrange things so he could secure the reward for himself? He needed the money badly enough, according to his own story."

"But how could he know where the diamonds were?" asked Clay.

"Well, the person who left the marked paper on the boat knew where the stones were! You can't get away from that! Besides, Frank had been seen loitering outside, and there had been a motion at the glass panel of the door just before he showed himself. Oh, it is all rather suspicious!"

"We'll have to give the boy time to explain everything," Clay admonished. "I have great faith in him."

"How long do you think that kid, Jule, will remain in there?" Alex yawned.

"Not long, I hope."

It had been the original intention to enter the jungle as far as the boat light could be seen, but now the necessity of remaining where they were, or close to the shore, was apparent, as they had no means of knowing in which direction either of the boys had gone, and there were three wanderers to watch for instead of only two. If they followed in the direction supposed to have been taken by Frank and Case, they would be apt to get farther and farther from Jule, and if they tried to follow the latter, it would be the two who would be farthest from their help, should help be required.

The only course to pursue, then, with reference to boys who were in the dark forest, was to remain where they were, guard the boat, and be prepared to get back to the *Rambler* in quick time should necessity demand such action.

The boys waited with premonitions of approaching evil in their minds. Now and then Captain Joe, disgusted with the conduct of his master, sent out a call for sympathy and liberty, and the voice of the dog sounded cheerful and friendly to the anxious lads.

Small creatures of air and thicket were talking all around them, and now and then a gruffer utterance in the distance told of larger denizens of the forest aroused by the visit of the boys. After a time a crunching in the undergrowth warned the listeners that some creature of large size was approaching them on a visit of inspection.

"It may be an Indian!" Alex whispered, when the sounds were very close indeed.

"An Indian wouldn't advance in the midst of a racket like that," Clay reasoned. "It is probably some wild animal coming up to see what all this row is about. Keep your automatic and your flashlight ready."

Alex did not need any such warning, for he stood with the automatic in one hand and the dark flashlight in the other.

The trampling came on, closer and closer, and the boys involuntarily drew nearer together. They could hear shrubs cracking and breaking under the heavy tread of their approaching visitor.

"It must be a jaguar!" whispered Alex. "Shall I turn on my light before he gets up to us?"

"More likely a peccary, or wild hog," Clay suggested. "They are dangerous only when attacked."

Snorts and grunts coming from the thicket soon proved the correctness of this supposition, and then the peccary turned back, much to the relief of the boys and the disgust of Captain Joe, who had from the cabin scented a possible enemy and a chance at pursuit.

Then another and much more surprising and disquieting sound came from the forest. This was nothing less than the gruff voices of two men, speaking in English. The boys listened in wonder and dismay. Who could these people be? Why were they there in that lonely spot? Were their intentions friendly or hostile? These questions were soon answered, and in a most unsatisfactory manner.

"The Indian will take care of the two kids, all right," they heard a coarse voice say, "and we'll get into the boat before the others wake up."

"Lucky to find a boat here—and a motor boat at that," another voice said. "It won't take us long to get to the headwaters now."

The boys stood perfectly still, listening to the throaty chuckles which followed this last remark. And so the new comers were enemies, and had designs on the boat! More than that, their conversation indicated that two of the boys, probably Case and Frank, had been discovered by the marauders and left in the custody of a native! The situation was serious, especially as the prow light disclosed the deserted condition of the *Rambler*.

One of the men moved out to the shore, so that a burly figure was outlined against the light on the prow of the boat. The lads moved forward a pace, in order to inspect the intruder at closer range, and a snapping twig betrayed their presence.

"Stay where you are!" a rough voice called back to them, "and we'll just take charge of this boat!"

"Step into that light," Clay answered, "and you'll take charge of a bullet!"

CHAPTER XIII.—A PLEASANT SURPRISE

Little dreaming of the desperate situation at the boat, yet understanding that the Englishmen had set out to take possession of her, Case and Frank stood silently, watchfully, at the campfire while the thing the Indian had fled from stepped out of the darkness and approached them.

Two conflicting emotions held them motionless, speechless. One was of joy at the flight of their guard, the other was something akin to the terror which had sent Ugly into the bush at headlong speed.

The noise of the Indian's progress through the forest might still be heard as trailing vines tore at his garments and sent him floundering to the ground only to leap to his feet and dash recklessly on once more. The thing advancing upon them was silent, the crouching figure moving over the ground like an ape, the features obliterated as to outline by a veil of yellow flame from which misty emanations proceeded.

Case was not at all superstitious. He saw in the queer figure only a trick of some enemy, and so sprang for the automatic rifle which the Indian had cast away in his flight. The next moment it was leveled at the advancing figure. The result was as remarkable as it was instantaneous.

The figure dropped to the ground, rolling about, kicking spasmodically at the empty air, and emitting shouts of laughter which rang oddly through the forest. Case understood and darted forward, shouting that it was Jule, up to another of his tricks!

"Whoo—pee!" yelled Jule, rolling about in an abandonment of mirth.

"I'll show you!" Case cried, taking the boy by the back of the neck. "I'll show you what we do to spooks in Brazil!"

Frank stood as if still unconvinced.

"Quit!" Jule remonstrated, as Case lifted him to his feet. "You let me go! Don't you know any more than to take a fellow by the hair of his head. "Quit, I tell you!"

Case released the boy, whose face and hands were still shining with the sulphur which he had rubbed from old-fashioned matches, and pushed him away as he arose to his feet.

"You smell like a match factory!" he said.

Jule leaned against the bole of the tree and laughed until the woods rang again, while Frank stood looking on with wonder in his eyes.

"I thought he was the Old Scratch!" the boy commented, in a moment. "Where did he get that fire paint?"

"Rubbed it off from matches," answered Case. "It makes a great show in the dark. No wonder Ugly took to his heels!"

"Who is your horned friend?" asked Jule, nodding his head in the direction the Indian had taken. "He is some runner!"

Then Jule glanced about at the fire, at the unfamiliar automatic gun in Case's hands, and at a collection of simple cooking implements which lay to one side, and asked:

"Where did all this come from, and what are you boys doing here? Where's the cargo?" then, breaking in upon each other, as if that would hasten the relation of the strange story they had to tell, each one giving an entirely different version of the incident, the boys informed Jule of what had taken place. Case described the Englishmen as bushmen, similar to the natives who prowl the forests of Australia, while Frank insisted that they were educated men gone back to primitive life because of degenerate dispositions or because of fear of punishment for crimes committed.

"It looks to me, then," Jule commented, looking suspiciously about, "that I came up in good time, and that my desire to give you a good scare brought you out of a bad situation. Oh, my!" he added, throwing back his head, "how that Indian did take to the woods! I don't believe he will stop this side of the Arctic circle. He certainly can go some!"

"He probably has gone to warn the others," Case suggested.

"That is exactly where he has gone!" cried Jule, "and we'd better be getting back. If we keep right along behind him, we'll have the brutes between two fires."

"How did you manage to get away from Clay?" asked Case. "He didn't want you to leave the boat."

"Why, when we all came ashore to see why you boys did not come back, I just naturally sneaked away."

"You all came ashore!" echoed Case. "Do you mean to say that there is no one in the boat? No one on board at all?"

"There wasn't when I came away!" admitted Jule, sheepishly.

"That's a nice thing, too!" cried Case, reprovingly.

Without waiting to further discuss the situation, anxious only for the safety of their friends and the boat, the three made their way through the black jungle at reckless speed. The night had cleared a trifle, and now and then a glance upward, through the jealous foliage of the trees and creepers, revealed a star looking down into the aisles of the wood.

Now and then they came to a little glade clearer of undergrowth than the general run of the jungle through which they were struggling, and at such time, with only the complaints of the creatures of the forest about them, they halted and listened. Presently, during such a halt, they heard a shot, and then the sharp, snappy, full-throated barking of a dog.

"Captain Joe!" Jule cried.

"He's on the boat?" asked Frank.

"Sure he is, unless he's found the key and unlocked the cabin door," replied Jule, with a grin.

"If they get hold of Captain Joe," Case observed, not without a grin of satisfaction, "they'll know they've come to a scrapper."

"He'll climb on their roofs and claw their shingles off!" exclaimed Jule.

"I won't have to wash dishes in a month!" crowed Case. "That is the slangiest slang I ever heard!"

"I don't care," Jule answered as he swung a hanging creeper out of his eyes. "That is just what

Captain Joe will do if he gets a chance. But you needn't go and tell Clay that I said it, all the same!" he added, with visions of many dishes to wash before his eyes.

Another shot came as the boys started away, and Case declared that it undoubtedly came from an automatic revolver, and proved that the boys were putting up a fight.

"Captain Joe told us that," Jule insisted.

Several other shots were fired before the boys came to the bank of Ruination creek. It was still dark, although a star reflected in the water at rare intervals. Still, the outlines of the trees could be faintly seen across the creek, and the prow light burning on the *Rambler* cast a white radiance farther down stream.

The three crept out to the margin of the creek and peered over a low, bush-crowned headland toward the boat. From where they stood the forward deck was in plain sight. At the back an overhanging tree made a black blot about the stern. There was no one to be seen.

Another shot came from farther down, and the barking of the dog became fierce and incessant.

"Captain Joe will be eating up that cabin next," Jule volunteered. "I wish I could tell him what to say!"

"Why don't they go into the cabin and let him out?" asked Frank.

"Because neither side can get into the boat," replied Case, grasping the situation at once. "Anyone showing himself under that prow light would be shot to death in a second. The only way the ruffians can get to the *Rambler* is to shoot out the light."

"Then how are we ever to get on board?" asked Frank.

"Drive the outlaws away!" replied Case.

"Sure!" Jule put in, thoughtfully, "and I've found a way to do it. You just watch me."

The two boys watched Jule with both wonder and amusement in their eyes as he drew out a great bunch of old-fashioned sulphur matches and began rolling them between the palms of his hands. Very little came from his efforts, and Case began poking fun at him.

"Doesn't work like it did when you scared the wits out of the Indian, does it?" he demanded. "I reckon we ran so fast through the thickets that we left the sulphur stuff behind, leaving only the dry sticks in your pocket!"

"Never you mind," Jule answered, "you just wait until I get ready, then I'll show you something worth while."

"That's what Frank said about his cargo!" cried Case, apparently determined to find whatever humor there was in the situation. "Where is that cargo now, kid?" he added, turning toward Frank and giving him a pull by the arm. "Do you think that Indian carried it off with him?"

"I'm going after the cargo before daylight," the lad replied, stubbornly.

"Yes you are!" Jule broke in. "We're going to get as far away from Ruination creek as we can before sunrise! You see what Clay says about your going into that mess again! Why, kid, those men you saw—the friends of yours who are trying to get the boat now!—will hang around here for a month if we don't go away—just on the chance of getting the *Rambler*."

"I'm going after that cargo again," repeated Frank, "and I'm going to get it—if those Englishmen haven't carried it off. Friends of mine, you call 'em! Well, I guess not!"

"How many will it take to carry the cargo out to the boat," asked Case, giving Jule a sly dig in the ribs, "if we get it away from your friends?"

Frank laughed at the attempt to provoke him, but made no reply, and in a moment Jule resumed his work with the sulphur matches. This playing "spook" with matches was an old trick of the boy's, and he had brought these old-fashioned ones along on the chance of finding them useful. He was more than satisfied with the result of his first tryout with them, and chuckled as he thought of the fright of Ugly, and also of the assistance he had been able by their aid to render his friends.

Only for his childish prank, he reflected, Case and Frank would still be in the custody of the Indian, and Clay and Alex would be facing the renegades alone.

"What are you going to do when you get through that monkey work?" asked Case, presently, as Jule continued to roll matches in his hands.

"I'm going on board the *Rambler*," was the reply.

"I'm going to let Captain Joe out, and tell him what to do to the men in the bush."

Case glanced again at the lighted prow of the boat and at the wide space one attempting to reach the deck would have to cross under rifle fire.

"You never can do it!" he declared.

"See that tree back there, at the stem of the boat?" asked Jule, in a whisper. "Well, I'm going to swim under water until I get to the black spot under that tree, where the light is shut out by the foliage and the cabin, and then I'm going to climb up on the back platform of the boat and through the window to the interior of the cabin. Any objections, Sober Sides?"

"You can't do it," Frank whispered. "You are not well yet. Suppose you let me try?"

"Not in a hundred years!" chuckled Jule. "I guess you don't know I'm the champion under-water swimmer of Chicago! I'll be inside the boat in no time, and then there will be doings. I'll show my devil face to the bushmen and let the dog out, and there won't be anything to it. Perhaps I'd better make a devil dog out of Captain Joe!"

"Try it, and he'll eat you up!" cried Case. "Don't be foolish."

"The sulphur will wash off," warned Frank.

"Water will only make it all the brighter," insisted Jule. "Now watch me go to it! When I get in, you boys come. Will you? All right! Now here goes for a swim! Be sure and keep well under water when you come!"

There was a slight splash in the creek, and Jule was out of sight.

CHAPTER XIV.—A BATTLE FOR THE BOAT

Case had expressed the situation exactly in answering Frank's question as to why the boys did not go into the cabin and release Captain Joe. The prow light cast a circle of illumination over the forward deck and also over the water between the prow and the shore.

Anyone stepping into that circle would simply be a mark for the bullets of his enemies. The only way in which the boat could be safely entered, with the bushmen and the boys watching each other, would be to shoot out the light and make a rush for it.

This Clay did not care to do, for he had hope that the boys back in the forest might in time come to his assistance. He had understood from the few words spoken in his hearing by the intruders that Case and Frank had been attacked by the fellows, but he did not know the exact situation, of course. And even if Case and Frank were in as great need of help as he himself was, there was still Jule—resourceful, courageous, and quite likely to turn up in the most unexpected place at the right time.

