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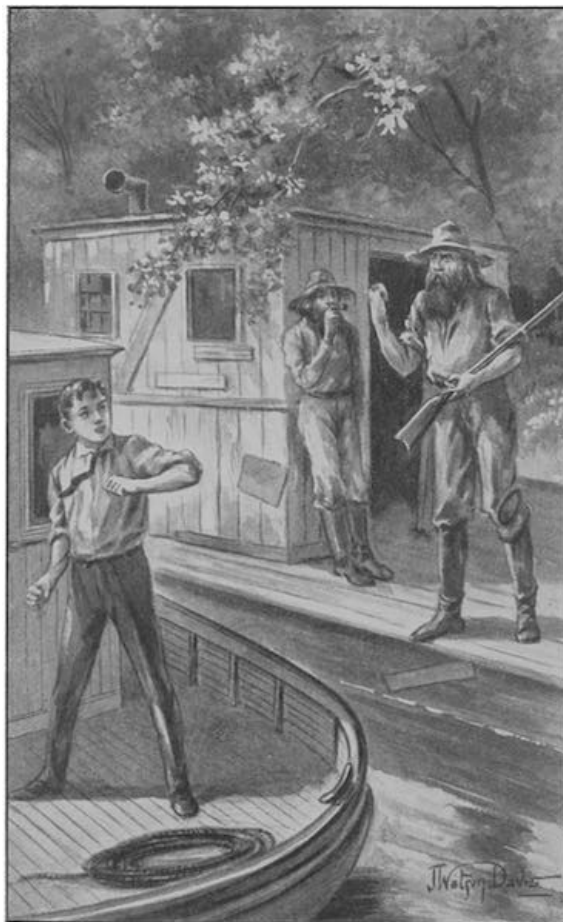
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RIVER MOTOR BOAT BOYS ON THE OHIO; OR, THE THREE BLUE LIGHTS ***



"Here you," shouted Mose, "don't you go near those motors."

The River Motor Boat Boys on the Ohio

OR

The Three Blue Lights

By HARRY GORDON

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

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THE SIX RIVER MOTOR BOYS ON THE OHIO

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"That Kentucky shore looks to me like good hunting."

"What can you get over there?"

"Possums, coons, rabbits and squirrels."

"All right, we'll go right now and get a coon."

Cornelius Witters threw himself back on the gunwale and laughed and shook until little wavelets sprang from the sides of the boat and rippled away over the Ohio river.

"You'll get lots of coons in the middle of the afternoon," he said, finally. "You have to get coons in the night."

"Well, there's another night coming, ain't there?" suggested Alex Smithwick. "We're going to stay here in this eddy until morning, ain't we?"

"I guess we'll have to stay till morning," Jule Shafer cut in. "The motor has gone wrong, and Clay doesn't seem to know how to fix it."

Clayton Emmett looked up from the motors with a very smutty face and smiled at the last remark.

"I'll tell you what it is, boys," he said, "this motor can't be put in good shape until we get another consignment of spark plugs."

The four boys, Clayton Emmett, Alex Smithwick, Jule Shafer and Cornelius Witters, gathered about the motor, looking with disgust at its motionless cranks. The boat had been turned into an eddy on the Kentucky side of the Ohio river about noon, and Clay had been working at the machinery ever since in the hope of getting farther down the river that night.

"Well," Case said, after a short silence, "some one must go out to civilization and buy some spark plugs. How far do you think we'll have to go? Of course these little trading points on the river don't keep spark plugs. We'll be lucky if we even get gasoline there."

"I'll tell you what we'll do," Clay suggested.

"We may be able to buy or borrow spark plugs from some passing launch or steamer. There are store-boats on the Ohio, you know, and they may carry all kinds of motor boat supplies."

"Oh yes," Alex grinned, "there are store-boats on the Ohio, and whiskey boats, and show-boats, and house-boats, and about a thousand other kinds of boats, but I don't believe they carry such supplies as we want."

"It's just a chance," Clay went on. "We may be able to get a supply from some motor boat, but in the meantime we'd better be looking about in other directions."

"All right," Case exclaimed, excitedly, "Alex and I will go out hunting and steer toward any little river town we get wise to. We may find motor supplies in any old shanty town."

"All right," Clay replied. "Go out and get a mess of squirrels or rabbits while you're hunting for a supply store."

The motor boat *Rambler* lay in an eddy on the Kentucky side of the Ohio river, some distance below Louisville. The four owners had put the boat into the river at Pittsburg, and were making their way to the Mississippi at Cairo.

They had only recently returned from an extended trip up the St. Lawrence river. From Ogdensburg they had followed the Great Lakes to Chicago, which was their home. From Ogdensburg the motor boat had been accompanied by the launch *Cartier*, which had been presented to Captain Joe, one of their old-time friends, because of important services rendered by the boys. Those who have read the previous books of this series will understand the build and speed of the *Rambler*, and also the affectionate relations existing between the four boys and Captain Joe, an ex-sea, lake and river captain.

Captain Joe had been urged by the lads to accompany them on their trip down the Ohio with his launch, but had objected, saying that the boys would be sure to get into all kinds of scrapes, and that he did not care to become responsible for the actions of a crew going about the world looking for trouble!

The old captain, however, had a very alert and intelligent representative on board the *Rambler* in the person of Captain Joe, a white bulldog of forbidding appearance. This dog had been purchased at Para, Brazil, by Alex, and had often made himself useful during trying situations on previous trips.

There was also another passenger on board the *Rambler* whose name did not appear on the crew list. This was Teddy, the quarter-grown grizzly bear which Alex had rescued from a floating tree in the Columbia river, near the source of that wonderful stream.

The bear and the dog were very good friends, playing together like kittens. During their many river trips the boys had taught the bear to box, wrestle and frisk about in the water. Captain Joe was always ready for a tussle with the bear, and had a habit of following Alex surreptitiously every time the boy left the boat.

The *Rambler* was well supplied with provisions and ammunition of all kinds, but, the supply of gasoline running low, the tanks being well-nigh empty, and the spark plug badly worn, the boys had proposed early in the day to merely drift down the river, keeping headway with the sweep.

But a little experience of this mode of traveling on the great stream had caused them to tie up in an eddy on the Kentucky side. It was September, and the Ohio was alive with traffic of all kinds.

During the early part of the day they had passed several excursion boats, gay with flags and music, almost a fleet of shanty-boats, and innumerable packets, stern-wheelers and side-wheelers. Drifting with no control to speak of, the *Rambler* had several times come very near collision with larger boats.

On the Ohio, as well as on the Mississippi and the St. Lawrence, the traffic-men seem to have a great contempt for those who go about in gasoline boats. Captains and pilots unite in making trouble for the owners of such craft whenever it is possible to do so.

Once that forenoon the *Rambler* had come very near destruction because of a monstrous tow of coal barges moving down upon it. Later, the boys had been annoyed and insulted by a gang of

toughs who were lounging over the railing of a whiskey boat which was passing up the river.

It was finally arranged that Alex and Case should go ashore and look about for a place where supplies might be purchased. There were no settlements in sight from the point where the *Rambler* lay, but the boys thought that, as she lay just above a great bend which swept around a long peninsula, turning to the south at last, there might be business places not far away which were not in view.

"And while you are gone," Jule called out as the boys rowed ashore, "catch a coon and half a dozen squirrels. I can make a squirrel pie that will bring Captain Joe down from Chicago!"

"All right!" Alex called back. "We'll bring game enough to last a week. Get your fires all ready by dark."

The shore on which the boys found themselves a few moments later was wild and rocky. There were great oaks towering along the side hills and immense trees of hickory, beech and walnut shut out the view on all sides. There was also a heavy undergrowth.

"Where are you heading for?" asked Case, as Alex turned into a thicket and went tramping through it with a great noise.

"I think," Alex replied, "that we'd better keep off to the west and south. I looked at a map of the river just before I left the boat, and there's a great bend here. We can walk across it in an hour or two, but it would take half a day to float or row around it."

"I see," Case answered. "There may be a town in a nook around the bend. That's where they build towns in this country."

The boys made good time for an hour or more, when they came out on the bank of the river perhaps three miles from the boat, across the bend, and ten or fifteen by way of the river. Just below them, hardly forty rods from the point where they emerged from the underbrush, they saw a little river settlement composed of half a dozen ramshackle houses, a fishing dock, and one store building.

"There!" Alex said. "I'll bet we find spark plugs there!"

"If we find as many spark plugs there as we didn't find squirrels coming through," Case laughed, "It will take a long time to get our motor started."

"Oh, well," Alex answered, "we didn't look very hard for squirrels, anyway. We'll see what they've got here, and do our hunting on the way back."

"Clay may get what we want from some of the boats," Case suggested. "There are lots of boats on the river that ought to carry spark plugs. It's dollars to apples that every motor boat we've seen today carries an extra supply."

"That won't do us any good," Alex answered, "if they don't show a disposition to pass them around."