The Englishmen, also, hoped to take the boat without destroying the prow light, for they knew very well that they would have need of it in the hasty journey they had planned to start out on the minute they gained possession of the *Rambler*. The outcome of all this was that the two parties remained hidden in the forest, each watching the other, and each hoping that the other would make a rush for the deck of the boat.

This was the situation when Jule plunged into the creek and, under water, in a slow current, struck out for the rear of the boat, protected by the boughs of the tree and the bulk of the cabin from the rays of the light on the prow. The last thing he heard as he leaped into the warm waters of Ruination creek were the words of Case and Frank promising to follow him by the under-water route to the cabin and the noisy expostulations of Captain Joe at being kept out of the fight!

"The dog will be frantic when he hears me opening the window," thought the lad, as he turned on his back and came up for a mouthful of air. "I hope he won't advertise the fact that I've come aboard."

So, while Frank and Case were waiting in the keenest anxiety at the point from which Jule had entered the water, while Clay and Alex were in the bushes not far away, watching with all the eyes in their heads for a shot at their enemies, and while the two Englishmen were trying to mature some plan for getting into the boat without running the risk of passing under the light, Jule made his way along the bottom of the creek, rising to breathe only at rare intervals, and finally came up, without being discovered, at the rear of the boat.

The rear deck, or platform, for it was little more, was entirely out of sight and range of the fighters in the forest on the bank the boy had just left, so he climbed up on it with confidence. But a new peril awaited him. Captain Joe set up such a volley of barks, and growls, and scratchings that it seemed to the boy that those on shore must understand that something unusual was going on in the boat and make a rush for it. The dog was certainly doing his duty, so far as noise went, in guarding the *Rambler*!

"Captain Joe!" called Jule.

The dog let out a fiercer challenge than before.

"Captain Joe!" repeated the lad. "If you don't quit that I'll come in there and crack your crust!"

Jule checked himself and broke into a chuckle. He had been much given to the use of slang in the old days, and it still seemed to come involuntarily to his lips, so did more than his share of the dish-washing as a result. There was never anything profane or coarse about his lapses into the dialect of the street, but by common consent all slang had been barred. Now he was glad that Clay was not near to hear this new outburst.

The dog began sniffing at the window on the inside. He would have recognized Jule, doubtless, in a moment only for the odor of sulphur with which his clothes, even though they were wet, was permeated.

"Lie down, dog!" Jule whispered.

Then Captain Joe recognized the voice and gave forth a low whine of recognition and reproach—recognition in spite of the sulphur, and reproach because of his having been left there alone while the others took an outing in the forest!

Jule finally managed to unfasten the window and crawl into the cabin. Captain Joe gave him an appropriate reception, and then sat down to look from the boy to the door, and back and forth, until his eyes and the motions of his head seemed to say:

"Well, why don't you hurry up and let me out?"

"All right, old chap!" Jule answered the look. "I'll let you out just as soon as it is safe for you to go."

Captain Joe insisted that he wanted to go at once, in order that he might see what was going on outside, but Jule consoled him with a caress and stood waiting for Case and Frank to make their appearance. Before long a commotion in the water back of the boat told of the approach of someone.

Jule crept back to the platform and waited, thinking that Frank might need assistance in getting out of the water. When he turned to look back he saw that Captain Joe had followed him to the window and was now trying his best to follow his example and get through. However, he seemed to have stuck in the narrow opening, not knowing how to bring his hind legs up to the sill.

The dog whined a warning and Jule turned back to the dark pool of river at the stern. A head lifted darkly from the surface and a face masked by heavy whiskers and seen only in outline regarded the boy blankly. The attacking party, it seemed, had adopted the same tactics to get into the boat as had the boy.

"Come off there!" commanded the gruff voice of the fellow, as he took hold of the boat "Come off or I'll be the death of you!"

"What do you want here?" demanded Jule.

The intruder made no reply, but exerted himself climbing to the platform, from which he could have taken possession of the boat in spite of the efforts of the boy, who was unarmed, having left his automatic and searchlight with Case on shore.

He looked about for some weapon with which to repel the boarder, but the platform was clear. Then he sprang to the window, hoping to get through it and barricade himself in the cabin.

But he found Captain Joe stuck in the opening! The dog was doing his best to wiggle out, his eyes flaming fiercely, his snarling jaws showing two rows of capable teeth, as he eyed with disfavor the faint figure of the man who was already climbing on the boat. It was a desperate situation, but at the same time it had its humorous features, as Captain Joe certainly was in a comical plight, half in and half out of the window.

"Get him, Joe!"

Jule urged the dog on by pointing as he spoke. Captain Joe licked his chops, as if anxious to sample the intruder, but he was stuck fast, and the boarder was now half out of the water.

"Get him, Joe! Get him!"

The boy gave a yank at the dog's head as he gave the command, and then something happened. The dog slipped out of the window opening, passed through Jule's arms like a white flash of light and launched himself on the man who was almost on the platform.

The two, the dog and the bearded man, went over the rear together with a great splash, and directly two heads were dimly seen on the surface. Captain Joe had caught the Englishman by the shoulder, and a stain of red dropped from his jaws before his head disappeared from sight again.

The boy did not want to see the dog kill the man, and he shouted to Captain Joe, entreating, commanding, coaxing, but the water was deep and the unequal combat was going on beyond the reach of words.

While Jule waited for the fighters to come to the surface again, hoping that he might be able to do something toward releasing the man, Alex came bobbing around the corner of the boat. At the first sound of Jule's voice on the boat he had leaped into the water and made for the stern platform. This interruption saved the man's life, for Captain Joe, coming to the surface, recognized his master and, releasing his hold, swam toward him.

Though half drowned and seriously injured by the teeth of the dog, the intruder managed to make his way to the dark shore. When, a moment later, the boys looked for him he had disappeared in the thicket. Jule had blazed the way to the boat, and in a short time all the boys were on the stern deck or in the cabin.

There was no indication of a fresh attack from the shore, and when a single shot was fired, some distance away, the boys took that for a signal from one ruffian to his mate. One was now on the north side of Ruination creek and the other on the south side, and it would be some time before they could plan any more mischief together.

Clay looked at Jule's face as he climbed to the platform and burst into a laugh. There was a good showing of phosphorus still in sight.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

"No wonder that man hustled off into the woods!" Alex added.

"That didn't frighten him a bit!" Jule explained. "He seemed to be wise to the trick. Anyway he would have been in charge here now if Captain Joe hadn't risen to the occasion. Good old Captain Joe!" he continued, patting the dog on the head.

"We'd better be moving," Clay said, presently, after Case and Frank had briefly explained the events of the night in the forest. "Those men will hang around us as long as we remain here."

"But Frank wants to get his cargo!" Jule laughed.

"Indeed I do," put in the boy.

"It seems to me," Case suggested, "that Frank has already secured his cargo—a cargo of experience!"

"We can't exchange experience for money!" Jule declared, "not always!"

"I've just got to get that cargo," Frank insisted. "It is too dark to attempt to move out of this narrow creek anyway," he urged, "and so we may as well remain here until morning."

"That won't be very long," Clay said, "for there is a faint smudge of daylight in the east."

"If it is most morning," Alex cried, "that accounts for the empty condition of my stomach. I'm going to get something to eat!"

"That suits me," Jule grinned, and Case and Clay were not slow in agreeing to the proposition.

Frank seemed lost in thought. He said nothing regarding supper, or breakfast, rather, and sat quietly near the door of the cabin while the boys, now apparently safe from attack, fried bacon and made pancakes and coffee. When the bacon, pancakes and coffee were steaming on the table, Clay turned to the forward deck and called to the boy. But Frank was not there.

It was now quite light in the eastern sky, though the forest still showed dark and dreary. Clay went to the side of the boat and looked down to the place where he had tied the row-boat, which had been brought out soon after the disappearance of the man who had been attacked by the dog. The boat was nowhere to be seen.

"Frank has gone!" Clay shouted.

"He's determined to have that cargo!" Alex explained. "It is a risky thing to do, this going into the jungle alone, but I can't say as I blame him!"

The boys did not enjoy their early meal very much, for they were anxious over Frank's disappearance. They knew well enough where he had gone. The cargo he insisted on securing must be somewhere near the scene of the night's adventures in the jungle, and he had gone there—alone!

CHAPTER XV.—THE VANISHING "CARGO"

The sun rose red and hot, looking like the bottom of a newly-scoured brass bowl. It was insufferably warm, and there was no breeze. Alex got out a spyglass and went to the prow.

"What are you looking for?" asked Case. "Expect to see Frank through a mile of trees?"

"No," grinned Alex. "I'm looking for the equator! It is so hot here that it seems to me as if it must have sagged down toward the creek."

"That's a very bad joke!" laughed Case.

In a moment Alex turned his glass toward the shore, scanning the jungle into which they had penetrated the night before. Presently his eyes brightened and he handed the glass to Clay with a whoop of joy.

"There's Frank!" he shouted. "Coming on a run—or as near to a run as a thousand creeping vines tangled around his legs will admit of. And I don't see him carrying any cargo. Seems to be running in ballast!"

"See anyone chasing him?" asked Jule of Clay, who was now looking anxiously through the glass.

"Not a soul," replied Clay. "He is at the row-boat now, and is putting off for the *Rambler*."

"Guess it doesn't require any spyglass to see that!" Jule broke in. "Hello, there, kid!" he shouted, leaning over the railing, "where have you been? You've missed a square meal."

Frank rowed out to the motor boat and climbed wearily to the deck before attempting any reply. Then he handed a closely-tied oblong packet to Clay and dropped into a convenient chair.

"What's that?" demanded the boys in a chorus. "The cargo!" smiled Frank.

Clay hastily untied the strings which secured the paper wrapping of the packet, disclosing a canvas bag, which gave forth a pleasant, tinkling sound as the boy bounced it up and down in his hand.

"What's in it?" asked Jule. "Sounds like something you can turn into gasoline, all right."

Frank replied with a motion for Clay to open the bag. He did so, and a roll of gold coins was exposed to view. Amazement, incredulity, joy, all showed on the faces of the boys, who now gathered closer about Clay and began fingering the coins, of which there were about two score.

"It is the real stuff!" Alex decided, turning his head critically.

"American twenty-dollar pieces!" gasped Case.

"Where in the name of all the seven seas did you get it?" asked Clay.

But the lads did not wait for Frank to reply. They seized him by the arms, the neck, the legs, and hustled him about, thumping him with their fists in the way boys have of expressing great appreciation. Even Captain Joe came out of the cabin and joined in the celebration.

"You just wait!" Alex shouted, when the excitement had in a measure died out—that is, when Frank was permitted to stand on his own feet again—"just you wait until I feed you up proper for this! There's a tin of roast beef left that we've been saving for a joy-feast, and that is what you're going to get for breakfast! And fish! And wild fowl! And dessert! And there's a can of honey, and some sixty-cent coffee we've been hoarding! You just wait and I'll show you a feed that will make your eyes stick out!"

Alex at once set about celebrating the receipt of the wonderful "cargo" by getting Frank such a breakfast as had not been seen on the *Rambler* since she had turned her nose out of the Mississippi. This characteristic expression of approval was seconded by the others, and all Frank's efforts to induce the others to share his meal were ignored. Captain Joe deigned to accept a bit of the roast beef, but he did it as one conferring a great favor.

"Now, where did you get it?" asked Clay, when Frank drew back from the little cabin table and sought the cooler air under the awning which ran over the forward deck. "Did you know all the time that you could find it here? Then why didn't you tell us?"

"Did you see anything of Ugly in there?" asked Case, his mind going back to the dark hours in the jungle.

"Ugly!" Jule exclaimed. "Why, that Indian is running yet."

"Or the Englishmen?" persisted Case.

"We went in the wrong direction last night," Frank replied, dodging the questions. "This morning, when it began to get daylight, I saw right where my tree hotel was, and went to it without difficulty."

"You never found that in a tree!" Jule objected.

"Yes, I did," answered Frank. "I found it in a tree because I put it in a tree on the way down. That is one reason why I wanted to get back in a motor boat. We could stop here without attracting attention and get the money."

"But we did attract attention! And you said—you said you found the cargo here, in a tree, when you were on your way down the river!" insisted Alex.

"I did find it in a tree, but only after I had hidden it there," Frank explained. "You see, as I have already told you, I was pursued on the way out, and, thinking I might be caught and searched—as I was—I hid the money in a tree—the money and, other things I valued more than the money. Then, after my pursuers went away, I went back to the tree and took out some of the money, and something else, and made my way out of the country."

"What was this something else?" asked Alex, always curious to know everything connected with the boy's past life.

"I shall have to tell you about that some other time," laughed Frank. "Just now, I think, we'd better be getting out into the Amazon again, for we still have a long way to go before we sight Cloud island."

"There's that Cloud island again!" cried Jule. "I'd like to know what you mean by keeping the secret of it from us."

"You'll have to wait!" was all Frank would say.

Early in the forenoon the *Rambler* was headed for the Madeira, and then, much to the surprise of

the others, Frank turned the prow down the stream toward the Amazon.

"What about this little town up the river where you were going to dispose of your cargo?" demanded Alex.

"You refer to Rosarinho?" asked the boy.

"Don't know the name," Alex answered, "except that it sounds to me like rhino—which means hard cash in some localities in Chicago."

"That is a good town to visit for the purchase of supplies," Frank said, "but I have an idea that the Englishmen we have been having trouble with will go there, so we'll give them the slip and buy our supplies at Monteiro, which is on the right bank of the Madeira, near the junction with the Amazon. It is not wise to hunt trouble by following those men."

"What did they want in that jungle?" asked Jule. "They were stranded," answered Case, who had heard the story told Frank by the Indian. "They wanted our boat—that's all."

Then Case turned and whispered to Frank:

"Ever see those men before? I thought one of them seemed to have a mutual understanding with you about—well, about Cloud island, you know. What is all this talk about Cloud island?"

"As I have told you boys before, I can't tell you anything now. I may tell you all about it in time, but just now there is nothing to say."

"But about those men?" persisted Case.

"I don't remember either face," Frank replied, slowly, "but I have an idea that they knew me—that is, that they have heard of me, somewhere, before we met in the jungle. If they are going to Cloud island, as they told the Indian, they certainly knew something about my affairs before they started. Now, that is all I'm going to tell you about it," he added with a smile.

Arrived at Monteiro, Clay brought out the company purse and showed that it was empty.

"We'll have to borrow from Frank," he said. "I was in hope that we could get a real cargo somewhere, and so get through on our own resources, but it seems that we've either got to go back, drifting down, or run in debt."

"Why," Frank said, astonished, "this money belongs to the common fund—it is just as much yours as it is mine."

"I fail to see it in that light," Clay insisted. "The money belongs to you individually, and if we use any portion of it we'll pay it back."

"And here I've been riding with you, and living off you, for weeks," urged Frank. "If you took all this money you wouldn't have any too much pay for what you've done for me. If you don't take it, I'll get off at Monteiro and wait for a steamer going up the river."

"If you try that," Alex declared, "I'll set the dog on you."

"Aw, give the money to me!" Jule cut in. "I'll borrow it and contribute it as my share of the expense. Anytime a boy wants to give away money, I'll accommodate him!"

"We'll give a note for it," suggested Case, and so the boys counted out the gold pieces—there were forty of the denomination of \$20—and gave a joint note for \$800. Jule laughed as he put his name to the paper in letters an inch long.

"I'll make 'em good and big," he explained, "because the name is all there is to it, the names, I mean. We are all infants in the eyes of the law, you know."

"Where did you learn that term?" asked Alex. "You must have been studying law."

"Dr. Holcomb says I'm an infant in the eyes of the law, anyway!" the boy replied. "Now, if you've got this money matter settled, suppose we go ashore and feed up. I'm hungry for something that hasn't been lugged about in tin cans for a month."

"Rich we are!" shouted Alex, "and we'll have a feed on shore that will put an inch of fat on our ribs! Hurry up, fellows!"

"Someone must remain on the boat," suggested Frank, and I'll be the guard. I can go ashore after you all get back."

"You furnish the money and stay out of the feast!" cried Jule. "Not if I know it. I'll remain on the boat, and you can bring me a modest meal in a bushel basket. You'll need Frank as interpreter, anyway."

It was finally arranged that Jule should remain on board, and the others soon set off in the little boat. They reached the town in a few moments, wandered about the illy-kept streets for a time, and then hunted up a place where motor boat supplies were sold. The order for gasoline and provisions was given, Clay promising to pay when the goods were delivered on board the *Rambler*.

"These people may be all right," Clay explained to the others, "but it is just as well to pay on delivery."

Finally they came to a public restaurant which seemed to be tolerably clean. It was a small public eating house, such as one finds at Havana and Para, operated in Spanish style and boasting a fair menu. The boys found that they could get steaks there and ordered liberally. An extra one was ordered cooked for Jule.

The lads enjoyed their dinners greatly, Alex declaring that the only thing lacking to make it perfect was the motion of a boat on a stream! The cooking was good and the attendance perfect, but there was something about the seeming friendliness of the proprietor, who insisted on personally attending to the wants of the boys, which was not wholly sincere—at least so it seemed to Case.

When he referred to the matter, however, the others laughed at him, and Clay even showed a handful of gold when he paid for the dinners and the basket which was going back to Jule, well loaded with eatables. After leaving the place Clay turned back.

"I'm going to have some of that odd-tasting coffee put into the basket for Jule," he said. "I meant to have it done while we were in there. I'll go back and have it put in, and you boys go on around the town and meet me there."

The others protested against Clay going back alone, but he only laughed at their fears. Half an hour later, after walking through the main streets of the odd Brazilian city, the boys entered the

restaurant to find Clay sitting at the table they had occupied with his head on an arm, which was resting on the table. He seemed to be sound asleep, and Case and Alex shook him vigorously.

"He has been asleep for a long time," the proprietor explained, in Spanish, translated by Frank, "and I let him alone. He had company with him at the table first, and they ordered coffee—coffee to drink and more coffee to put in the basket."

The boys lifted Clay to his feet and shook him until he opened his eyes. He seemed to be dazed, and Frank set the boy back into a chair and gave his attention to his pockets. They were all turned wrong side out and empty!

The proprietor insisted on calling in the police. He declared that one of the men Clay had visited with at the table was not above suspicion, and began to talk vaguely about getting the money back.

"Wait," Frank said to him. "We'll go on board with him first. You see," he continued, talking to the boys after they had finally succeeded in getting Clay out of the place, apparently against the wishes of the owner, "if he calls in the police we'll be held no one knows how long as witnesses. One of us may even be accused of taking the money. They are all against foreigners here, so the best thing for us to do is to pocket the loss and get away as soon as possible."

This was agreed to, with many sighs at the loss of the money, and the boys were soon on board the *Rambler*, where they found Jule arguing fiercely with a man who did not know what Jule was saying any more than Jule knew what he was saying. Frank listened and turned a pale face to Clay.

"We're tied up," he said, "until the stores are paid for!"

“Tied up!” repeated Alex. “Does that mean that we can’t give ’em back their stuff and take the *Rambler* away?”

“I’ll find out,” Frank volunteered, turning to the Spaniard who was now shaking his fists’ angrily in the air and almost foaming at the mouth.

There was a short conference, and then Frank turned back to the boys, his manner not at all encouraging.

“He wants his pay, or the boat!” he said. “He says he’s been to all the trouble of getting the goods on board, and that he’s not going to go to the further bother of taking them off. He says we can’t leave this harbor until we settle in full.”

“But he can’t hold the boat,” urged Case. “It doesn’t belong to us, but to Dr. Holcomb.”

Again Frank conferred with the excited dealer in marine supplies.

“He says that in law that makes no difference,” was the discouraging report.

“He got here pretty quickly after the robbery,” Case suggested. “Ask him if he knows that Clay was drugged and robbed,” he added.

Frank talked with the merchant again, and he answered that he had heard something about it, but thought it all a Yankee trick. During this conversation Clay had not opened his mouth to speak. He stood leaning against the cabin door frame, his hands in his pockets, his eyes on the deck. Now he turned and entered the cabin, closing the door behind him. Case followed him with his eyes until the door closed, then spoke to Alex.

“Go in there and see what he’s up to,” he said. “He is taking this too hard. Tell him we don’t blame him a bit—that it would have been the same if either one of us had had the money. Tell him to buck up!”

Alex rushed into the cabin and Case gave his attention to the Spanish merchant, who was now gesticulating and calling to three men who were putting off in a row-boat.

“He means to have the *Rambler*,” Frank said, dejectedly. “Those men are officers. Once they get their feet on this deck it will be impossible to continue on our way.”

Jule heard and turned toward the motors. In a moment sharp explosions which denoted full speed were heard, and the boat began backing out into the river. The men in the row-boat shouted and waved weapons in the air, but did not fire. The Spanish merchant fairly danced up and down in frantic rage, declaring that the boys would all go to jail for what they were doing.

Seeing that these threats and demonstrations made no difference in the speed of the boat, he leaped toward Jule, who stood by the open hatchway over the motors. While the deck was kept closed over the machinery on ordinary occasions, it was so arranged that a square of the deck lifted like a patch above the motors whenever special attention was being given to them.

The Spaniard was almost to the boy when Case tripped him and he fell headlong to the deck. Captain Joe stood watching him for a moment, showing his teeth, and then lay down within a foot of the fellow’s face, his lips snarling, his jaws working.

“If you try to get up we can’t restrain the dog,” Case said, gravely, “so if you think anything of your hide you’d better remain where you are.”

The row-boat followed the *Rambler* out into the river for a short distance and then turned back. As she did so the smoke of a steamer lifted to the east.

The Spaniard continued his verbal attacks on the boys, though he was careful not to swing his arms nearer to Captain Joe.

“What is he saying?” asked Case.

“He is saying that this is piracy,” answered Frank.

“And the worst of it is that he is right,” grumbled Case. “What are we ever going to do with this fellow. It isn’t fair to take him off with us just because he wants his money.”

“No, it isn’t,” admitted Frank, “but we’re in a tight fix.”

“I’ll help him off when he wants to go!” Jule volunteered. “I’ll pitch him overboard!”

“Play fair!” urged Case. “We’re in a sorry plight, but play fair!”

“He isn’t playing fair!” asserted Jule. “He heard of our trouble, and came right down to take possession of the boat. I believe he knows something about that robbery.”

When the row-boat turned back the *Rambler* was slowed down so as to keep abreast of the current. The Spaniard was still cursing wildly, and Frank was saying something to him which appeared to make him all the more indignant.

“If he was in Massachusetts,” laughed Jule, “he’d want the state troops called out!”

“What are we going to do with him?” asked Case, and Frank shook his head gravely. “Looks like he has the law with him!”

Then the cabin door opened and Alex came running out with a handful of banknotes waving aloft, his feet fairly dancing along the deck, his lips set for one long whoop, which, being finished, gave the boys a chance to ask questions.

“Where did you get it?”

“Is there a bank in there?”

“How much is there in the roll?”

This last from Jule, who beckoned to Alex to call Captain Joe off guard duty. The dog left reluctantly and joined Clay in the cabin, for the boy who was in a degree responsible for the situation insisted on remaining out of sight until he had “had it out with himself,” as he expressed it.

“Now,” Case snapped out, catching Alex by the shoulder and facing him around. “You keep still long enough to tell us if you’ve found a mine of banknotes in the cabin just when we were in great need. Get on with the story!”

Alex was too excited to talk for a time. He just danced up and down and shook the fluttering ends of the banknotes in the faces of his chums whenever he came in contact with him. In the meantime

the Spaniard had arisen to his feet, and now, the Rambler having stopped, stood beckoning to the men in the row-boat to come on.

"Where's your bill?" asked Case, approaching the gesticulating merchant. "We're going to cash up. Here, Alex, bring me that money!"

Alex calmly drew a \$50 banknote between each of the fingers of his right hand and waved it in the hot air, like a fan.

"Give him our notes!" he said. "Frank accepts 'em!"

Finally Case secured the statement which the fellow had brought on board for payment and handed it over to Frank.

"It is \$100," said the boy, "and most of the charges are double what they should be."

"Well, what can we do about it?"

"I'll see."

Frank continued his talk with the fellow, who was now shaking his head and pointing to the advancing boat. Jule started the motors again and the distance between the two craft increased.

"He won't take paper money," Frank said. "He demands gold."

"All right!" Case cried.

The boy took the paper into his hand, thrust two \$50 banknotes into the unwilling hand of the merchant—who looked on in rage and wonder at the bold action!—and handed out a pencil. As long as the row-boat containing the officers was coming on, the fellow would not sign the receipt, insisting that exchange fees must be added, but when the *Rambler* began to edge out toward the Amazon he seized the pencil with a growl and wrote his name under the column of charges.

This done, he pointed to the row-boat, asking Frank to permit it to come along side, in order to take him off. Frank consented to this, and the boat drew nearer.

"If those officers get within reaching distance I'm afraid they'll make us trouble."

This from Case, who stood by Alex and Captain Joe, the latter looking disappointed at the apparently peaceful solution of the trouble.

Alex grinned and whispered to Captain Joe. The dog cocked up his ears and opened his jaws with a snarl.

"Say, mister," Alex called out to the Spaniard, then, "I can't control this dog much longer. Jump!"

"He doesn't understand!" Case observed. "I wish he did!"

"Tell him, Frank!" Alex ordered.

As Frank ceased speaking, after this request, Alex let the dog out at arm's length, holding only to the collar they had made for him. He made as if he were nearly exhausted holding the animal, now clawing the deck, and the Spaniard stepped to the side of the boat.

Alex let go his hold, the dog sprang forward, and the merchant jumped into the river, making a great touse as he struck the surface on his back and dropped under.

"Hope he'll drown!" was Jule's observation.

"No; he won't drown. The row-boat is heading this way and will pick him up. Now, perhaps we'd better be on our way. I rather think we have committed assault and battery—or, rather, that Captain Joe has—on that chap, and he may want us all arrested."

Alex laughed as he spoke, making faces at the angry men in the boat. Directly the merchant was hauled, streaming and vociferating, from the river. Then the *Rambler* was headed out of the mouth of the Madeira and was soon breasting the slow current of the Amazon again.

"Now, about that money!" demanded Case. "Where did it drop from?"

"Why, you know Captain Joe gave us a package, to be opened only when we had come to the end of our rope? Well! we had not only come to the end of our rope, but had lost the rope!"

"And so you opened Captain Joe's package?"

"Of course we did."

"I had forgotten all about it," Case remarked.

"And so had I," Alex went on. "It was Clay who thought of it. He got it and opened it."

"How much money is there?"

"Three hundred dollars!"

Both Case and Jule gave vent to a low whistle.

"How did he ever save that much money?" Case asked.

"Why did he give it to us?" was what Jule said. "It is remarkable," Frank added.

"Perhaps he wrote something and put it in with the money," suggested Case, in a moment.

"Never thought of that!"