"Do you know," Case went on, "I'm afraid of some of those river boats. There's a tougher gang on some of them than you'll find on Clark street. They drink third-rail whiskey, made up in the mountains, and are ready to do murder after a dozen doses of it."

"Well," Alex said, "we'll just have to watch out, that's all."

"You remember that red, white and blue boat we saw yesterday?" Case went on. "That was a gambling house proper. Just looking over the gunwale into the cabin windows, I saw roulette wheels in operation and three faro layouts crowded with excited gamblers."

"Yes," Alex assented, "and it looked to me like they were playing stud poker out in the open. It's a wonder the people along the river don't put dynamite under those boats some night."

"I reckon," Case suggested, "that the people along the river are more afraid of the store-boats than they are of the gambling boats. These store-boat men steal everything they can get their hands on. They have been known to raid small towns, strip the shelves of the business places, and even take valuable furniture and musical instruments from the residences. When they get a boat load of this sort of plunder, they take it down to New Orleans, where it is disposed of by men who make a business of doing that sort of thing."

Alex scratched his red head and wrinkled his freckled nose for a minute and then turned to his chum with a grin on his face.

"If they try to get the *Rambler*," he said, "don't forget that we have dynamite under the after deck near the gasoline tanks."

"If they try to get the *Rambler*," Case exclaimed, "they'll do it while we are away on shore, or asleep. These river rats are too cowardly to put up an open fight. They do their work in the dark."

"That's one reason why I don't like being away from the boat long at a time," Alex went on. "Clay and Jule would do anything any two boys could do to protect our property, but, all the same, two boys wouldn't cut much ice with a gang of river pirates like I've seen on those boats."

As the boy ceased speaking he laid an excited hand on Case's shoulder and turned his face in the direction from which they had come.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

Case nodded and turned back to the east.

"It sounded like a gun," he exclaimed. "I'm going back to the boat."

Alex held him back and pointed toward the settlement below.

"We may as well see about the spark plugs," he advised. "It won't take us very much longer. That noise may be only hunters, anyway."

Trying their best to conceal their excitement, the boys moved down the slope to the river bank and stopped on a level platform before the store door. The shots were now coming in a volley.

CHAPTER II.—A "FRIENDLY" CAPTAIN.

After the departure of Alex and Case, Clay and Jule continued their efforts to get the motor into working order. In the meantime, however, they kept a sharp lookout for the approach of some boat which might possibly supply them with what they needed.

However, they had little hope of relief from any river craft.

"There must be some towns along the river, below the bend," Jule insisted. "The boys will find some sort of place where motor supplies are sold."

"If they do," Clay answered, "I hope they'll bring a whole pocketful of spark plugs."

"And I hope they'll bring back a dozen squirrels, and six rabbits, and a coon, and a 'possum!" Jule laughed. "Here we've been on this river all the way down from Pittsburg, and haven't had any wild game yet! I've eaten fish until I believe there are fins growing on my toes."

"There's a large motor boat coming down," Clay said, pointing up stream. "Perhaps we can get what we want by going aboard."

"Looks like a pretty decent sort of a craft," Jule suggested.

"It looks to me like a store-boat, anyhow," Clay went on.

"Then we'll give 'em a hail!"

The call from the *Rambler* was answered immediately, and a large-sized motor boat turned in toward the Kentucky shore. The name "Hawk" was discernible on the prow as she came slowly on.

"What idiot named a sailing vessel after a bird?" asked Jule.

"She may be a bird, at that," decided Clay. "She looks as if she could go some, anyway."

"Hello, the boat!" now came from the *Hawk*.

"Have you got motor supplies?" Clay called back.

"What kind of supplies?"

"Spark plugs," was the answer.

"Come on board and we'll fit you out."

"That's the talk!" Jule shouted.

"Where are you bound for?" called out a man on the deck of the *Hawk*.

"Just down the river," Clay answered.

The man who had been speaking from the freight deck of the *Hawk* now turned away and conversed for a moment with two men who had been listening to the conversation. As the fellow talked, he pointed with his thumb over his shoulder, significantly, at the *Rambler*.

"I don't like the looks of this!" Clay declared.

"Then let's cut it out," replied Jule.

"We can't very well cut it out!" Clay exclaimed. "They probably know we're tied up here with a disabled motor. If they are the kind of people we fear they are, they'll come and get us anyway. I wish Alex and Case were here."

"Shall we stay here and shoot if they attempt to board us?" asked Jule, the light of battle flaming in his usually merry eyes.

Clay thought hard for a moment and then turned back to the cabin for his automatic, which he took good care to keep out of sight.

"Are you coming aboard?" the man shouted from the *Hawk*.

"We haven't any boat," Clay replied. "Our friends have gone hunting on shore."

"We'll fix that all right," was called back, and in a moment a rowboat rounded the stern of the *Hawk* and made its way rapidly to the *Rambler*. The boys watched the appearance of the boat with premonitions of danger. The two rowers looked like veritable river pirates.

"Pile in!" shouted one of the men gruffly as he held on to the anchor-chain of the motor boat. "Hustle yourselves in here, and I'll have you over to the *Hawk* in a minute."

Motioning to Jule to remain where he was, Clay dropped into the rowboat and told the man to pull away.

"Isn't your friend coming?" one of the rowers asked.

"We can't leave the boat alone," was the reply. "Why, we'll be right here alongside," urged the other.

As he spoke he lifted a hairy, repulsive face toward the *Rambler* and shouted:

"Come on, lad, the captain is fixing up a treat for you boys!"

"I've got to stay on board," Jule answered.

"Oh, come along," ordered the other, almost angrily.

"Pull away," Clay advised, "we never leave the boat alone, night or day. It isn't safe to do so on the Ohio."

"Perhaps that isn't a bad notion, either," one of the rowers replied, with a sullen smile. "Perhaps the captain will send some one on board to keep him company."

Clay saw by the significant and sneering looks passing between the two men that they considered him a prisoner already. So much of a prisoner, in fact, that they did not consider it necessary to attempt to conceal their contempt and their triumph.

Had the *Rambler* been in fit condition he would have leaped out of the boat and speeded away. It seemed to him now, however, that the common-sense course would be to find out exactly what kind of a boat the *Hawk* was before taking any steps having the appearance of alarm.

"All right!" the boy answered in response to the rower's offer to send some one on board to keep Jule company, "the boy may become lonesome after a time, although I shall be gone only a very few moments."

"There's a mighty jolly crowd on board our boat," the rower went on. "There's many a man gets aboard for an hour's ride and never gets off for a hundred miles."

"I don't doubt it!" Clay said with a laugh.

It was the work of only a moment to land the unwilling boy on the freight deck of the *Hawk*. He was at once surrounded by a group of men who seemed to represent all grades of society. There

was the well-dressed man wearing diamonds and the man who was garbed like a river rat!

The captain was a hatchet-faced man with rat eyes and a perfect bill of a nose. His manner was offensive as he approached Clay familiarly and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"So you're going down the river on a little trip of your own, eh?" he asked. "Nice boat you've got."

"Yes," Clay answered, "it's not expensive, but it's pretty well rigged out. She's a bit fast, too, when in good shape."

"Looks like she could go some," agreed the captain.

"What are you trading in?" asked a handsomely-dressed man who looked enough like the captain to be his brother.

"Oh," Clay replied, "we're just out for amusement; taking our vacation on the river."

"That's a good bluff, too," the other sneered. "People don't trail along the Ohio just for the fun of the thing."

"If you've got whiskey aboard," another called out, "you want to keep off our beat. We're doing a little in that line ourselves."

By this time Clay was thoroughly frightened. He saw that he was in the hands of a desperate and reckless gang of river thieves. While pretending to be a store-boat, the *Hawk* was merely a floating receptacle for stolen goods, with gambling as an assistant money-maker.

"You said," the boy began in a moment, trying his best to conceal what he really felt, "that you could fit me out with spark plugs if I came on board."

"Sure, we can!" answered the captain, with a sty wink at another. "We can fit you out with anything on this little old boat."

"All right," Clay answered, "if you'll get me the plugs, I'll pay for them and go back to the *Rambler*."

"No hurry!" laughed the captain. "No hurry at all. Still," he continued, "if you're anxious to get back, I'll send one of the boys into the storeroom to look for the spark plug while you come up for a little social visit in the cabin."

"No need of that," smiled Clay, "I may as well remain on the lower deck. It probably won't take long to find what I need."

The captain took the boy by the arm in a manner evidently intended to be friendly.

"Oh, come on!" he said. "We've got a slick little boat here, and I want you to look her over."

"You bet we have!" cried another, "and we don't let guests leave us without giving them something of a treat."

Clay's inclination was to deal the insulting captain a blow in the face, plunge into the river, and make for the *Rambler*. He knew very well, however, that such a course would instantly bring about hostilities; whereas, if he pretended to be unaware of their purpose, assistance in some form might come to him.

"Yes, come along!" urged the captain. "I'll send a couple of boys over to bring your chum, and we'll have a jolly night of it."