Alex bounced into the cabin and came back in a moment pushing Clay in front of him. Clay, looking half ashamed, half triumphant, held a sheet of writing paper in one hand.

"Just read it!" Alex cried out.

Clay held it out so that the large, irregular character written on it might be seen from a distance.

"KEEP HER HEAD ON!"

That was the message!

It seemed to the boys, all of whom were greatly affected, that the words had come directly from the kindly lips of the Captain, straight over four thousand miles of sea and land, to put them all in good cheer again.

"Good old Captain Joe!" Jule exclaimed. "How did he know?"

"Oh, anyone would know that such a fool as I am—such a heedless fool—would get any company he traveled with into trouble, and—"

Alex clapped a hand over the speaker's mouth.

"That will be all for you," he said.

Neither then nor at any other time was Clay permitted to speak to his chums of the loss of the gold. He was allowed, briefly, to explain that two men who claimed to be interested in motor boats had approached him as he re-entered the restaurant, that he had invited them to seats at the table, where he had ordered another cup of coffee—the quality served before having been excellent—that he had felt drowsy after drinking one cup, and that the next he knew the boys were pulling him to his feet. That was all.

There was no doubt in the minds of the boys that the coffee had been drugged in the kitchen before being brought to the table, or that the two men were confederates of the restaurant keeper; but they were in no position to demand investigation in a hostile country, and so resolved to continue their journey up the Amazon and say nothing more about it. There were even suspicions in the minds of Clay and Case that the whole thing had been planned by Frank's old enemies to keep the *Rambler* tied up in the harbor for a long time, as well as to acquire the gold the boy had so freely shown.

"The people who are trying to keep Frank away from that strange and mysterious Cloud island are at the bottom of it," was Case's final comment on the incident.

However, the boys were now well supplied with gasoline and provisions, and there would be no further need of stopping at any town for a long time. Frank seemed to have lost his desire for great speed, after leaving the Madeira, and so the *Rambler* lolled along the river for all the world like a boat out with a summer-day picnic party.

Now and then the boy watched the down-stream country with a glass, as if expecting to see a steamer with green and yellow stripes on her stack shooting swiftly against the current. Again, he sat for hours on the little stern platform at night, watching the river and the shores for a light which he never discovered.

"What has gotten into the lad?" Case asked, one night when the *Rambler* lay at anchor in a bay just above the Rio Negro river. "He seems to be watching for some sign or signal, but refuses to tell what it is."

No one ventured a reply, and Jule pointed away to the valley of the Rio Negro.

"That river," he said, to change the subject, "is a thousand miles long. Its head waters rise in Columbia and Guiana. Perhaps some of the water that trickles down to the Amazon comes from the oldest land on the continent."

"I guess not!" Alex interrupted. "The oldest land is somewhere near the center of Peru."

"The oldest land is in Guiana," insisted Jule. "Many millions of years ago an island rose out of the water there. That was the first of the continent of South America. The Andes were forced up later by the wrinkling of the crust of the earth as it dried out. But the Andes lifted and lowered a great many times before they got their noses into the air for keeps. Why, there is a salt spring 14,000 feet above sea level down here. That deposit of salt was made when the ocean washed the spot where it lies!"

"There's gold down here, too," Alex declared. "I've read that the gold mines of Peru were sealed up when the Spanish came, and that they have never been discovered to this day."

"What do you know about that, Frank?" asked Case, as the boy came up.

Frank made no reply, but walked back to his old place on the rear platform, which he reached by creeping over the low roof of the cabin.

"Perhaps there is gold on this Cloud island," suggested Jule.

"There is something there worth fighting for," Case argued. "Then, where did the kid get all that gold? He brought it out with him, you know, and hid it in a tree!"

"Ho, ho!" laughed Jule, "there are no twenty-dollar gold pieces down in the mines of Peru. All that gold he brought out saw the little old U. S. long before it saw Peru!"

The boys held many such conversations as this as they proceeded up the river of their dreams. They never forgot those days and nights on the Amazon, the splendid panorama of forest and stream ever before their eyes, the perfect freedom from the restraints of city life.

They were nearly under the equator, it is true, and the heat was almost unbearable at times. The insects were numerous and annoying. But, after all, they were out in the open, and they were free! The average lad of seventeen will endure many privations and suffer many physical penalties just to be free—to be brother for a time to the woods, the blue sky, and the running water!

Many an evening, in spite of the heat, they built great cooking fires in some alluring cove and made a supper of fish, turtle eggs dug out of the sand, and the flesh of a fowl resembling wild turkey. The boy dearly loves to cook by a campfire! Often they got into territory which the ants seemed to claim as their own, and now and then an anaconda or an alligator supplied a mark for their revolvers.

Those were entrancing moonlit nights. Often natives came from small villages and visited with them. Traders are numerous along the Amazon, and in nearly every settlement of natives there are some who speak English and Spanish. As a rule the Indians were friendly and willing to assist in the capture of game, but now and then the boys were glad to get away from the vicinity of a town or a plantation because of the vicious nature of the natives.

The owners of the plantations they visited were usually Spanish, or of Spanish descent. Their workmen were invariably natives. There are more villages and cities on the banks of the upper Amazon than the maps show, and the boys made a point of stopping at most of them. In fact, Frank seemed determined to hold a conversation with someone in every settlement they came to. Sometimes he would go ashore alone in the row-boat and remain for a long time in conference with a planter or one employed thereabouts.

"He's asking questions about Cloud island!" Jule explained, whenever this strange habit of the boy's was referred to.

However, the boys liked best to get away from all civilization and tie up at night in a little creek

or bay, or in a channel forming one side of an island.

Here they caught fish, fought ants, captured opossums, and beat the thickets for monkeys and snakes.

The opossums of Brazil are not much larger than a good-sized rat, but they are very good eating. Fish are plentiful, and there is plenty of small game in the forests, so the boys had lots of fresh food to eat. In that hot climate, however, it was necessary to procure fresh game every day, as putrefaction soon sets in. Fish taken from the river soon becomes offensive unless cut into thin strips and dried in the sunshine.

Ever since leaving the Madeira the boys had slept in hammocks swung from strong uprights on the forward deck. The deck was shut in by wire netting, which afforded them partial protection from the insects. But of course the impudent blood-seekers hung constantly about, and more than one found its way into this screened place when the one door, opening at the side, was in use.

Lizards of all sizes, shapes and dispositions managed to take passage on the *Rambler*, much to the disgust of the boys and the anger of Captain Joe, who attacked them relentlessly but could not keep the boat free of them. But if the lizards and snakes and ants were unwelcome guests on the boat and at the little camps, there were plenty of other visitors who more than compensated for them. These were the birds, whose shrill voices and brilliant coloring made the night as well as the day musical and gay. Taken all in all, the life the boys lived there on the mighty river, under the equator, was ideal from a boy's viewpoint.

There were, besides many birds well known at the North, kingfishers, green and blue tree-creepers, purple-headed tanagers, and humming birds. Butterflies were everywhere, of every size and color. And there were the cicadas, at home in every tree, sending out their jarring, reedy notes. The forests were alive with sound, and the lads realized that even the roar of Chicago would sometimes be small beside the constant ring of wild life.

One of the native weapons in use on the upper Amazon quite fascinated Jule, and he never gave over bartering with the Indians until he secured one. This was a zarabatana, or blow-gun. It consists of a hollow tube through which an arrow is shot by the breath. The arrows are sharp as a needle and are winged with fluff from the seed-vessels of the cotton tree. The arrows are expelled with such force that the sound of their exit from the muzzle is something like that made by a popgun. They are frequently tipped with the fatal urari poison.

One night, under the brilliant light of the moon, the boys saw a black tiger or jaguar drinking at the edge of the little creek in which their boat lay. They were anxious to take the fellow's hide as a souvenir of the trip, and so Clay and Alex cautiously left the boat and struck into the forest back of the spot where the tiger was quenching his thirst. He threw up his muzzle and dropped his ears, like a great cat, at the first motion on the shore.

Captain Joe, quivering with excitement, and entirely beyond control, leaped to the shore and headed for the tiger, which backed, snarling, into the jungle which the boys had thought to surround. The dog followed on until he reached the spot from which the beast had disappeared. In a moment Alex and Clay were at his side, the former trying to force his way into the thicket. Finally he pressed in a yard or two and called to the dog to follow.

But Captain Joe was evidently going out of the tiger-hunting game without loss of time, for he tilted his nose in the air, gave one growl of defiance, and walked away in a very dignified manner indeed.

"There," Clay exclaimed, "Captain Joe knows more about tigers than we do, so we'll go back to the *Rambler*."

The waters of the upper Amazon are filled with alligators of all sizes. They occasionally swarmed about the boat, and Captain Joe appeared to enjoy watching their hungry little eyes as they gazed up at his plump shoulders. Sometimes, while sleeping in rude hammocks swung from trees and poles on sandy shores, the boys were disturbed by the reptiles.

After midnight, however, the alligators keep away from the sands of the shores, at least where there is a considerable stretch of it, for the radiation of heat during the night from the sand makes these resting spots cool, even chilly, in the morning.

And so the boys leisurely proceeded up the Amazon, stopping to fish, to hunt turtle eggs, to watch the monkeys climbing the great trees, to hunt the black tiger in the thickets and the alligators in the rivers. They frequently spoke with traders on the river, and now and then heard news from Chicago.

At last, along about the middle of September, they came to Tabatinga, where the Amazon enters Ecuador. Here they secured additional supplies of gasoline and such provisions as they would need and made a few repairs to the boat. The upper Amazon country is never very "dry," as storms are likely to come on at any time during the early fall, so the boys set up a little stove in the cabin and made ready for the days of slow rain and wind which might come on.

From the time of leaving Marajo island they had not seen or heard of the *Señorita*, and the boys, all save Frank, were flattering themselves that the pursuit had ceased. They had passed, and been passed, by many steamers on the river, but none of them resembled the little vessel they had first seen on the South Branch. But at Tabatinga their dream of being free from pursuit by Frank's enemies vanished.

CHAPTER XVIII.—JUST AHEAD OF A MOB

The *Rambler* lay in front of Tabatinga, ready to take to the reaches of the upper river, one morning, when Jule called Clay's attention to a small steamer, painted a silver gray, which was steaming into a crude slip not far away.

"That boat looks familiar," the boy said. "How many times have we passed her on the way up?"

Clay viewed the boat critically and then went for his glass. Frank had heard the question, seen Clay take the glass from the hook on the wall of the cabin, and followed to the side of the boat. Clay looked long at the steamer and then handed the glass to Frank.

"What do you make of her?" he asked.

"Which way did she come from?" asked the boy, placing the glass in position.

"Up river," answered Jule, at an inquiring glance from Clay.

"That's strange!" Frank exclaimed.

"What is?" demanded Jule.

"The *Señorita* coming from that direction," was the reply.

"The *Señorita*!" repeated Clay, in amazement.

"Just what I thought!" Jule declared.

"So that is our escort, all in a new suit of clothes!" Alex grinned, looking over Frank's shoulder at the freshly-painted steamer.

"There is no doubt about it," Frank replied. "But I can't understand why she is coming down stream."

"She's been investigating Cloud island," laughed Alex.

"That is no joke," Jule cut in. "Do you see our friend with the scar and the funny little black mustache?" he added.

"Señor Lewiso?" asked Frank. "Yes, he is on board, and is looking this way."

"Give him the merry ha, ha!" advised Jule.

"So that is his name?" Clay asked, turning to Frank. "Señor Lewiso. You never mentioned that before!"

"There was no occasion," Frank said.

While the boys inspected the *Señorita*, Señor Lewiso descended into a small boat and was taken ashore.

"I wish I knew what he wants in the town," Frank mused.

"Supplies, probably," Clay suggested.

Frank shook his head.

"There is little need of her buying supplies here," he said, "for she has large provision refrigerators, and, besides, most of the food supply up here would naturally come from the forest and river."

"Then he is going ashore to find out something about the *Rambler*. Perhaps he did not see us."

This from Alex, who was now preparing for the shore.

"Rest assured that he did see us!" Frank replied, noting the boy's preparations for a visit to the city. "Where are you going?"

"Why, don't you want to know what he's up to?" asked Alex.

"Of course, but you—"

"Oh, yes I can!" broke in the boy. "I can take Captain Joe with me and shadow him like a Sherlock Holmes!"

"Of course we can!" decided Jule, also making ready for a visit to the city. "You see, he doesn't know us, and—"

"Don't you ever think he doesn't!" Case interrupted. "That boat lay close to the *Rambler* in the South Branch for a number of days, and you may be sure that he has a mental photo of everyone of us. Better cut this visit out!"

"You said," turning to Frank, "that you would like to know what he wanted in the city! Well, then!"

"Run along!" Clay decided, seeing that Frank was about to appeal to him for advice. "I see no harm in the boys going, but they would better leave Captain Joe on the boat."

"I guess Captain Joe wants to feel the soil under his feet, just the same as we do," Alex exclaimed, patting the dog on the head, "but we'll leave him on board if you think best."

"He will be certain to get into a quarrel with some Brazilian pup," laughed Jule, "and may bring on international complications, so we'd better kiss him bye-bye and be on our way."

The lads went ashore in the boat while Captain Joe stood on the prow and threw glances of sorrow and reproach at them. When they reached the shore, however, Alex gave out a long, shrill whistle and the next moment Captain Joe was in the river, swimming to his feet!

"Go it!" Case stormed. "He'll get you into a fight, and we'll have to come and get you out. Go it, and have all the fun you want to, but lookout for squalls."

"That is the first evil forecast I have heard from you in a long time," laughed Clay.

"We've had too much of the real thing lately," grinned Case, "to need any imaginary woes. Say, I'm going to quit that prophet-of-evil role!"

"I hope so," Clay responded.

During the absence of the boys and the dog Frank moved restlessly about the hot little cabin and the crowded forward deck. It was plain to both Clay and Case that he anticipated something important as a result of the trip ashore.

Alex and Jule were reckless and full of pranks, but he knew them to be courageous, resourceful and tenacious of any purpose undertaken. He thought they would have little difficulty in finding the man they sought. The only question in his mind was as to whether they would not, by some prankish trick, get themselves into trouble with the people of the town.

Señor Lewiso would not molest them. He knew that very well. He thought he understood the man

thoroughly, and counted on his trying to make friends with the lads instead of antagonizing them. Clay questioned him in vain when he said as much to his chum. Frank would not talk of the man, his object in following them, or of the secrets of Cloud island.

Noon came and the boys were still absent. Then Captain Joe came to the shore where the row-boat lay and set up a request to be taken on board, as they thought. Thinking that it might be just as well to have the boat alongside, Case stripped to the waist and plunged into the river, swimming with long, steady strokes to the shore.

Captain Joe pranced, barking, around him, but would not enter the boat. Instead he seized Case by one trousers leg and invited him to take a stroll into the city, much to the delight of a crowd of boys and adult loafers lounging about the water front.

"What is it, Captain?" asked Case, as if the dog could answer him. "Where did you leave the boys?"

Again the dog drew at his clothes, urging him in the direction of the town.

"But I can't go in this swimming rig," said Case, arguing with the dog as he would have argued with one of his chums. "You wait here while I go on board and dress, then I'll go with you."

The dog expressed his dissatisfaction with this arrangement by a series of growls, but Case entered the boat and rowed to the *Rambler*, where he found Clay and Frank ready for the shore, they having seen the dog's pantomime from the deck.

"Just as I thought," Case grumbled. "They've gone and got into some trouble and sent the dog to tell us about it."

The situation looked grave, but Clay smiled as he nudged the boy in the ribs.

"You were going to quit that!" he said.

"Well," Case responded, with a grin, "they've found a diamond mine, and have sent the dog to notify us to come and help carry away the wealth. Does that suit you any better?"

"Surely, that is much better!" smiled Clay.

In the meantime Captain Joe was sitting on the little dock where the boat had been moored in a very dignified attitude, his snarly nose pointing up the street which ended at the river. This was not the main street of the town, but one running back of the thoroughfare where most of the places of business were situated. It was a street where old warehouses and cheap eating and drinking places predominated.

"See Captain Joe!" Frank exclaimed; "he scents mischief up there. We would better be on our way."

"Someone must remain on the *Rambler*," Clay declared, "and you, Frank, ought to be the one. He, this Señor Lewiso, is not after us, but he may make trouble for you."

"What a name!" Case exclaimed. "I'll wager that his name is just plain Lewis in the United States."

"That is probably correct," Clay agreed. "Now for it!"

Then the actions of the dog attracted their attention. He no longer held his dignified pose, but was running to and fro on the dock, looking alternately at the *Rambler* and the street beyond the dock, as if in doubt whether to chase up the street or swim to the boat. Presently he darted away up the street.

Believing that something serious was happening to Alex and Jule, Clay and Case now sprang into the boat and rowed ashore. There was then no need for them to advance up the street taken by Captain Joe.

An excited mob was rushing down the thoroughfare, and at the head of it, covering the ground like race-horses and dodging sticks and clubs as they shot ahead, were Alex and Jule.

The boys were not very far ahead of the crowd, but were gaining. Indeed, they would soon have been beyond the reach of the missiles thrown in their direction only for the fact that fresh recruits were continually swinging into the race from nearby doorways and taking front positions in the pursuit.

Captain Joe was running at the heels of his master, pausing now and then to check the pursuit by showing a dangerous set of teeth to the pursuers. At such times those in advance fell back sullenly, not caring to come to close quarters with the dog.

When the boys reached the dock they were only a few paces ahead of the front line of those who were giving chase. One sturdy fellow, far in advance, evidently a Spaniard, was even reaching out to seize Alex when he came to the boat. He might have succeeded in his attempt to prevent the lad getting into the craft only that the dog sprang at him and bore him back. As the two boys and the dog gained the boat the oncoming rabble stumbled over the prostrate man and half a dozen pitched headforemost into the river.

These seemed to be too much astonished at their sudden immersion to seize the boat or the oars, and so detain the boys, although those in the rear shouted to them to do so, and Clay pushed out into the current. While members of the mob sprang for nearby boats, Frank set the motors going and picked up the boys halfway to the dock.

Then the *Rambler*, for the second time during that trip, glided away, leaving an angry, vindictive mob howling at her crew from the shore. Once on the boat, and the boat showing clear water between herself and the dock, Alex and Jule dropped down on deck and set up a succession of mad shouts which echoed over the stream. Captain Joe put his paws on the railing at the screen door and deliberately winked first one eye and then the other at the defeated runners! Alex declares to this day that he did it just to provoke his former antagonists!

"Now, what is it all about?" asked Clay, as the *Rambler* shot up the Amazon at full speed. "Can't you boys go on shore without bringing a mob of uninvited guests back with you?"

"That is our escort!" grinned Jule, waving an arm in the direction of the gesticulating crowd on the dock.

"How did you happen to stir up such a hornet's nest?" asked Case.

"It was this way," Alex began, whistling to the dog and taking his head into his lap as he sat on

the deck, "when we got up there into the town we saw—. Guess?"

"Lewiso," suggested Clay.

"Give it up!" cried Case. "Go on!"

"Well, we saw, not the man we went to look up, but the two Englishmen we had the skirmish with in the bush down on Ruination creek!"

"Then they must have passed us on a steamer," Frank interrupted. "How were they dressed?"

"Fine! Oh, they've made a raise since we saw them trying to steal the *Rambler*!"

"That is why I failed to hear or see anything of them along the river as we came up," Frank mused.

"So, when you were watching night and day that is why!" Case cried. "Did you think they would walk up?"

"I thought that they, being down on their luck, would be obliged to make their way from town to town on tramp trading vessels, and that I might hear of them somewhere."

"They look like they owned a yacht of their own now," Jule put in. "They sure have robbed a bank somewhere."

"Go on with your story," Clay suggested, as the *Señorita* left the dock and started up stream. "If you have good luck you may be able to tell us what is going on before that steamer comes up with us."

"Of course," Jule said, taking up the story, "Alex had to follow the Englishmen into a restaurant, where they were eating some funny contraption and drinking something that looked like rum. They were so busy they did not see us at first—busy over papers which looked like maps they took from their pockets!"

"Maps!" echoed Frank, excitedly.

"Yes, maps, and they laid the bunch of papers down on the table, and they looked good to me, and so I sent Captain Joe after them."

"You did?" shouted Clay and Case in a breath. "Did he get them?"

This from Frank, whose eyes were shining with a spirit the boys never seen there before.

"Get them?" repeated Jule. "Of course he got them, and handed them to me, and we beat it for the boat, and the Englishmen followed with a mob at their heels, and we hotfooted it down the street."

"But Captain Joe——"

"Yes, I know he got to the dock a long time before we did, for we got sidetracked and had to hide from the mob in an old warehouse. It was while we were in there that Captain Joe left us, and came after you."

"But the mob never found us," Alex exclaimed, "until we broke and ran for the river. I guess the Englishmen are looking for us back there in the warehouse yet."

"The papers?" asked Frank. "Where are they?"

Alex laid a packet on the deck by his side.

"What are they?" he asked, provokingly holding them down with one hand as Frank, catching sight of one, reached for them.

"Maps of Cloud island!" was the quick reply.

The boys gathered around Frank as he took the papers into his hands and ran them over hastily.

"Are they really maps of Cloud island?" asked Clay.

"Where is this Cloud island?" demanded Alex, grinning at the old question.

"What are the maps good for?" added Jule.

"How far is it to Cloud island?" asked Case.

"One question at a time, boys," smiled Frank. "I'll tell you all about Cloud island now."

This statement was so extraordinary, in view of the boy's previous reticence on the subject, that even Captain Joe arose and looked the speaker in the face and wagged his tail in applause.

"Cloud island," began Frank, but Clay caught him by the arm and pointed to the *Señorita*, now under full headway, steaming up the river.

"There comes your Señor Lewiso," he said.

"Looks like he wants our maps!" Alex observed.

The boys, at Frank's request, did not increase the speed of the *Rambler*. Instead, they loitered in order that the *Señorita* might come up with them.

"What's the notion?" asked Alex. "You ain't going to give up those maps, are you, Frank!"

"Did you met this Señor Lewiso while on shore?" Frank answered the question with another, as the steamer came abreast of the *Rambler*.

The boy shook his head.

"We were too busy doing those other chaps out of the maps," he said.

When the *Señorita* came abreast the young man with the scar on his face was seen on deck, gazing impudently at the boys.

"Fine day!" yelled Jule, making a wry face.

Clay gave a gesture of disapproval, but the boy went on:

"Is this your river?"

There was no answer whatever from Señor Lewiso, but someone not in view called out, in good English:

"You know it! The river and all the islands in it!"

"Going to take the river up as you pass along?" demanded Alex.

"Oh, quit it!" Case exclaimed. "There is nothing to be gained by that sort of thing."

"He looked so bossy," commented Alex, "that I didn't know but he had the key to the river in his pocket! He doesn't look good to me, no way you can put it!"

The *Señorita* swept on, and was soon lost to sight behind an island. Then an entirely unexpected sight presented itself.

A boat which looked like a launch, fitted with motors and well filled with tanks and crates, shot out of a little bay and followed the steamer. Frank sprang for the glass and succeeded in getting a good view of the two occupants before the craft made the angle of the island just ahead.

"Where did that come from?" questioned Jule. "Say, but she is going after the *Señorita*!"

"It looks that way," agreed Alex.

"There go the two Englishmen!" Frank said, laying down the glass, as the launch disappeared from sight. "They are going to follow the *Señorita* to Cloud island."

"Whew!" ejaculated Case. "This Cloud island seems to be in good demand. I hope they won't carry it away before we get there!"

"Go on and tell us about it now," Alex said, turning to Frank. "The pursuers are all in the lead!"

"Yes, we're all crazy to know about Cloud island!" Jule added.

"But there is one thing I don't understand," Case observed. "These people have been following on behind us up to now. Why do they shoot ahead at this stage of the race?"

Frank's face broke into a smile.

"It seems to me," he replied, "that I am believed by my enemies to be out of the game just now! They appear to have left me for the pleasure of pursuing each other!"

"And you are sauntering along in order that they may have their wish and fight it out between themselves.

"Something like that," Frank replied. "When we met those two men on Ruination creek, I knew that they would keep the Señor Lewiso rather busy, if they succeeded in getting up the river. I doubted their ability to continue their journey, for they seemed to be in hard luck, but, thinking they might, I watched and inquired all along to see if they had gone on up ahead of us."

"I thought you acted strangely," Clay said.

"I had about given up all idea of their being anywhere near here when the boys came upon them to-day," Frank went on. "Where they secured their outfit is more than I can imagine, but they certainly are in the contest in excellent form. The Señor Lewiso will be troubled when he sees the launch chasing him."

"Will the first one at Cloud island get what they are all going after?" questioned Jule. "Will they get what we are going in search of, do you think?"

"Of course not!" Alex answered. "Don't you forget that Frank knows what's he doing, loitering along the river. I guess he knows what he is about part of the time!"

"The fact is," Frank replied, guardedly, "that neither one of them can secure the Cloud island prize without help from me."

"Oh!" grunted Jule.

"Then they'll have to wait for you to come up?" asked Alex. "If that is the idea, why don't they stick around with you?"

"Each one," laughed Frank, "seems to have the idea that the other possesses the information I have."

"I see!" grinned Alex. "And you're going to let 'em fight it out?"

"That is my present intention."

"But if they fight it out and discover that they have fought the wrong parties, what then?"

"Then the ones left alive will want to fight it out with me!"

"Then there's going to be a scrap!" Jule exclaimed. "Some day they are sure to find out that they've each been watching the wrong party!"

"Now, if you have satisfied the curiosity of these young sleuths," Clay remarked, "perhaps they will permit you to tell us about Cloud island, and what reward is sought there."

From far up the shining surface of the river, its sound somewhat deadened by the intervening island, came the report of a gun. In a minute there came a second shot.

"The *Señorita* doesn't like to be hugged by the launch!" smiled Case.

"It is a case of war there!" Frank observed. "I'm glad I have two parties opposed to me instead of one! They enjoy fighting each other, it seems!"

"Every time you get ready to tell us about Cloud island," Clay laughed, "there is an interruption. Let them fight it out, if they will, and you go on with the story of that wonderful place."

Another reverberation came down the river, and then silence. There was no more shooting at that time.

"Nearly a thousand miles from here, as the river runs," Frank began, "the Amazon turns south and follows a valley running along between two giant ridges of the Andes. Three or four hundred miles from the point where it changes its course, it finds its source in a small mountain lake. This lake is not much more more than one hundred miles from Lima, the capital of Peru."

"The Amazon draws water almost from the Pacific!" Jule interrupted.

"Yes, it comes very near crossing the continent of South America," Frank went on. "Well, about half way between the source and the point I have mentioned lies Cloud island, not in the center of the river, but so setting over to a rocky shore that the channel between the rocks and the island is very narrow at low water."

"Low water?" asked Alex. "What makes high and low water away up in the Andes?"

"Rains, of course," replied Frank. "During the wet season, which is due to begin up there before long, now, the Amazon sometimes rises from twenty to forty feet. Well, it is these inundations that make Cloud island valuable."