It was useless for Clay to falter or draw back, so he stepped along as if grateful for the invitation. His hope was that Jule would understand the situation of affairs on board the *Hawk* and stand guard on deck with a good supply of automatic revolvers.

"Where'd you say you came from?" asked the captain as they ascended the stairway to the cabin. "Chicago," was the short reply.

"Nice town, Chicago," the captain went on with a leer. "I used to live in Chicago. I know every foot of the North Branch. Goose Island used to be my favorite resort."

Clay was thinking that if the captain had ever resided in Chicago he must have left it at the request of the police, but did not say so. Reaching the cabin, the captain led Clay to a long, narrow stateroom looking out on the Kentucky shore. He took pains, however, to seat the boy so that he could not look out on the *Rambler*.

Before seating himself the captain proceeded to a cupboard hanging on the wall and took out two bottles and a siphon. One of the bottles contained whiskey; the other wine.

"It strikes me," the captain said, "that this moonshine whiskey is a little bit too strong for boys, so I'll give you a glass of wine. That's prime wine, too. I bought it in Pittsburg and paid a big price for it. If you were to buy that wine, kiddo, you'd pay about two bits a glass for it. It's the right kind of stuff."

"Then I wouldn't buy it!" Clay answered with a smile. "The fact is," he continued, "we haven't got any money to waste on drink, and don't care for it, anyway."

The captain went to a faucet with a glass and brought back two goblets of water. Just before he turned away from the faucet Clay was certain that he saw him dropping something into one of the glasses.

"Well," the captain said, sitting down at the table and pushing one of the glasses over toward Clay, "I don't urge any boy to drink anything intoxicating, but it would take a lot of this wine to creep up to a man's head. Perhaps a glass of water will be just as good for you."

Clay suspected that if he drank the water he would soon become unconscious. The captain of the *Hawk* was playing a quick game. He had not been aboard the vessel more than five minutes, and yet here he was in the captain's cabin, being urged to partake of a drugged drink!

He arose with the glass in his hand, walked to the open window and looked out. The glass dropped with a crash. The act was involuntary for Clay saw the *Rambler* whirling away down the stream.

CHAPTER III.—RESISTING AN OFFICER.

While Alex and Case stood, hesitating, on the little platform in front of the store, two men came rushing out with excitement showing in their faces.

"What's the shooting, boys?" one of them asked.

"I haven't any idea," Alex replied. "We just came from that part of the country, and everything was quiet when we left."

"It's a sure thing," one of the men, who seemed to be owner of the store, declared angrily, "that those river pirates have broken loose again."

"I'm afraid so," his companion answered.

"Do they give you much trouble?" asked Case.

"Trouble!" exclaimed the merchant. "They come here and strip my shelves. They bring a howling mob of river rats into the town and take everything they can get their hands on."

"Why don't you have them arrested?" asked Alex.

"Arrested!" exclaimed the other. "They're here one night and the next night they're hundreds of miles away, with a new coat of paint and a new name on their boat. Besides all that, you can't get half the officers along here to take any action at all. You go to them and make a complaint and they'll say that the robbery wasn't committed in their county, or in their township, or in the state of Kentucky, or something of that kind! My honest opinion is that they're afraid of the pirates."

"Don't put it too strong," the other advised. "There's some pretty good officers along the river. Besides, there's the Government boats."

"Yes, there's the Government boats," decided the merchant, "but the Government boats are as easy to keep track of as a white elephant would be in our main street. The river rats wait until Uncle Sam's boats get out of sight before they attempt any mischief."

During this conversation, the boys had been listening for more pistol shots from the direction in which the *Rambler* lay. They had little doubt that Clay and Jule were in trouble. They knew, too, that the *Rambler* was virtually helpless, so the boys had no chance whatever of escaping from any hostile boat. Directly Alex turned to the merchant and asked:

"Do you keep motor boat supplies?"

The merchant turned to his friend and indulged in a long, slow, insulting wink.

"So," he said significantly, "you boys have a motor boat up the river?"

"Yes," Case replied, "but the motors are out of order."

"Is that where the shootin' is?" asked the merchant.

"There was no shooting when we left," Alex answered.

"Come, come, now!" the merchant advised. "You boys may as well tell me the truth. Was it one of them pirate boats that sent you here after motor supplies?"

"We have a motor boat of our own," Alex answered angrily. "She is lying in an eddy on the other side of the bend, and we don't dare to drift her down stream."

"That's too bad!" said the suspicious merchant with another long and insulting wink. "What is it you want in the way of supplies?"

"Spark plugs," was the short answer.

"Well," said the merchant, "extending a bony finger and poking Alex on the chest, "I keep a few spark plugs because there are a good many motor boats passing along the river."

"Yes," laughed the man who stood with him on the platform, "you keep spark plugs, but you take pretty good care not to sell them to men who will put them to unlawful use."

"That's the idea!" said the merchant.

"Will you sell us some?" asked Case indignantly.

"I might," was the reply, "after a time. Just now, you see," he went on, regarding his companion knowingly, "just now, we think we'd better hold you boys until we find out what all that shooting is about."

"Hold us?" repeated Alex and Case in a breath.

"It's just this way," the merchant went on, "this man here is constable in this township. It was him I was giving the dig to a little while ago about the officers not being ready to take action."

The officer turned back the lapel of his coat and ostentatiously displayed a brass badge.

"Yes," he said, "I'm constable of this township, and old Bill, here, never gets tired of telling folks that the officers ain't no account."

The two men roared lustily, pounding each other on the shoulders, evidently regarding the whole affair as a good joke.

"Come," Alex said, "will you sell me some spark plugs?"

"You can't buy nothin' just now," the constable declared. "You're both under arrest!"

"What for?" asked Case.

"We think," the constable replied, "that the pirates sent you here to look over the town and see what they could get. That's too thin, your talking about spark plugs. Why, every boat carries a lot of them."

"If this man is a constable," urged Alex, "why don't he hasten over to the other side of the bend and find out what that shooting is about?"

"There," snarled the constable, "now I know you're in cahoots with a gang of river thieves. Old Bill, here, heard you try to get me to go right up there where they're shooting, tried to get me to run my neck right into a noose!"

"They're dangerous boys," the merchant suggested. "Why don't you look them over for weapons?"

By this time quite a crowd was collecting about the little store. The merchant and the constable were receiving all sorts of advice, and women and girls stood about with red hands rolled up in their aprons, watching the two suspects with frightened eyes.

"I reckon I'd better be seeing what they've got on," the constable said with an important air.

"They probably didn't come down here without guns."

As the constable stepped forward Alex and Case exchanged quick glances, each asking the other what ought to be done. They understood that arrest there meant confinement in a country jail for several days, perhaps weeks, before they could establish their identity.

They knew, too, that their assistance was needed on board the *Rambler*. The shooting had disclosed a situation anything but peaceful.

"Come on, now, boys!" the constable shouted "Let's see what you've got in your pockets."

"And don't you try to hide nothing away from us, either," the merchant added. "Turn your pockets wrong side out."

"All right," Alex said, so angry that his face was whiter than Case had ever seen him before. "We'll show you what we've got in our pockets."

As he spoke, he drew forth an automatic revolver and held it threateningly at the head of the constable. Case was not slow in following his example. The little crowd instantly scattered; some dashing around the corners of the store and others hiding behind barrels and boxes. The women present let out such screams as the boys had never heard before. The merchant and the constable both broke for the store door. Such a scattering the little town had never seen before that day.

In a second the constable opened the door of the store about six inches and peered out, shaking a rusty shotgun in one hand. The merchant stood behind him, looking out of the glass panel and showing an old army carbine.

"We're armed! We're armed!" called out the constable. "Don't you try to come in here! You boys will get a life sentence for this!"

"This is highway robbery, and murder, and piracy!" shouted the merchant.

The boys backed away from the platform so as to be out of reach of any shot from the angle of the building and paused a second for consultation.

"We've got him buffaloed!" was Alex's, first remark.

"Hadn't we better be getting out?" Case asked. "I've a good mind to go in there and fill my pockets with spark plugs," Alex declared.

"That would be a nice thing to do, wouldn't it?" scoffed Case. "That would be larceny from a store in the daytime, and you can get fifteen years for that; and if you went into a store with a gun and put the keeper in peril of his life, you could get fifty or sixty years!"

"Then I won't do it!" grinned Alex.

"It's me for the *Rambler*!" Case declared. "It will take us until dark to get there now, and as soon as we turn our backs that bum constable will have a hundred men out after us."

"And that means that we've got to hot-foot through the bushes!" Alex declared. "We can beat 'em if they don't get dogs."

The boys turned into the undergrowth and ran, tearing their clothes and scratching their hands on wild vines, and occasionally falling over a protruding tree-root. At one time they both lay in a heap at the foot of a beech tree, where they had fallen over a mass of vines. When they scrambled to their feet they heard shouts of laughter coming from a thicket not far away.

"Guess they've got us!" panted Alex.

"I guess they have!" Case agreed.

The next moment the brown barrel of a rifle was thrust out at the boys. The boys sat flat down on the ground and waited.