"Like the valley of the Nile," Alex hinted.

"Not at all in that way! It is believed that Cloud island was once an active volcano. Its top lifts above the river, at low water, about thirty feet. The summit is not more than ten acres in extent, and is as level as this deck, except that it tips gradually to the north."

"Just a mountain tableland?" asked Alex.

"Yes, and not a very high one at that. But what makes the upper level so peculiar is that in the center there is a great crater, which sends out smoke and steam which at times hide the land. Hence the name Cloud island."

"Why, of course!" Jule interrupted. "That is a volcanic region. But I have never heard of any Cloud island volcano!"

"It isn't a volcano," Frank went on. "There is never any eruption, never has been one since the records of that region were opened. Deep down in the crater are monster caverns, from which lava was tossed years ago, and at the bottom of some of these are crevices through which the steam seeps."

"I'll get a Russian bath when I get there!" Alex promised himself.

"You'll get the hide scalded off you, if you go down there!" Jule advised. "Won't he, Frank?"

"He will unless he knows where to go," was the reply. "The steam guards well the secret of those caverns."

"Any gold there?" asked Case.

"Yes, plenty of it."

"So that is what they are all after! Well, why don't they get it?"

"Do they have to dive for it?" asked Case. "The caverns must be full of water, if they are deep."

"The water in the crater follows the surface of the river, of course," Frank answered. "When there is high water, the current sweeps over the mouth of the crater, and when there is low water the bottoms of some of the caverns are dry—the caverns which are shallow in comparison with the others."

"I've got it now!" roared Alex.

"Smarty!" Jule reproved.

"What is it you've got?" asked Case.

"The answer!" was the reply.

"Give it, then!"

"There is plenty of gold in the mountains of Peru," Alex went on, while Frank leaned back with a smile on his face. "I have read that there are solid deposits a mile wide there." he went on, with a nudge at Jule. "The mother lode, in fact! Well, the waters carry this gold out of crevices when it is at its highest and pass it down the river. And some day the river, at high water, deposited a great quantity of gold in one of the caverns Frank speaks of, and that gold is what all this mess is about. Is that right, Frank?"

"Very nearly right!" Frank replied. "Years ago, a very ocean of water swept down the Andes and rushed through the valley, which is narrow and rocky. During this period of high water, a great quantity of gold was washed out of a mine and carried down, and a large amount of what was swept over Cloud island lodged in the caverns—in one cavern especially, and there my father found it. It is there still, for he died before he could bring it out! It is this cavern those people ahead are seeking."

"And you know right where it is?" asked Jule. "What a snap!"

"Then why didn't you get it out a long time ago?" asked Alex. "If I knew where there was a bunch of gold, I'd buy three automobiles and a motor boat that would fly in the air!"

"I couldn't get it out," Frank replied. "I was watched by thieves! The minute my father died this Señor Lewiso, who had long been in the employ of my father in the trading business, began watching me and searching for the cavern."

"The caverns!" corrected Case.

"You let him tell this story!" Alex exclaimed.

"Perhaps caverns is more accurate," Frank laughed, "but it is with one special cavern that we have to do. There is only one cavern which is believed to be full of gold. Father declared that it held millions, and I have no reason to doubt either his judgment or his word."

"It ought to be easy to find, if he found it," Jule broke in.

"But it isn't easy to find, unless you know just where to look for it," Frank continued. "As I have already stated, some of the caverns show fissures through which steam oozes at times, forming misty clouds about the island. In these caverns there is no gold, or a very little, if any, as the rush of the water carries it through the openings to unknown depths below.

"During the great inundation I have referred to, gold was swept by the current into a cavern where there were no fissures. Subsequent floods and periods of high water increased the gold deposit in this cavern. They also covered the yellow metal up with ooze and earth."

"Then it is still a guess! Of course, if it is covered up!"

This from Case, who had hardly breathed during the latter part of the narrative.

"So, if you don't know where to locate this particular cavern," Frank resumed, "you might hunt for it for years and never find it."

"And you really know right where it is?" asked Clay. "Well, all this was worth while, wasn't it?"

"I think so!" smiled the boy.

"Do any of these other people know?" asked Jule.

"They have only a faint idea as to where the gold is, but they are counting on taking their time and hunting until they find it."

"They may finally blunder on it," Case remarked.

He was about to say more, but, remembering his recent promise to get out of the role of prophet of evil, he checked himself, much to the satisfaction of the others.

"Strictly speaking," Frank resumed, "the cavern where the gold is, is not a cavern at all! There was once a cavern there, but it was filled with gold and the wash of the mountains, so it now presents a level surface to the eye of one entering the crater."

"Is it above water at this time of the year?" asked the practical Clay.

"Yes, I think so. In order to reach the gold, one must enter one of the steam caverns and cut through to the one filled with gold and gravel. This is what has puzzled them all, for there are many of these steam holes, large and small, and one to investigate thoroughly would be obliged to examine the entire inner surface of each one. Father found the deposit by accident."

"What about this Señor Lewiso," asked Clay. "You spoke of him in connection with some action following the death of your father."

"He found what purported to be a map of the crater," answered the boy, "and began digging for the gold, which he knew to be there somewhere. I never objected to his quest, as he was all wrong, but let him go on while I looked for men I could trust to assist me in getting the gold out."

"But he must have found some gold," Jule argued, "for it took money to get that steamer and follow you when you went out."

"He undoubtedly did," Frank admitted, "but he did not discover the main body of it. At least it was intact when I left for Chicago."

"Why Chicago?"

"Because I believed my father's people to be there."

"And you found them?"

Frank shook his head.

"All dead," he said, sadly. "On the way out in my boat I was attacked at the mouth of the Madeira, as I hinted before. Only for the fact that I hid my gold, and—and other things—in a tree, I would have been plucked clean by the Indians this scamp of a Lewiso sent upon me.

"When I left Ruination creek I left \$800 in a tree, as you know, to come back to, for there was no telling what luck I would have outside. I left too much there, as it turned out, for I was hungry and cold in Chicago, even when I possessed——"

The boy hesitated and Clay gave Case a nudge on the shoulder.

"Possessed what?" asked Jule.

"Something which would have brought money and plenty," was the guarded reply. "I heard of you boys, and used to hang about the *Rambler* nights, wondering if you would let me go with you. You see, this is an ideal party to go in quest of that gold," he went on, "for no one would give us credit for being anything but a bunch of lads out for a vacation."

"And you saw this Lewiso in Chicago, of course?"

"Oh, yes, and he caused me to be robbed, and arrested, and put out of hotels as a thief! I shall have a long account to settle with him when the time comes!"

"Then why didn't you go to some man of wealth and state your ease to him? You could have secured money enough for the trip back after the gold," suggested Clay.

"I tried that," Frank answered, "but never succeeded in closing a deal with anyone. Lewiso caused me to be shadowed, and whenever I interested a man in the enterprise he sought him out and discouraged him. At times, until the very last, he would act friendly toward me, but this was only to lead me on to confide in him. He probably followed me when I went to the South Branch pier nights and learned of my desires. Anyway, he heard plenty of talk about going to the Amazon,

coming from the *Rambler*, and doubtless took it for granted that I had joined hands with you, and that we were going after the money."

"You think he bought the steamer there after hearing of our trip?"

"I am sure of it. He was foolish enough to believe I would lead the way to the gold and let him get it!"

"And now where do these Englishmen come in?" asked Clay, desirous of clearing up the whole mystery at once.

"I never knew them at Cloud island, but it seems that they knew of me. One of them, I am almost certain, was formerly the valet of an English nobleman who visited father at his home on the upper Amazon. He undoubtedly interested the other in the adventure. Where he got the maps the boys secured is more than I know."

"Are they valuable?"

"Not worth the paper they are drawn on."

"Still their loss evidently urged the fellows on," Clay mused. "They seem determined, now, to keep pace with the *Señorita*, doubtless believing that Lewis has secured, while shadowing you, the needed information regarding the cavern."

"Something like that," Frank replied. "I have often wondered how those two men came to mention Cloud island at Ruination creek that night," he continued. "I can account for it only on the theory that Ugly, the Indian who was with them there, had been a member of the party which attacked and searched me in that vicinity. They engaged him as guide, and he might have recognized me and told them about my being a member of the other Cloud island party which had stopped there."

"I guess you have that sized up correctly," Clay remarked. "I hope," he went on, with a broad smile, "to be somewhere near when Lewis and the Englishmen meet! Each one thinks the other has secured from you the important information!"

"In the meantime," Frank remarked, "we'll let them watch and shoot at each other on the way to Cloud island. We can loiter along the river and enjoy ourselves."

"Why not hustle right along, and take no chances on their getting the gold?" asked Case, the most enthusiastic member of the party, now that the goal seemed within reach.

"You boys were planning a good time," Frank answered, "when I joined you. You were figuring on long days and nights on the Amazon, fishing and hunting. Then I connected with you, bringing my troubles along as my only baggage! Since then we've been kept busy keeping alive. We have fought days and kept guard nights, until you must be sick of your bargain, the bringing of yours truly along."

"Aw, it's been fun!" Alex broke in, and the rest echoed the thought, though not in the same words. "Besides you had baggage! You've got our note now, this minute for \$800!"

"And now," Frank went on, "I see no reason why we can't fall back on the old program, and loiter along, fishing and hunting and learning something of the country. As for the note, I've burned that!"

"That will be all right, too!" Jule cut in, "we all like that! But we'll pay it all the same, and if you say that we've got any the worst of it by bringing you along, I'll set the dog on you."

"We should have been lacking in excitement!" Alex added.

"It would have been a quilting party without you," Clay laughed. "Your affairs have kept us busy—but we like to be busy," he closed with a friendly poke at Captain Joe, who immediately stood up on his hind legs and dropped his forepaws into an attitude of meditation.

"Oh, say what you will about it," Frank protested, "I know that I've been a marplot all through, and now I want you boys to join in with me and have a game old time. Who's for it?"

Four lusty yells answered the challenge.

"All right, then," Frank continued, "we'll tie up right here, in that little bay, and see what sort of a country Ecuador is."

"I'd like to go into the interior," Clay remarked.

"It seems that the forest is more open here than on the Madeira."

"It surely is," Alex confirmed, "and I move that we go back from the river a short distance and look up a jaguar or an ant-eater."

"Whoo—pee!"

This from Jule, who at once began pulling on a pair of long-legged boots he had brought with him from Chicago. The boy was always obsessed to get into the forest.

"What about weapons?" asked Clay.

"I'll take my bean-shooter," Alex proposed.

"What's that?" asked Frank.

"Bean-shooter?"

"Yes, what is it?"

Alex brought out his long zarabatana, or blow-gun and shot an arrow to the shore, twenty paces away, where it fluttered in the bole of a tree.

"I have used those," Frank laughed, "but I never before heard them called bean-shooters."

"I'm going to hunt with this," Alex went on. "If I see a jaguar I'll fill him so full of arrows that he'll look like a feather bed turned wrong side out."

"And what will he be doing all this time?" asked Jule.

"Getting out of the way!" roared Alex.

The *Rambler* was soon anchored, and four of the lads went ashore, leaving Case in charge of the boat. It was a beautiful afternoon, though, of course, very warm, and the boys set out with high spirits to inspect a bit of Ecuador forest which fringed a creek emptying into the Amazon.

As they proceeded through the forest Alex came to a great tree which seemed to have been "slashed," as the knights of old "slashed" their doublets. It was almost red on the outside, and great "slashes" in the bark showed a tender green. While the boy was looking at the tree in wonder Frank came up and, catching one of the reddish strips, peeled it from the trunk as one peels a banana.

"What kind of a tree is that?" asked Alex.

"Mulatto tree."

"Why mulatto tree?" asked Jule.

"Because it is black before it begins to shed its bark."

"Shed its bark?" repeated Clay.

"It sheds its bark every year, like a snake," was Frank's amazing reply.

Clay ripped off one of the long slabs, disclosing a pretty green surface underneath.

"That is the new bark," Frank explained.

Clay dropped the slab of bark and turned it over with his foot.

"Heavy?" asked Alex.

"As a stone."

"It makes fine wood, and also fine shingles for a hut," Frank went on. "We'll use some of it to cook supper with."

"Cook it now!" urged Alex, his hand on his stomach.

"Right now!" Jule joined in the hungry request.

"Earn your suppers!" grinned Clay. "Go and kill a jaguar."

"But don't get far from the river," warned Frank, "and don't get lost in the jungle back there."

"Any bears back there?" asked Jule, with a wink at Alex.

"There's worse—snakes a rod long."

"That's my snake!" shouted Jule, and off he went, not stopping to permit Alex to come up with him.

"That kid has steam enough for a Central Lines locomotive," Clay said, as the boy disappeared.

"Do you remember how ill he was that night on the South Branch?" he added, turning to Frank.

"He looked like death had him," was the reply.

"And look at him now," Clay exclaimed, proudly, "look at him now! There isn't a healthier lad in nine states! Hear him yell, in there! Not much like tuberculosis, eh?"

"No," Frank agreed, as he put up a hand for Clay to cease talking.

"What is it?"

Clay was all anxiety at once.

"Sounds like the kid calling for help. Did he take a gun with him?"

"Of course."

"Where's Alex?"

"He went the other way."

There was a short silence and then Jule's voice rang out, sharp and clear:

"Help! Come on a run!"

“Come a-running!” repeated Jule, his voice sounding close at hand.

Clay swung his gun to the front as he rushed for the thicket.

“Be careful!” warned Frank. “If there is a drove of wild hogs in there, and you should happen to kill one, they would give you the fight of your life.”

“Can you follow the sound?” asked Clay, as they pushed along through the undergrowth.

“Straight ahead,” was the reply.

“But there is a movement in the brush away to the left. That may be Jule.”

“It is Alex,” panted Frank, for they were moving fast and having a hard time working their way through the jungle, which increased in density as they proceeded. “Can’t you see the point of what he calls his bean-shooter?” continued Frank. “See, he is coming this way.”

In a moment Alex joined them as they ran, and the three made good progress. Only once they stopped to listen. They had heard nothing from the boy for a minute or more, and they were not quite sure they were going in the right direction.

“If he would only shoot, or call again,” Alex grumbled.

Then the call came, from the dense copse just ahead:

“Come on a run!”

The voice sounded faint.

“Coming!” exclaimed Alex.

“Come on a run——”

The voice ceased, and Alex darted ahead so fast that Clay and Frank were left behind. In a moment they heard him shout:

“Drop your head! Drop it!”

There was no sound for a second, and then a great tumbling took place on the small growths of the forest. Then came a sound like the fall of a heavy body to the ground. This was followed by a whipping noise, like that made by slapping a rug against a post to get the dust out of it. And then the cracking of little bushes and plants, the rustling of foliage, as if a street sweeper were being drawn over them.

“Come on in!” yelled Alex.

“The water’s fine!” came Jule’s voice, but it was not so strong as it had been an hour before.

“What has been going on in there?” asked Clay. “What is that noise, that slapping, that threshing about?”

“That’s probably a serpent—a boa—kicking the bucket,” Frank answered.

“A what?” questioned Clay. “A serpent in there?”

“Surest thing you know! And I imagine from familiar sounds that he nearly got Jule!”

“But how?” puzzled Clay.

“Hypnotized him!” Frank answered. “But come on,” he continued. “We may as well go in and learn the facts as to stand here and guess.”

They passed through a fringe of thorny vines and came out in a small glade. In the middle of this slight clearing stood Alex and Jule, the latter looking pale and shriveled. At their feet lay the still writhing body of a giant boa—one of the constrictor serpents which make the forests of South America so dangerous.

“Look at him,” Alex shouted, pointing to the serpent. “Look at the arrow plump through his neck! Broke the backbone of him at the first shot. Don’t you ever tell me that I can’t edit one of these bean-shooters! What? That’s his snake!” he added, making a face at Jule.

The serpent was still pounding about the glade, but his backbone had been broken by the boy’s arrow, and his death was only a question of time. Jule approached Clay with an apologetic smile on his face.

“He near got me!” he said.

“How?” asked Clay, not having understood Frank’s short explanation of what might have taken place.

“I guess he hypnotized me,” answered Jule. “You see, fellows, I was walking along right here when I heard a hiss and a sliding motion in the tree, the one straight ahead. I looked up quick, of course, and there was that great flat, triangular head swinging back and forth before my eyes.”

“Why didn’t you duck and run?”

Jule glanced at Alex scornfully and went on.

“I just couldn’t move. All I could do was to wag my tongue, and I take it you know what I said. I don’t. I know my head swayed back and forth in response to the motions of the snake. I saw all kinds of bright and beautiful lights in the wicked eyes of him. I felt his great, sticky face rubbing against my cheek! Ough!”

“That’s the way they charm birds and monkeys,” Frank said.

“And then Alex came up and his arrow struck the serpent in the neck and I was free from the fascination, but weak—just as weak as a cat!”

“That was a good shot, Alex,” Frank said, stepping forward to inspect the arrow, which had passed entirely through the neck of the great reptile, protruding at both sides.

“It is a wonder!” the boy replied. “I was so scared that I didn’t know what I was doing. You see, this great brute had his head right on the kid’s shoulder. I never saw a human face as white as his was at that time!”

“It wasn’t any whiter than I felt,” grinned Jule. The boys finished the serpent with a couple of shots and started back to the river. They walked a long ways, but still no water showed in the distance.

Then Frank put out his hand and stood still. When he put it out to Clay there was a drop of rain in the palm.

“That’s fine!” Alex exclaimed. “Lost in the woods and the rain coming down. Now what, fellows?”

"Who has a searchlight?" asked Clay.

"I have!" answered Jule. "I've got one tucked up under this sweater. Never go away from the boat without it."

"Why didn't you turn it on the serpent?" asked Alex, with a most provoking laugh.

"I hope you'll get a snake on your shoulder some day!" Jule retorted. "Then you'll see what you are capable of doing. Turn it on the serpent!" he repeated. "Why, I couldn't have turned it over in my hand."

"What do you want of the light?" asked Frank. "It will soon be dark," Clay responded, "and then we shall have hard work finding our way back to the boat."

"Unless a miracle takes place," Frank predicted, "we'll remain in the forest to-night. We might as well try to bore through a mountain with a gimlet as to pick our way through this jungle in the night."

"But it rains, and there are snakes and jaguars abroad!" protested Jule, who was not in favor of giving the serpents of the forest another chance at him."

"A fire will keep them both away."

With this comforting remark the boy set to work gathering up the long, red slabs of the mulatto tree. The boys assisted him in bending and tying down a small tree and the slabs were put over the horizontal trunk, slanting to the ground. They were piled against each other so as to more effectually keep out the rain, which was now falling in great drops.

"Now," said Frank, after the roof was on the proposed habitation of the night, "we'll build a fire at one end and pile bark at the other. We shall have a house as cozy as a bug-in-a-rug nest."

"If Case would only shoot!" Jule hinted, disliking the idea of a night there, "I could find my way to the river. Perhaps he will, after a time, for he will be lonesome and anxious as soon as it gets dark."

But no signals came from the river, which seemed a long ways off, and the boys, hovering under the bark roof and listening to the patter of the drops on the growths of the forest, began to wonder if something hadn't happened to the lad in the boat.

Presently a wind came up, blowing great guns, and the boys were obliged to cling tight to the swaying ridge-pole of their tent in order to prevent the whole frail habitation being blown away. It looked as if a dreary night lay ahead of them.

After an hour or more had been passed in this way a faint drumming, whirring sound was heard, followed by a sharp whistle and a splash of paddles.

"That's Frank's miracle!—a steamboat on the river!" cried Alex, jumping out into the rain. "Now I reckon we can tell which way to go to the *Rambler*!"

Clay and Jule arose and peered out in the direction from which the sounds appeared to come. Frank burst into a laugh.

"Look the other way!" he cried. "That is the echo! The sound is stopped by the foliage and hurled back."

"Not!" disputed Jule. "The boat is off that way. I can see a light over there."

"If you do," Frank returned, "you see a campfire. The river lies off in the opposite direction."

"We'll see when the boat gets nearer," Clay conciliated. "If I had my way about it now, I should chase off in the direction those sounds come from."

The lads crept back under shelter and listened patiently as the sounds came nearer. Then music was heard. It was evidently a large passenger steamer, and a lady was playing and singing in the cabin!

"Sounds like a bit of paradise!" declared Clay. "It has been a long time since we have heard a woman sing."

"Her song points out our way," Alex observed, as the lights of the boat struck the green, wet foliage and flashed back a thousand tiny stars!

"Give it up?" asked Frank, as the steamer passed and the lights and music faded in the distance. "Give it up? You would have gotten deeper into the woods if you had followed that echo."

The rain was now coming down harder than ever, and the wind was blowing a perfect hurricane from the west. Clay stepped out of the shelter and was nearly blown off his feet.

"Never mind," he said, bracing himself against the wind, "we can make it if we try hard enough. We know where to go now."

"Dark?" Jule broke in, savagely. "Who said it was dark?"

"No one!" scoffed Alex. "That isn't a dark jungle out there! That is the Great White Way!"

"You're crazy!" Jule laughed. "Who said there were snakes and jaguars in the woods of Ecuador?"

"Who's crazy now?" chanted Alex. "Give my regards to Herald Square."

"I believe you are both afraid to make the journey back to the boat," Clay laughed. "Hence these meaningless observations."

"Who's afraid?" demanded Jule.

The next instant he was out in the rain, his flashlight shining in front of him like a headlight to a locomotive. When the others called out to him to wait a second and give them the benefit of his light, there was no reply. Nettled at the seeming taunt, he had started off alone toward the *Rambler*.

It was dark, and the rain fell in torrents, and the wind was tipping over great trees in the forest, but the boys started out toward the river hoping to come upon Jule with his searchlight before long.

Presently they saw it, coming toward them through the trees, and then they heard the boy's voice, raised to a great pitch to combat the clamor of the wind and rain.

"I've found the *Rambler*," he said, "but Case isn't there!"

"Nice quiet excursion this," said Alex, with an answering whoop.

CHAPTER XXII.—A BATH IN THE NIGHT

"A nice, quiet excursion, all right!" agreed Clay. "This is one of Frank's nature-loving trips!"

"I wish I had some of these wild animals in Lincoln park!" Alex grumbled. "I could live like a king on the income they'd bring as promoters of sensations!"

"There are said to be plenty of snakes along North Clark street," laughed Clay.

"But most of them are not present to the senses," Alex explained.

Jule came up with his light, and better progress was made through the forest, which grew thinner as it approached the river. The rain was still falling in dashes, but the wind seemed to be going down.

After walking a short distance they heard a call, seemingly coming from the wrack of clouds overhead.

"That was Case's voice!" Clay declared. "He's near by!"

"Sure it was!" Jule agreed, "but where is he? Sounds like he was up in a balloon."

Again the call came, and this time there was no doubt that the boy was up above the surface of the ground.

"He's in a tree!" Clay concluded. "Now, what do you think of that? This surely is a night for nature-loving kids!"

"H-e-l-l-o!" called Case. "Lookout where you go. I've got a whole menagerie down there."

The boys stood still and looked about, passing the searchlight from side to side, but seeing nothing save the splash of the rain on the broad leaves about them. Then Case called again:

"Keep close to the light!" he cried.

Then a great racket in the undergrowth reached the ears of the listening lads. It sounded as if an elephant was engaged in deadly combat with an alligator fresh from the river. Cries like those of a cat and grunts like those of a huge hog came with the tumblings. Ripping sounds like tearing tough cloth or leather succeeded. Presently the racket died out, and nothing was heard save the drip-drip of the rain and the wind in the tall trees. The night was clearing a bit, and the clouds responsible for the shower were breaking and floating away, showing open spaces from which stars looked down.

A movement in the bushes caused Clay to present his gun in that direction and Jule to advance his light. Instead of the wild beast they anticipated seeing, Case came forward to meet them. His clothing was torn, and his face showed contact with thorny vines.

"What did you leave the boat for?" demanded Alex, glad of an opportunity to "roast" the boy. "Someone might have carried it away in a hand-bag!"

"I wanted to get that jaguar skin," was the answer.

"Did you get it?" asked Jule, anxiously, for it was the desire of his heart that the party should take home such a trophy.

"Something got it, I guess," replied Case. "Go and look where that fight was. You'll see what I bumped up against."

Frank took the searchlight and peered through the thicket to the spot where the disturbance had been.

"It was a jaguar, all right," he said, "and the tamandua got him—and he got the tamandua. Come here, boys."

On the ground, clasped in a deadly embrace, lay a tamandua and a jaguar. The tamandua is best known as the ant-eater, and is a tough-skinned, slothful animal, bulky, muscular, and dangerous when attacked.

"I was stalking the jaguar," Case said, approaching the bodies, "when he turned on me. I didn't know what to do, so I mounted a tree, which was some climb—believe me! Then the ant-eater blundered along, and it looked as if the tiger was so mad because he had been delayed in getting me that he attacked the fellow. And there they lie! My, but they kept each other busy for a spell."

"The jaguar would have kept you busy if the ant-eater hadn't happened along!" Frank declared. "He would have been up that tree in no time. You are lucky to be alive!"

The boys found their way back to the *Rambler* and delighted the heart of Alex by beginning preparations for supper. Clay decided that they should have a "native" meal, as a fowl shot earlier in the afternoon would form the piece d' resistance. Besides the fowl, which was roasted at a fire on the shore—alligators paddling about the shore and slapping the water and the sand with their unwieldy tails as the roasting went on—they had bread made of the product of the mandioca plant. This plant means as much to the people of Brazil as the potato does to the inhabitants of our Northern states.

It produces farina, cassava, and tapioca, all of which are made from the roots, which are peeled like potatoes. In order to produce most of the products of the plant the pulp secured from the roots is squeezed dry by twisting it in a bag. The juice thus secured is poisonous when new, but when fermented it makes the whisky of the Amazon valley.

The boys also had a fish fresh from the river, and Jule insisted on having this roasted also. Even the coffee they had brought in with them was a product of Brazil.

After supper they sat for a long time watching the moon rise over the river. It came out of a bank of clouds at first, but directly a long, bright path lay along the rippling surface of the water, seeming to lead straight back to the Atlantic coast. Alligators innumerable came out and raced clumsily about—playing, Frank said. Off in the forest they could hear the call of a jaguar, probably the mate of the one that had been killed by the ant-eater.

A great chattering in the trees told of the presence of monkeys, but the boys did not molest them. The alligators, too, were immune from the guns of the party. The only thing the lads killed relentlessly, at all times and under all circumstances, was the snake.

"I move," Clay began, as they all sat under the wire netting, looking out on the attractive and unfamiliar scene, "that we go on to Cloud island in the morning and do our exploring when we come

down. I have a notion that this Lewiso and the Englishmen will do murder up there unless we stifle their cause of combat by taking the gold ourselves."

"I second the motion!" Case cried.

Case was really becoming one of the most enthusiastic and resourceful members of the party. Only at rare intervals did he give way to his imagination—an imagination, by the way, which was bright and suggestive, even if inclined to bring out disagreeable points—and let out prophecies of evil.