"That's right!" the holder of the gun said, stepping out of the thicket. "Set right down and take things easy. If you try to unlimber any artillery, you'll get the worst of it."

The man was tall, bony, angular. His face was clean-shaven, showing high cheek bones, with prominent nose and a cleft chin. His hair was brown, his eyes blue, and the general expression of his face at that moment was humorous rather than threatening.

"What's the idea?" Alex asked.

"You don't look like a man capable of holding up two boys!" Case put in. "You look like a pretty decent chap."

"If you've got any masked batteries with you," the man said a smile showing on his rugged face, "just poke them out here, handle first, and then we'll arrive at some understanding!"

The boys did as directed, although they would have made a fight for their weapons only for the indescribable air of friendliness about the man. They rose to their feet as they dropped their revolvers.

"Better put that gun down," Alex advised. "You might get excited and let it go off."

The man sat down on a fallen log and laid the gun across his knees.

"Where you boys from?" he asked.

The man's voice and manner invited confidence, and the boys told him briefly the story of the *Rambler*, and of the shooting at the point where they had left her.

"I think you boys are all right," the man said, and I think, too, that river pirates are making trouble for your friends."

"Do you think they will follow us from the landing?" Case asked, anxiously. "They may shoot us from the bushes."

The man pounded his thigh with one ponderous hand and laughed until the woods rang. The boys looked on in wonder.

"Follow you? I should say not," he said in a moment. "Why that constable deputized me to come and take you prisoners. He's helping old Bill barricade his store. Now we'll see if we can find out what's wrong with the *Rambler*."

CHAPTER IV.—A DIVE FOR LIBERTY.

Left alone on board the *Rambler*, Jule lay for a long time behind the gunwale watching the *Hawk*. He saw Clay surrounded by a group of ill-looking fellows as soon as he gained the freight deck. He knew by the boy's face that all was not going well.

When Clay was taken up the cabin stairs and into the stateroom by the captain, Jule got out his field glass and scrutinized the windows of the boat. Directly he saw the captain come to a window facing the *Rambler* and look out. Clay was nowhere in sight.

Lying thus, almost flat on the deck, watching the *Hawk* intently, the boy could not see what was going on on the starboard side of the boat. Indeed, so closely was he watching the *Hawk* that he did not notice a little shiver which ran through the craft as two husky men crept over the gunwale and stood looking down upon him.

"Hello, kid!" one of the men said roughly in a moment.

Jule turned around to see two revolvers pointing at his head. He laid down his automatic and rose to his feet. The two men on the deck before him were signaling to the men on the *Hawk*, while the latter were shouting words of congratulation.

"Oh, Gid and I got her all right!" one of the men said.

"You bet we did," the man referred to as Gid went on.

"What shall we do with the boy?" was the next question.

"We'll send after him," was the reply from the *Hawk*.

Jule walked over to a chair and sat down. There was nothing whatever he could do. He knew that Clay was in the hands of the river pirates, and that resistance would be useless.

"If you don't mind," he said finally, "I'd rather stay on board the *Rambler*. It seems like home here."

"There's more fun on board the *Hawk*," laughed Gid.

"I don't suppose there's anything to drink on board this boat?" asked Gid's companion.

"There's plenty of water," answered Jule.

"Don't insult Mike with a drink of water," Gid advised; "Mike likes water to that extent that he won't even wash in it."

"He looks it!" Jule declared.

"No lip, now, young fellow!" Mike broke in.

"What are you going to do with the boat?" asked Jule.

"Why, this boat," Gid answered, "will make a fine tender for the *Hawk*. We've been wanting a fine boat like this for a long time. You see, we get parties on board the *Hawk*, sometimes, who need a little more care than the ordinary river chap. When such get tired of our company, and we're willing to let them go, we take 'em home in style."

"Well," Jule answered, "the motors are out of order, so you can't run the *Rambler*, and I'm not sorry for that, either."

"We can tow her, can't we, until we can get the motors fixed?" asked Mike. "It won't take much to fix the engine."

"All right!" Jule said. "When you get her fixed up all right we'll take her off your hands."

"Oh, you will, will you?" laughed Gid. "If you don't watch out, son, you'll be wanting some one to take you off our hands."

The two men now moved up to the prow of the boat and whispered together for a long time. They paid no attention to signals and calls from the *Hawk*, and so a small boat was soon making its way toward the *Rambler*. Jule saw the two men handling their guns nervously as the boat supposed to contain members of their own party approached.

The boy watched the situation anxiously. It seemed to him that the two men who had boarded the *Rambler* were not at all pleased at the approach of the rowboat. It appeared, too, that those on board the *Hawk* were watching Gid and Mike suspiciously.

When the boat drew near, the man who had been called Mike leaned over the gunwale with a revolver in each hand.

"Keep away, boys!" he said. "We don't want you on board!"

"What does this mean?" demanded the mate of the *Hawk*, who was one of the men in the small boat.

"Never mind what it means," Mike called out.

"Keep away from the boat if you don't want to be shot!"

While Mike was holding the mate off with his revolvers, Gid stood by the boy also with revolvers in sight. The mate of the *Hawk* threw his hand back as if to produce a weapon and Mike passed a bullet so close to the side of his head that it scorched his scalp.

"Don't try to get out any guns!" the man ordered. "Get back to the *Hawk* and stay there!"

"What right have you to take that boat?" demanded the mate.

"No words, now!" Mike shouted. "Get back to the *Hawk*!"

"We'll sink you if you move away from here!" shouted the mate.

"You'll do lot's of sinking, with Government boats patrolling the river!" mocked Mike. "You'd get pinched in half an hour."

"How do you expect to get away with that boat?" demanded the mate.

"Why, we've got one of the owners on board," Mike laughed back, "and he'll tell the Government officers anything we ask him to."

"And look here, Mr. River Thief!" Gid joined in, "if you make any noise about the taking of this boat, or try to make trouble for us, or open your mouths to the river police, we'll give the *Hawk* away good and plenty. Every murder and every dirty game that's been played on board will be in the Government's books within twenty-four hours."

Slowly, sullenly, the mate turned the boat around and headed for the *Hawk*, glancing back over his shoulders with angry eyes as he did so. Hoots of derision came to him from the deck of the

Hawk as he returned. It was quite evident that those on board the *Hawk* knew what had taken place.

"Look here, kid!" Gid said to Jule as the boat turned back, "get down there and loosen the anchor-chain. We must be getting out of this and we haven't got time to hoist her up!"

"I can't do it while there's a strain on the chain," Jule answered.

"Then wait a minute," directed the other, "and she'll probably slacken up."

Caught in a contrary swirl of the eddy in which she lay, the *Rambler* gave a lurch ahead, in a moment, and Jule took the opportunity of slipping the stopper from the chain.

When the boat settled back again the chain ran out of the hawse-pipe with a clatter which attracted the attention of those on board the *Hawk*, and many oaths and epithets were passed back and forth over the water.

Not for long, however, for the *Rambler* swinging out into the current, gradually swept down. Now she ran stern against the current, now prow against the current; now sideways; now swirling round and round in an ugly whirlpool.

It was at this moment that Clay, approaching the window in the captain's stateroom, saw what had taken place. He turned to the latter a face red with anger, his eyes flashing, his fists clenched.

"What is the meaning of that?" he asked pointing out of the window.

The captain bounded to the window and peered out. At that moment an imperative knock sounded on the stateroom door.

"What is it?" demanded the captain, opening the door and starting out. "Why is that boat running away?"

"Mike and Gid have stolen her!" shouted the mate. "They threatened me with guns when I tried to board her. Now they threaten all on board the *Hawk* if we attempt to recapture the *Rambler*."

The captain tore about the stateroom in a blind rage, dancing up and down and shaking his fists in every direction. The mate stood by only a trifle less excited. It looked like a show to Clay.

"I'll kill the dirty dogs!" shouted the captain. "I'll murder them both before they're a week older! They threatened me, did they? They threatened to turn us over to the officers, did they?"

"That's what they did!" shouted the mate. "Mike had the drop on me, or I would have settled the matter right then."

While this conversation was going on Clay stood by the stateroom window, wondering whether it would be possible for him to leap out and drop to the river. His idea was that the men who had stolen the *Rambler* could not by any possibility be more vicious than the men on board the *Hawk*; besides, if he could reach Jule, the two might stand some chance of recovering the motor boat.

While he stood making up his mind to undertake the difficult task of leaving the boat without being detected by those on the outside, two pistol shots came from the deck. Instantly the captain and mate whirled out of the stateroom, the latter stopping for an instant to lock the door before dashing down to the scene of the disturbance.

Clay knew by the trembling of the deck under his feet that they were getting the *Hawk* under way. He saw little puffs of smoke coming from the deck of the *Rambler*, and rightly surmised that the shots had been fired at her. While he stood undecided, the *Hawk* began moving down stream, following in the wake of the *Rambler*.

Without waiting another instant, the boy made his way out of the window and clung to the casing until his feet came in contact with one of the fenders. Then he dropped down into the river with a splash which, in the excitement of getting away, was not observed by those on the lower deck. Indeed, the boy was some distance from the pirate vessel before his absence was discovered at all. Then the captain returned to his stateroom and found it empty.

Rushing to the window, he fired several shots at the boy, but all to no purpose. He was greatly excited, and the boy was diving and dodging in the water so not one of the bullets took effect.

When Mike and Gid, on board the *Rambler*, saw the boy swimming in the water they naturally supposed him to be one of the crew of the *Hawk*. Therefore, they began firing at him, thus placing him between two dangers.

Seeing that it would be impossible for him to board the *Rambler* under the circumstances, the boy dropped down in the water and made for the shore, where he landed, sorely out of breath, in a few moments.

It was September, so the water was not very cold, and Clay suffered little inconvenience from his bath at that time. His first act was to secrete himself behind the bole of a large hickory tree and watch what was going on in the river.

The *Rambler* was still drifting down with the current, wheeling this way and that, threatened with destruction nearly every instant. The *Hawk*, now under full power, was shooting past her, evidently with the intention of heading her off and blocking farther progress.

While the boy looked and waited he saw a white head lifted above the gunwale and the next moment Captain Joe, the bulldog, leaped into the river. Clay gave a low whistle to direct the dog in his direction and stood with his heart in his mouth, almost, waiting to see if the brutes on board the motor boat would fire at the bulldog.

Just at that moment, however, Gid and Mike were busy with sweeps and oars trying to get the *Rambler* out of an eddy around which it was whirling aimlessly. Jule looked over the gunwale of the boat in a moment and Clay signaled to him from behind the tree. The next moment the bulldog sprang upon Clay in joyful greeting and the two disappeared in the woods.

Jule went back into the cabin and threw himself down on a bunk.

"I don't believe," he moaned, "that we'll ever get the *Rambler* away from these thieves!"

CHAPTER V.—CAPTAIN JOE ON SHORE.

"I'll tell you right now," Alex declared, panting and out of breath in his efforts to keep pace with the long stride of the new-found friend, "that there isn't anything the matter with the *Rambler*. There never was anything wrong with the boat, and there never will be. She may be in trouble, but she's been there before."

"Yes," Case added, "and we've always gotten her out of her troubles, and we'll do it again. What's your name, Mister?" he added, turning to the lanky guide who was forcing them through the thickets at such swift pace.

"My name," the other replied, "is Hank Beers. I live up in the mountains, and I came down to-day to see about negotiating for a little product I make up there."

"Are you a moonshiner?" asked Case, innocently.

"No, I'm not a moonshiner," replied Hank. "I'm making a superior quality of aeroplanes up in the hills. When I get one finished I put it in a suit case and bring it down."

"That means," Alex laughed, "that the product of your factory is intended to send people up in the air!"

"Put it any way you like," laughed Hank. "The point with us now is to find out what's become of that boat of yours. You say you left her up at the stem of the bend?"

"Yes," answered Case, "we left her to get a spark plug and some squirrels. That shooting, you know, may not have been at the *Rambler* or from the *Rambler*. We may be unnecessarily excited about it."

"Young man," declared Hank, "when you hear shooting going on like that in this vicinity, you just make up your mind that the river pirates have something to do with it."

"Why don't they get out and lynch these river pirates?" demanded Case.

"Sakes alive!" exclaimed Hank. "If we Kentuckians lynched all the people who make us trouble, we'd have to import telegraph poles to hang 'em on. There wouldn't be anywhere near enough trees for the business."

"I thought Kentucky was a law-abiding state," remarked Alex.

"She's the most law-abiding state you ever heard tell of," replied Hank with a laugh. "All the trouble is," he went on, "that sometimes we mountain people make laws of our own, and when we do that the laws have to be abided by."

"Oh, yes," Case grinned, "I remember the Knights of the Golden Circle, and the Ku Klux Klan, and the Night-Riders, and the White Caps. When that bunch wanted to kill a man, all they did was to pass a law against him and then abide by it."

"There are a whole lot of offenses," the mountaineer went on, "that can't be handled by the laws these here shysters put on the statute books. But," he continued, "we won't talk about that any more. We wouldn't agree, anyhow. About how far are we from the point where you left your boat?"

"Two miles," declared Alex.

"Three!" suggested Case.

"What time did you leave the boat?" asked Hank.

"Two o'clock," was the reply.

Hank looked at a ponderous silver watch which he took from a back pocket of his trousers and shook his head.

"If you left the boat at two o'clock," he said, "and you had just come to the settlement when that little ruction started, you were something like three hours on the way. That means more than three miles."

"Oh yes," Alex agreed, "but we wandered about this way and that, looking for squirrels, and coons, and rabbits, so I think that we ought to be somewhere near the boat by this time."

"If we don't come to it pretty soon," the mountaineer suggested, "we'll have to look for it in the dark. It is getting twilight in here right now. It will soon be almost impossible to make our way through the thickets. 'Tarnal bad woods in the night time, these are."

Darkness was indeed settling over the forest. To make matters worse, a mass of heavy clouds was drifting up from the Mississippi valley, and the chances were remarkably good for a long, slow rain. After proceeding some farther in the thicket, Alex took out his electric searchlight—without which he never left the *Rambler*—and threw its rays on the thicket ahead. As he did so Hank seized him by the arm.

"Douse it, douse it!" the mountaineer cried. "Don't you know any better than to make a light in here?"

"Where's the harm?" asked Case. "We'd never get through there without a light."

"I'll tell you where the harm is," the mountaineer answered. "Them fellers you stirred up back there at the settlement will shortly be sending men out here to look you up. I shouldn't be surprised if they sent men with bloodhounds."

"Oh well, then, we'll have to do the best we can in the dark," Alex sighed, turning off the light.

"Let me see that, will you?" asked Hank.

The mountaineer took the searchlight in his great bony hand and examined it attentively, switching the light on and off and turning it this way and that, taking the precaution, however, to hold the eye of the electric close to the ground.

"You Yankees," he said presently, "will soon be getting searchlights by wireless! It's a pretty good light, though, and I don't object to it if you do. How much might one of those contraptions cost?" he added.

"All the way from four bits to four dollars," was the reply. "If you want a real large one, you may go as high as fifty dollars."

"I'll buy one when I bring down my next airplane," said the mountaineer, whimsically. "I don't doubt but that I could use it in my business. I don't suppose the wind would put that out, would it? It's mighty strong up there in the mountains sometimes," he added.

"No," Case answered, "nothing will put that light out until the battery becomes exhausted. That is, unless you break the lamp."

The boys were just starting on again when the long terrifying baying of a hound came to their ears. The dog was still a long distance off, yet even as they listened his great voice came more distinctly through the darkness.

"There!" Hank said in a disgusted tone of voice, "they've gone and done it at last! It's just this way, boys," he went on, "when you left that old skinflint of a merchant back there, you were two little boys sent out by a river pirate to see if the town was worth plundering. Ten minutes after your departure, you were two river pirates, armed to the teeth and half drunk on moonshine whiskey. Thirty minutes after you left, they were saying that the town had been visited by a band of pirates armed with cannons. By to-morrow morning, they will have the town pillaged and burned. I never did see the way people exaggerate things."

"But where did they get that hound?" asked Alex. "There wasn't any there when we were there."

"They might have got one off of the Government boat," Hank answered.

"But there wasn't any Government boat," Alex insisted.

"There was one just coming up the river," said the mountaineer. "If we ever come to the bank of the stream we'll see her pass up."

"Well, what are we going to do about the dog?" Case asked. "He's evidently out of leash, for, judging from the sound of his voice, he's running faster than any man could navigate through the woods."

"Yes, he does seem to be out of leash," the mountaineer answered, "and it may be that he took up the scent on his own hook. Still, the Federals do have bloodhounds to aid in trailing the moonshiners."

"Isn't there any way to get away from the brute?" asked Case. "If we don't, he'll tree us and set up such a howling that the men will be thicker than bees around us in about an hour."

"We can shoot him when he comes up," suggested the mountaineer.

"Seems too bad to kill the dog," Alex observed.

"Besides all that," Case went on, "we couldn't hit a barn in this darkness."

"Well," Hank suggested, "the thing for us to do is to make for the river as fast as possible. There's always a good many skiffs and rowboats scattered along on the Kentucky side. You see, if we can only get to the water and pack ourselves into a boat, we can sit and make faces at that hound until Kingdom Come."

Making what speed they could through the thicket, stumbling over vines and protruding roots, the boys proceeded on their way for a very few moments. Then it became evident that the dog was only a few rods away.

"Now that's too bad," Hank said, "we've got to climb a tree, turn that bottled gas concern of yours on the dog, and put a bullet plumb through his head. I never did like to kill dogs, somehow."

The dog came swiftly on, and it seemed to the boys as if his voice could be heard for a thousand miles. They were crouching in a thicket, preparing to vault into the branches of a great beech tree which stood near at hand, when a great commotion was heard not far away. It seemed to them that a wild hog, or a bear, or some heavy yet swift denizen of the forest, awakened from his slumber by the howling of the dog, had set out to make a swift investigation of his own.