"I shall be glad when it is all over with," Frank admitted. "Of course I want you boys to have all the fun you can on this trip, but I think we can have better entertainment after this suspense is over, on the way back to the coast."

"Are you going back with us?" asked Alex.

"Yes; if you will permit it. Why not?"

"Even if we do not get the gold?"

"Why, certainly. If we get the gold I shall go out with you as a starter on a series of travels to include all the large rivers in the United States. If we do not get it, why, then I shall have to go out and find something to do."

"Is this prospect of the gold all the interest you have up there?" asked Clay.

"Yes, nearly all; my father left considerable property, but it is about gone. My guardian helped himself, and this Lewiso has cost me a lot of money."

"Then we've just got to get the gold!" Alex exclaimed. "We just can't go back to Chicago broke!"

"I like that idea of exploring all the large rivers of the country," Clay said, smiling at Alex's enthusiasm. "If we win out with the gold, we'll form a Motor Boat Club and make it our business to visit all the large streams our Uncle Sam owns."

"Correct!" shouted Alex.

"You know it!" Jule contributed.

"Glorious!" Case declared.

The boys talked until midnight, looking over the moonlit river and listening, at intervals to the sounds of the jungle.

"It is just like a large city!" Case observed. "There is such a continuous clamor that individual noises are lost. We hear only the full-throated roar of races and forget the existence of the little voices. But the little voices are there. They make the roar!"

"We'll all make a roar about getting up in the morning!" Jule said, "if we don't get to bed."

He looked about the crowded deck where so many hammocks swung and then up to the roof of the cabin.

"I wonder," he mused, "if the mosquitos would eat me up before morning if I should make a bed up on the cabin?"

"They would do their best!" Alex replied.

"Anyway," Jule decided, "I'm going to try it."

So he hauled a rug and a blanket to the roof of the cabin and composed himself to slumber. The boys on the deck were asleep almost as soon as he was, and the alligators in the Amazon sported on without a human audience.

But the long silence of the boat seemed to attract the attention of the huge reptiles, and they soon began to nose about the sides of the *Rambler*. Pretty soon a whole school of the big fellows were swimming close to the sides, evidently attracted by the odor of the supper which had been eaten there.

Presently a huge fellow bunted into another huge fellow in what seemed to be defiance of the rules of river etiquette, and a battle was the result. In the squabble one was forced with a bunt against the boat, and the craft rocked perilously. Another bunt, and the top of the cabin stood at an angle of about 75 degrees. The sleeper rolled off his blanket and tumbled overboard, striking one of the fighters squarely on the nose.

The alligators seemed to be as much surprised at the sudden visitation as Jule was to find himself floundering in the water, with the cold noses of the 'gators touching his bare flesh. He let out a cry which brought the boys out of their hammocks with their guns in their hands, and directly a shower of lead fell into the river.

When the boy was finally pulled on deck he looked at both legs and both arms, and felt of the back of his head to see if he was all there. Alex tried to convince him that one of the river "birds" had amputated his intelligence, but Jule chased him away and lay down on his blanket again.

"You're a nice fisherman!" Case cried. "Trying to catch an alligator by the tail! We'll have to tie you up!"

Even Captain Joe seemed to be inclined to laugh at the lad for his accident, but quiet was soon restored, and the boat was sent up the river at great speed, Jule declaring that he would sit up and run her in order to get out of that part of the country. Its snakes and alligators, he intimated, were too numerous for him!

For two days and nights they kept on their way, stopping once to replenish their gasoline tanks. Then, on the morning of the third day, a cloud lifted from the river and Frank pointed to it with a sigh of relief. As he did so the wreck of a steamer floated past—a steamer which had been the *Señorita*, and which had evidently been blown up with dynamite. What had taken place, the boys asked, and where was the crew?

CHAPTER XXIII.—CLOUD ISLAND

Cloud Island was just a bulk of mist when the lads came opposite it. The outlines of the shore were not to be seen, for steam pouring out of the fissures in the rocks clouded everything. To the west, however, a small hut was to be seen on the narrow rim which lay between the river and the mountains. While they looked, checking the speed of the *Rambler* until it just held against the current, two figures moved out of the structure and motioned to the boat.

"That's John!" Frank cried, putting his fingers to his lips and giving out a long, wavering whistle which cut the air like a knife. "That is John," he went on—"the man I left in charge of my affairs here. I think we would better land at the little pier just above."

But there was no pier there, only a mass of burned and twisted timbers and blackened stones! However, Frank put ashore in the row-boat, soon returning with the man who had motioned from the shore. He was a muscular young fellow with the dusky complexion of the native Indian and the regular features of the American. He was dressed in European clothing and spoke English fluently, although Frank assured his friends that he had never lived out of Peru.

It was evident that Frank and John had discussed personal affairs on the way to the deck of the *Rambler*, for the boy now asked:

"What happened to the pier?"

The boys gathered around to hear the reply, for the wreck which had drifted by them told of violence which had not been confined to the boat.

"Before we go into that," John replied, "suppose you head up to the station just above—where your father used to live—and bring down a surgeon. I have two patients at my hut."

"Why didn't you tell me that before?" asked Frank.

"I thought you might want to stop and talk with them," was the reply, "and every minute is precious if their lives are to be saved."

"Who are they?" asked Clay, unable to longer restrain his curiosity.

Frank's eyes asked the same question, and John continued:

"You remember Lord Wilson? The Englishman who came here with a valet two years ago? Well, one of the men in need of surgical aid is Edward, the valet. He came in here a few days ago with another Englishman, in a queer combination of launch and motor boat."

"Ahead of the *Señorita*?" asked Frank.

"Just behind her. This man Lewiso, who formerly worked for your father, was in charge of the *Señorita*, and the two men mixed at once. You see," he added with a smile, "they were both after the gold we have so often talked about, and each believed that the other knew the exact location of it. They both prowled about Cloud island, each watching the other, until they came to blows."

"That was to have been expected," Frank said.

"The crew of the *Señorita* deserted when shooting began, and Lewiso and Edward had it out together, one day, on the pier, where the *Señorita* lay. Neither was much injured, but that night the steamer was blown out of water with dynamite stolen from my warehouse. I pushed the wreck of the vessel down stream not long ago."

"We just passed it."

"The companion of the Englishman, Edward, was killed that night, but Lewiso escaped. Last night they came together—Edward and Lewiso—on Cloud island, while searching for the gold, and this morning my men brought them to my place wounded unto death. They are there now, and the doctor's house is in sight, and we'll interrupt the conversation long enough to get him on board," John added, as the motor boat headed in at a little cove on the west shore.

The doctor was soon on board—a fussy little fellow with gray hair and a beard like a goat—and the *Rambler* shot down stream again.

"Of course the men never found what they were looking for?" asked Frank, as the boat sped on its way.

"Certainly not, and for a very good reason!"

"Not being able to find the right cavern, I suppose?" laughed Frank.

"Oh, they found the right cavern, all right, but that helped them not a bit."

"What do you mean?"

Frank sprang to his feet excitedly, and the others gathered around, anticipating the next sentence. There had been no gold in the cavern! Frank's father had been mistaken! Was that what John was about to say? Had all this excitement, all these dreams of wealth, come to such a dreary ending?

"There was no gold there for them to get!" John said.

Frank sank back with a sigh.

"That is a corker!" he said. "No gold there?"

"For the reason," continued John, with a laugh, "that I had taken it out and shipped it away!"

Clay was about to ask the speaker if he considered it a good joke to rob a fellow like that and then laugh over it, but there was so much humor in John's eyes that he hesitated to put the impertinent, accusing and degrading question.

Frank arose wearily and walked away, but John caught him by the arm and turned him back.

"When we get up to the hut," he said, "I'll show you how much I got for the gold. It was sold at Para, at a small discount."

Frank did not appear at all interested in the price of this gold—the gold he had considered his own.

"All right!" he said, dully. "Then we'll turn back."

"Not until you look over the island," cried Alex. "I've a notion that there's something crooked been going on here, and I want to remain here—abouts long enough to dig it out," he continued, his eyes flashing in John's direction. John did not appear to mind this in the least, and even Captain Joe seemed to make light of the hostile demonstration, for he sniffed a moment at John's trousers and

then, taking him into his confidence lay down at his feet!

"You must have made a good thing off Frank's gold!" Jule broke in.

"Something like \$300,000," was the cool reply.

"That's nice!" cried Case, moving toward the speaker.

"And the check for it all," John went on, laughing as he talked, "is waiting for Frank! It was his mine, you know, and if he wants to pay me for my trouble, why——"

An avalanche of boys flowed over John! They dragged him about the deck, tore at his clothes, shouted his name——

"John! John! John! He's a brick is John!"

"Here's for a revel! Bring him along! Who? John!"

"That will answer for the present," John managed to say. "Save the pieces! I want to see a little of the world yet!"

It took a long time for John to describe how the cavern had been opened by himself, and how he had engaged men to work the gold out during the night-time, and how it had been secretly shipped away, and how all the money it brought lay at Frank's disposal in a bank at Para!

But the story was told at last, and then the *Rambler* landed the surgeon and all went up to John's hut to see the two men who had fought each other for an empty cavern! John's servant opened the door for them and pointed silently to two bunks standing next the wall. The figures on the bunks were still, and a white cloth was laid over each face.

The boys turned away and went back to the *Rambler*. And so the quest for the Cloud island gold ended, and so the secret of Cloud island was told.

The boys remained a week at Cloud island, and then, accompanied by John, started back down the Amazon. Before leaving, Frank gave to John what was left of his father's estate, and the latter refused to accept any other reward for getting out the gold. The honest fellow had long ago been taken into the confidence of Frank's father in the matter of the gold, and so it was, after all, no great wonder that he had found it!

His idea in not acquainting Frank with the true condition of affairs before the boy left for Chicago, was that the boy ought to go about a bit and learn the value of money before taking such wealth into his boyish hands.

Then followed more magnificent days and nights on the Amazon. The boys were now in the midst of the wet season on the upper river, and many of the camps they had made on the way up were under water. However, the *Rambler* behaved admirably, and Captain Joe seemed so proud of her conduct in the face of the flood that he was always found looking over the stern with an air of dignity and triumph!

And so, with Jule completely restored to health, the boys stepped out on the pier on the South Branch one sharp day in early winter. And who should be there but Captain Joe, with his ruddy face and wooden leg! The dog immediately made friends with him, of course, and, in order that names might not become mixed, was called merely "Joe" as long as the boys remained in the city.

When they set foot on the pier that first day Clay turned to Frank and seized him by the neck, in mock anger.

"Tell me!" he cried. "Tell me who put the marked newspaper on the boat that morning!"

"I did," was the calm reply. "You see," the boy continued, "those were my diamonds, and——"

"And you paid the reward!"

"I pledged the stones to the lawyer to get the money to pay that reward!" laughed Frank.

It was so noisy for a time, on account of what the boys were saying and doing to Frank, that nothing more was said. Then Clay:

"But the diamonds were stolen?"

"Stolen by a lad who had slept with me in a cheap lodging house on Clark street," was the reply. "You see, I had kept the stones, even when hungry and cold, because they had been the last gift of my mother. When they were stolen I followed the track of the thief until I came to this dock, where we had often loitered together before. As it turned out, the boy had repented of his act, and was here to return the stones to me, he believing that I would come here to watch your boat, as we had done together many a night. But Lewis—whose name was Lewis, by the way—saw him have the gems and fought him for them. He secured them and ran away, as you know, before I could interfere or find breath to follow him. Well, you saved the diamond, and the next morning I arranged for the reward to come to you. I guess you know all the rest."

"Not yet!" broke in Captain Joe. "There is a matter of \$300, you know!"

"But you gave that, Captain!"

The good-natured captain pointed to Frank.

"After he gave it to me and told me what to do with it."

Then followed another demonstration which it is not necessary to describe! Everything had been explained save the robbery of the boat that night, and that would never be anything but a mystery.

One of the first men to call on the boys was Dr. Holcomb, who made a great claim for damages on his boat! But he was appeased when he saw how well Jule looked, and offered the boat for another river trip. Finally he called Jule aside and whispered:

"Did you tell them?"

Jule shook his head and Clay called out:

"Tell them what?"

Again the boys gathered around to hear a story told.

"The day before you left," the doctor began, "I found a little property which belonged to Jule. You see, his parents had owned a lot out on Cottage Grove avenue, and it had increased in value. Jule, it seems, had been paying the taxes without knowing it, for the tenant of the place had paid the claims for taxes and improvements and put the rest of the rent money in bank. He did not know that Jule's father was dead, but expected him back any day to demand an accounting. I told Jule about it that night, and kept him quite a long time doing it!"

"Can't you dig up a fortune for Alex and Clay now?" asked Case. "I would just enjoy being the only poor one in the bunch. I've cut out the prophet-of-evil business, and that is enough for me for one year."

"This property belongs to us all," Jule cried. "At least the income from it does, and right here we'll form the Six Rivers Motor Boat Club and get ready for a trip in the spring."

"Where?" asked the doctor.

"The Colorado?" hinted Alex.

"The Mississippi," said Jule.

"The St. Lawrence," declared Case.

"The Ohio," Clay suggested.

"Or the Columbia!" Frank mentioned.

"That's it!" they all cried. "The Columbia! And a larger boat, and no gold caverns, and no snakes!" added Jule.

The story of the adventures of the boys at the headwaters of the Columbia will be found in the second volume of the Six-River Motor Boat Club Series, entitled: "Motor Boat Boys on the Columbia; or, the Confession of a Photograph."

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RIVER MOTOR BOAT BOYS ON THE AMAZON; OR, THE SECRET OF CLOUD ISLAND ***

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