"What was that noise?" asked Alex, clutching his new-found friend by the arm.

"Well, sir," Hank replied, "that sounded to me like a dog going out to hold a little conversation with that hound! It ran like a dog, and, besides, I think I heard a succession of low growls as it passed us."

"Here's hoping he keeps the hound so well entertained that it won't come any farther in this direction!" Case said.

In a moment there came a great snarling and growling from a thicket not far away, accompanied by such a thumping and beating on the ground as the boys had not heard in many a day. The baying of the hound ceased entirely, and in a moment only low choking pants of suffering were heard.

"I'll tell you what it is, boys!" the mountaineer exclaimed, excitedly, "that thing that went through here is either a bulldog or a wild hog. He's mixing it with the hound right now, and we may as well go and see the scrap."

Alex used his flashlight now without reproof. The three pressed swiftly forward, the sounds of conflict growing clearer as they advanced. Directly they came to a great patch of bushes, from the center of which the commotion came.

In spite of the protests of the others, Alex pushed his way into the jungle and turned his searchlight on two objects struggling desperately on the ground. The next moment they heard his voice crying out joyfully:

"It's Captain Joe! It's Captain Joe!" he said.

"What has he done to the hound?" asked Case.

"Who's Captain Joe?" demanded the mountaineer.

Alex answered the two questions by dragging the white bulldog out of the thicket by the collar. His jaws were smeared with blood, and he limped slightly on one fore leg.

"Captain Joe," Alex replied, "is the gamiest bulldog that ever lived, and there ain't enough left of that hound to bait a trap with."

"Where did the bulldog come from?" demanded Hank.

"Huh!" Alex exclaimed. "That's just exactly what I want to know."

CHAPTER VI.—JULE TURNS THE SWITCH.

"I don't believe," Jule said, throwing himself off his bunk in a moment, "that the *Rambler* has made successful trips on the Amazon, the Columbia, the Colorado, the Mississippi and the St. Lawrence to become lost on an inland river like the Ohio! In some way, we're going to get out of this scrape and continue our journey."

The boy sat down by the little stationary table in the cabin and studied out the problem in his own boyish way. There were police boats on the river, and eventually the attention of some captain would be attracted to a splendid motor boat like the *Rambler* in the hands of a couple of river toughs.

Besides, the *Rambler* was entirely unmanageable, and would doubtless soon bring up against a sand bar or a mass of wreckage. In this case the first boat coming within sight would undoubtedly stop to inquire the cause of the trouble.

Thus reasoning himself into a more hopeful state of mind, the boy went out onto the little deck and watched Gid and Mike panting and sweating at the oars and sweep in their vain efforts to keep the *Rambler* off a sand bar which lifted its white surface above the river on the Kentucky side.

For a time the men succeeded fairly well, but the current set directly toward the bar, which was, in fact, one of its creatures, and the *Rambler* soon thrust her nose into the firm sand with a shock and shiver which seemed to loosen every rivet and bolt.

Gid rattled the oar he had been using down on the deck and wiped his streaming brow with a dirty hand. Mike sat down on the gunwale and swore earnestly and with originality.

"What's the answer?" Mike asked in a moment.

Gid shook his head gravely.

"If we don't get off this everlasting sand bar before daylight," Mike said in a moment, "there'll be a procession of river boats up here to know what's wrong. They'll all be wanting to pull us off, and they'll all be wanting a pocketful of money for doing it. Have you got any money, Gid?"

"Have I got any money?" repeated Gid. "If the whole world was selling for a dollar, I couldn't buy dirt enough to stop a watch! I was lucky enough to get out of Louisville with a whole skin. What did you do with your money?" he asked, looking Mike keenly in the eye.

"I bought lottery tickets with mine," Mike replied. "I've got the lottery tickets in my pocket yet, and I never have any luck when I have the things around. Honest, Gid," the Irishman continued, "I've carried lottery tickets in my clothes for five years, and during all that time no band ever played in front of me on the street. And that's a fact, if you want to know!"

"Mike," Gid observed with a smile, "do you study the dream book every night and morning? You're as superstitious as an old woman!"

"Now look here, Gid," continued Mike. "That's the exact truth I told you about those lottery tickets. Look here, now, here's an illustration. I was standing on South Clark street, Chicago, one morning with three Louisiana lottery tickets in my pocket. There was a procession coming down the street with twenty bands in it. And I said to the boys who were with me that I would bet the cigars for the crowd that there wouldn't a band play when passing the spot where we stood."

"You got your nerve to bet on a hoodoo," Gid laughed.

Jule was now becoming interested in the conversation, which he had heard from his position at the prow, and drew closer to the two men. He noticed that they used remarkably good language, and also that they seemed to know Chicago well, so he resolved that he would try to learn more about them as soon as an opportunity offered.

"That lottery ticket hoodoo is one that is safe to bet on at any spot in the road," Mike continued. "Well, as I was saying, there was a procession coming up South Clark street with twenty bands in it, and I was betting there wouldn't a band play in front of the spot where we stood. This was on account of the lottery tickets I had in my pocket. I was just plumb hoodooed with those tickets. Why, look here!" he continued, "if I had thrown those tickets overboard, we wouldn't be on this sand bar now. I tell you they have just plumb hoodooed me. I think I'll throw them overboard now."

"What about the twenty bands and the procession?" asked Jule, with a grin on his face. "Tell me about that."

"Hello, kid!" Mike said with a chuckle. "Did you hear me talking that fool stuff about the lottery tickets?"

"Sure I did," Jule answered.

"Well, you take warning by me and don't ever buy any!" Mike declared.

"Well, what about these twenty bands?" Jule insisted.

"Sho', of course, I nearly forgot all about the bands. Well nineteen bands passed our corner without a note of music. Walked by just like they were going up the street in a political parade. You know, son," Mike continued, "that musicians think they are paid to walk in parades on account of their uniforms, and not on account of their music."

"What did you say these twenty bands did?" laughed Jule.

"Nineteen marched plumb by without ever blowing a horn. The twentieth one started in half a block below us. I just had a notion then that that band was going to play, and that I would have to buy the cigars, and then I thought that one of the tickets might draw a prize so I wasn't kicking any. Well, sir, do you know that that big band headed up to us in full tune."

"So you had to buy the cigars?" asked Jule.

"Did I have to buy the cigars?" repeated Mike. "Say, kid, twenty feet below us a horse hitched to a carriage filled with ladies reared up on his hind feet and they had to stop the music until they got by us so as not to frighten the horse any more. You bet I don't have to buy the cigars on any bet like that!"

Encouraged by the friendly voice and manner of the Irishman, Jule asked what they intended doing with the *Rambler*.

"It's just this way, boy," Mike replied, "we've been skinned and cleaned up, and knocked out, in

every enterprise we ever undertook. We're both printers, and used to work on the old Chicago Herald when Jim Scott owned it. Well, we beat the faro bank until we didn't have a cent. We played poker and roulette until the other fellows held a mortgage on our pay envelopes. So we're just plumb disgusted with civilization. We haven't got the brains to become city pirates and run gambling houses and elect aldermen and all that, but we have got muscle enough to become river pirates, so here we are, and here your boat is."

"Are you going to keep the boat?" asked Jule.

"Of course, we're going to keep it!" Mike declared.

"You bet we are!" Gid put in. "No man we ever played with ever gave us any Christmas presents after he'd cleaned us out."

"Well," Jule announced, "I'll set up a yell the first boat comes near us and your hoodoo lottery tickets will probably land you in jail."

"We don't want to be rough with you, kid," Mike went on, "but when you see a boat coming if you don't hustle into the cabin and go to bed and cover up your head and ears, we'll take the hide off your back in long, wide strips."

"I don't believe it!" Jule answered with a faint smile.

"That's all right," Mike answered, "we're pretty good fellows, but we're just plumb disgusted with everything in the world. Now, really," he went on, "this boat belongs to that pirate gang over there, and we stole it from them. We didn't steal it from you. We're innocent bystanders, as it were."

"Why doesn't the *Hawk* come over here and get you?" asked Jule.

"I don't know exactly," replied Mike, "but it is my idea that there is a police boat somewhere in sight. We can't see around the bend, and so wouldn't know if one was coming, but the *Hawk*, lying nearer to the other shore, would know it right quick."

"I hope there is a police boat coming!" Jule said.

"Well, when you see one, you duck into that cabin," Mike ordered, "and do it mighty quick. No Federal officer would believe your word against ours, so you wouldn't gain anything by making a fool of yourself."

The *Hawk* did seem to be acting strangely. It was now deep twilight and yet she could be seen lying over near the Indiana shore, her great bulk dim against the gathering darkness. Not a light was to be seen on board. Not a sound was to be heard.

"I reckon there is a police boat coming," Gid said, after a short pause, "but if we lie right still and don't show any lights, she'll pass on the other side. Anyway, she can't help seeing the *Hawk*, and she'll go there first."

Half an hour passed and it grew dark on the river. Clouds were driving over the valley, and it was likely to be a rainy night. A wind came up the river as the darkness increased, and the moaning of the trees and the rush of the waters made conversation quite difficult, even when the parties stood close together, as the three did on the deck of the *Rambler*.

Jule stepped back to the cabin entrance and stood close to the electric switch which controlled the strong searchlight on the prow. Mike and Gid stood leaning over the gunwale, their eyes fixed intently on the bulk of the *Hawk*, now almost lost in the darkness. A faint light, something like that of a candle or a small kerosene lamp, now showed on the freight deck of the river pirate.

"There's a Government boat coming up the river, and that's no dream!" Gid cried.

"There's no other way to account for the mighty strange actions of the captain of the *Hawk*," Mike responded.

"Perhaps if we keep all lights out and lie perfectly still, the police boat won't see us!" the other suggested.

The two men stood long at the gunwale, watching the pirate boat as long as the falling night permitted. Jule, too, remained on deck, standing by the switch which controlled the searchlight.

Once or twice, when the sound of a steam exhaust came from below, he put his hand to the switch, but always drew it away again when no lights showed over the dark river. He was waiting until the right moment.

Directly a sharp whistle sounded from below, and then the lights of a steamer flashed into view around the bend. Jule put his hand to the switch but brought it away once more when the lights turned toward the *Hawk*, still lying near the Indiana shore, motionless.

"Now," Mike said in a moment, "if we could only get this consarned boat off this idiotic bar, we'd be able to slide out of sight while that gold-laced officer is listening to the lies the captain of the *Hawk* will tell him. Prime liar, that fellow is!"

Standing on the deck with all close individual sounds shut out by the wash of the waters and the roaring of the trees, they saw the steamer head directly toward the *Hawk*, then in a moment the pirate craft was ablaze with light.

"Crafty chap, that captain!" Mike declared. "He knows he's been observed, and so lights up."

Jule could wait no longer. With one motion of his hand, he turned the switch and the strong prow light flashed out over the river. Gid sprang toward the boy with a leveled revolver.

CHAPTER VII.—THE TRAINING OF TEDDY.

"You confounded idiot!" shouted Mike, catching his companion by the arm. "Do you want to bring that police boat over here inside of two minutes? If you do, just fire that gun."

"Look what he did!" almost panted Gid, in a heat of rage. "He turned on the light, and they'll be over here as soon as they get done with the *Hawk*."

"Can't be helped now!" declared Mike.

During this short conversation Jule stood regarding the men intently, his face pale but his eyes flashing with the spirit of defiance which was in his heart. Mike regarded him whimsically.

"Will you turn out the light?" he asked. "Or shall I smash it?"

"Turn it out yourself!" ordered Gid, "if you know where the switch is."

"I don't know where the switch is," Mike replied.

"Then coax the boy to turn it out," sneered Gid. "He seems to be a special friend of yours."

"Turn it out kid," advised Mike.

Jule, realizing that the light must already have accomplished the purpose intended, turned the switch and the *Rambler* was again in darkness. He realized that the light would be extinguished whether he turned the switch or not, for the lamp could be easily broken.

"Now, boy," Gid thundered in Jule's ear, "you get into that cabin and stay there. If any of these sneaking Government officials come on board, you're sick! Do you understand that? You're sick abed! And we're your good, kind protectors! Understand that? If you ain't good and sick while they're here, you'll be ailing in earnest as soon as they go away."

"All right," Jule answered, "I'll go into the cabin now and lie down. But, look here," he continued, "I'd like to have you gentlemen make me a promise. Will you?"

"What is it?" asked Mike, not unkindly.

It was very dark now, and they could not see each other's faces, especially as the glare of the light during its brief presence had in a manner dazzled their eyes. Perhaps this was just as well, for Gid would not have liked the look on Mike's face as he spoke to the boy. It was all sympathy and feeling.

"Well," Jule said, with a low chuckle, "when you're hanged for murder or piracy, I'd like to have you invite me to the festival."

Gid uttered a snarl of rage and struck at the boy but Mike only laughed as Jule dodged the blow, only indistinctly seen, and, entering the cabin, closed the door behind him.

"They forget," he thought to himself, "that there are lights in the cabin which, when turned, will reveal the presence of the *Rambler*. Anyway," he added, "I believe the Government officers saw the searchlight. I don't see how they could have missed seeing it."

Teddy, the quarter-grown grizzly bear, now rubbed a soft muzzle against the boy's hand, as if in sympathy, and nestled close to his side.

"Teddy," Jule said, "you and I have been captured by pirates. Captain Joe has gone off to find Alex, and we're here in the possession of a couple of Desperate Desmonds. We want to get away. Now what would you suggest?"

In the darkness the boy knew that Teddy was sitting up on his hind feet suggesting a boxing match.

"That's the thing, Teddy," Jule said, speaking into the bear's ear, as if in belief that the cub understood every word he said. "That's just the thing! You suggest a fight, and that's just what it's got to be."

The boy and the bear sat together in the cabin for a long time. Through the window on the starboard side the boy could see the lights of the Government boat and the lights of the *Hawk*.

There seemed to be some commotion on board the pirate boat, and the boy at one time thought he detected the sound of a pistol shot.

"After they get done with those river robbers," Jule thought, "they will probably be over here to see why the *Rambler*'s light died out so quickly. Now, what shall I do when they come?"

The boy failed to reach any conclusion regarding future actions. The correct course seemed to be to be guided entirely by circumstances. If the officers came aboard he must find some way of notifying them of the true condition of affairs. If they did not come aboard, he must, again, attract their attention.

After half an hour or more the Government boat turned toward the *Rambler* and directly the boy heard a call.

"Hello, the boat!"

"Come aboard!" Mike's voice answered.

"Send a boat!" ordered the officer.

"We're stranded on a bar," Mike returned. "Can't you help us off?"

The boy could hear the rattle of a boat against the hull of the Government steamer, and then the creaking of oars. Just then the cabin door opened and Gid made his appearance, his bulky form clearly shown in the light from the steamer which came through the cabin window.

"Now, boy," Gid said, "the Government officers are coming on board. Buckle down on the bunk and keep your mouth closed."

The fellow enforced his command with a revolver, and Jule hastened to do as ordered.

"If Mr. Gold-Lace comes into the cabin," Gid went on, "I'll be setting here peaceful like with the lights turned on. You'll be over there in the bunk sound asleep. If you make a move or open your lips, I'll shoot you full of holes. See?" he added, thrusting one hand into his right pocket and pushing the muzzle of a revolver out against the cloth, "I can do some pretty good shooting from a pocket."

Jule started to speak, but Gid lifted a heavy hand for silence.

"Mr. Gold-Lace is coming on board," he said, "now mind what I've been telling you."

Jule lay still under the blanket he had drawn over his shoulders and chuckled softly to himself.

"Teddy," he laughed, "Teddy will be taking that fellow by the leg in a minute and then there'll be doings! Just wait till that officer gets on board," the boy's busy brain went on, "and I'll get that pirate into a boxing match with the bear."

It was true that Gid had not observed the bear, for Jule had motioned him into a dark corner as soon as the pirate's hulking figure had shown in the doorway.

Presently Gid arose to his feet and looked out of the glass panel in the cabin door.

"There's two coming aboard," he said turning toward the boy.

"Are you going to put me on the reception committee?" asked Jule, with a snicker.

"I don't see that you've got anything to laugh at!" Gid declared.

"Oh, what's the odds?" Jule demanded. "The *Rambler* is a mascot, and always was. You can't do anything to her."

"I'll do something to you!" declared Gid, "if you don't keep that mouth closed."

"You don't dare!" returned Jule. "If you touch me I'll yell like a loon, and then the officers will come running in here, and that'll be your finish. You'd better go out on deck."

Gid did go out on deck, arriving just in time to greet two Government officers as they stepped on board the *Rambler*. This formality over, the fellow backed up against the cabin door and stood facing the light now burning at the prow. The cabin door was open, and the boy could hear nearly every word that was spoken on deck, the wind having in a measure died out.

"What's your boat?" he heard an officer ask.

"*Rambler*, Chicago," was the reply.

"Whither bound?"

"New Orleans," was the quick answer.

"Who have you on board?" was the next question.

Jule saw Mike point with a hairy fist toward the cabin.

"Only a kid," he said, "back there in the cabin shaking his bones to pieces with the ague."

"How long have you been on this bar?" asked the official.

"We struck it just before dark," answered Mike, who really was doing a very good job in the way of convincing the officer that everything was all right and straight on board the *Rambler*.

"There are a good many motor boats doing illicit business up and down the river," suggested the official.

"I know it," replied Mike. "We're afraid some of them will come along while we are tied up on this bar."

"How did it happen?"

"Lost a spark plug," was the reply. "At first we limped along in fairly good shape, and then the others had to go bad with us. Honest," he continued, "I don't think we'll ever get off this sand bar unless you give us a line."

"I'll gladly do that," said the officer, "and I'll do more. I'll send over half a dozen spark plugs."

"That's kind of you," Mike suggested. "We'll be glad to pay for them. It is a great accommodation to us."

Jule snickered in his bunk, for he had recently heard the two men talking about being absolutely penniless. Observing that Gid was not watching him very closely, the latter's attention being directed to the two men standing forward, the boy beckoned to Teddy, who came shambling up to the side of the bunk and laid a soft paw against the boy's cheek.

"Now, Teddy," Jule said, "we're going to play a trick on those men out there. Do you think you can do a boxing stunt to-night?"

Teddy sat up on his haunches at mention of the word "boxing" and admitted in perfectly good bear talk that he could.

"You just wait, Teddy," Jule went on, "until that police boat draws the *Rambler* off this bar and supplies her with spark plugs, and we'll give a show that will beat any four-ring circus that ever traveled out of Chicago. It'll be something worth buying a ticket to."

After some further conversation the Government officers returned to their steamer. A cable was carried to the motor boat and in a minute she was floating in free water.

"Now," called an officer from the stern of the steamer, "bend on that manilla hawser to your spare anchor and throw it out."

Mike obeyed instructions to the letter, and the *Rambler* was soon swinging easily with her grip on the bottom of the river.

"You've got a favor coming from us now," Mike shouted, "if the time ever comes when we can render you one! Shall I come aboard for the spark plugs?"

"We haven't got any rowboat," Gid reminded his companion.

In the end the steamer dropped down and the spark plugs were tossed aboard, being caught deftly by the Irishman.

"Now," said Mike with a grin, "we'll fix up these motors and get down toward New Orleans at a right smart gait."

"Why didn't you ask the officer about the *Hawk*?" demanded Gid.

"Oh, that old captain lied himself clear, all right," Mike answered. "Don't you see that the *Hawk* lies there with her lights all going and the Government steamer is going on up the river?"

Gid turned to Jule with something like a smile on his sullen face.

Jule was standing by the closed cabin door with the bear fully instructed and trained, brushing against the inside of it.

"Well, boy," Gid said, "you did remarkably well during the visit of the officers, so we're going to let you get us something to eat. While we fix the motors, you cook up some supper and we'll soon be sailing down the river as happy and contented as three peas in a pod. I presume you've got plenty of provisions on board."

"You bet we have!" answered Jule happily. "I'll get you a supper that'll make your mouth water."

The boy knew that while preparing the meal he would be tolerably free from the surveillance of

the two men. This would give him an opportunity to bring a couple of revolvers from the cupboard where they were kept, and also to confer with Teddy as to the course to be pursued.

"Now, Teddy," the boy said, as he went into the cabin and shut the door, "I don't know what to do to these men. Sometimes I think I'll drug their coffee, and sometimes I think I'll give them a scare that will make their heads look like the top of a snow-capped mountain."

The bear turned his head thoughtfully to one side and expressed the rather selfish opinion that he thought a boxing match would be about the best thing under the circumstances. The bear had had boxing matches with river pirates before that night, and he knew pretty well what to do when the boys set him going on strangers.

"If I drug their coffee," Jule went on, "they'll go to sleep and we'll have them on our hands. If I give them a scare, they'll jump into the river and that'll be the last of them."

Looking out of the window the boy now saw the Government steamer disappearing rapidly upstream. He also saw the *Hawk* turning her prow in the direction of the *Rambler*. Mike and Gid stood by the port gunwale talking earnestly in low tones.

"I guess there's trouble brewing that I wasn't counting on," the boy said dejectedly. "Teddy and I can't fight the whole bunch."

CHAPTER VIII.—CAPTAIN JOE'S MESSAGE.

"Where do you think the bulldog came from?" asked Hank as, with Alex and Case, he stood watching the dog capering about in the joy of victory. "He seems to know you boys pretty well."

"This dog," Alex answered, "is the champion four-footed traveler of the world. He's been on all the big rivers, and in all the big cities. He's taken bites out of all the tribes on the face of the globe. He belongs on the *Rambler* with us."

"Seems like a mighty pert dog?" admitted the mountaineer.

"You don't have to guess again!" Case put in.

"Anyway, he done finished that hound in good shape," Hank suggested.

He stooped as he spoke and took the end of a rope into his fingers.

"You see how it is," he said, "the animal broke his leash and got away from the bunch sleuthing in the woods."

"Then they won't be able to find us?" asked Alex.

The bony mountaineer shook his head.

"They might as well look for a needle in a load of hay," he said.

Alex now bent over and began talking gravely to the bulldog.

"Captain Joe," he said, "why didn't you follow me sooner? I might have been eaten alive at that landing. Next time, you come quicker."

Captain Joe pointed his blood-stained nose in the direction of the river and whined softly.

"What's that?" asked Alex.

The dog drew away from the boy and ran a few steps to the north and looked back.

"Look here!" Alex said, speaking excitedly to Case and the mountaineer, "the bulldog says there's some of our friends over in the direction of the river."

"I didn't hear him talking," laughed the mountaineer.

"That's because you don't know dog talk. Captain Joe has a language of his own," laughed Case. "Great dog, that!"

"Anyway," admitted the mountaineer, "he seems to understand what you say to him."

"Oh, come on!" urged Alex. "Let's don't waste any more time standing here. There's something wrong on board the *Rambler*, or Captain Joe wouldn't be here."

"The *Rambler*," Case insisted, "is a long way upstream."

"I guess Captain Joe knows where it is," Alex replied. "You fellows come right along. I'm going to follow the dog."

The boys used their searchlights freely now, and made considerable noise making their way through the thickets. After walking steadily for fifteen or twenty minutes, the bulldog darted on ahead and left them to make their way without his guidance.

Even while the three were discussing the disappearance of the dog, they heard him barking not far away, and then a voice they knew came to their ears. The dog's bark took on a note of welcome.

"Hello, Alex! Hello, Case!" they heard Clay call. "Why don't you come on out to the river?" "We're moving as fast as we can," Case called back. "This jungle is harder to work through than a Saturday night crowd on South Clark street. How did you come to be on shore?" he added.

By this time, the two boys and the mountaineer had gained the spot where Clay stood.

"What's doing on the *Rambler*?" Case asked after the mountaineer had been presented to Clay.

"We have met the enemy and we are theirs!" said Clay dolefully.

In as few words as possible he told the story of the situation on the *Rambler* at the time he left it.

"And Jule is still there with those thieves?" asked Case.

"He is unless he's made a dive for liberty," replied Clay.

"You say the boat was drifting the last you saw of her?" asked Hank.

"Broadside downstream!" answered Clay.

"Well, then," the mountaineer suggested, "we'd better be moving on down. Was she on this side of the river or the other?"

"Pretty close to the Kentucky shore," answered the boy.

"Then you're in luck!" the mountaineer laughed. "There's a sand bar down here, just around the point, that will be sure to catch her. You may have my head for a football if we don't see her wedged against that bar as soon as we come in sight of it."

After half an hour's difficult walking along the river bank, winding far into the river to escape coves, crossing little runs on fallen trees, they passed around the point of the bend and looked down a long sweep of river.

"Thunderation!" shouted the mountaineer.

"Now, what do you think of that?" demanded Clay.

"Rotten!" Alex and Case declared in a breath. What the boys saw was the *Rambler* lying at anchor, perhaps forty rods away with the *Hawk* bearing down upon her.

"It looks to me," the mountaineer said, "as if those pirates were bound to have that boat."

"And it looks to me," Case put in, "as if they're going to get her, too! They seem to have the top hand in this game."

"I don't know about that," declared the mountaineer. "I don't think we ought to let those brigands run away with that boat."

"Well, then, suggest something!" urged Clay.

Before Hank could speak again, the *Rambler's* anchor was hauled in and she was headed directly for the shore almost at the exact spot where the four stood. The *Hawk* steamed steadily after her.

"What's she doing that for?" demanded Case.

"That boat of yours," suggested the mountaineer, "will almost float in a heavy dew, while the *Hawk* as you call her requires a considerable depth of water."

Clay nudged his companions and laughed.

"That's shows that you're not familiar with boating," he said, in a moment. "That old barge out

there will float in twenty-five inches of water, while the *Rambler*, sticking her keel down like a knife, requires at least thirty-five inches. I guess the truth of the matter is," he added, "that the pirates on board the *Rambler* are coming this way in the hope of dodging the *Hawk*."

"Why don't they do a little shooting?" Case asked. "Those fellows aren't usually so saving of their ammunition."

"I guess the police boat isn't far away," suggested the mountaineer. "She may be just downstream, or just upstream, but they know she's hereabouts, and there'd be plenty of shooting if they didn't suspect her presence. Those fellows usually shoot to kill, too."

The *Rambler* came in within a dozen feet of the shore and then turned prow down. The *Hawk* dropped down, too, edging in upon her every minute. The boys watched the maneuvers with anxious eyes.

"I hope they won't get to shooting," Clay said, "because Jule and Teddy must be still on board."

"If those fellows on the *Rambler* knew the game they are playing," Alex declared, "they would turn the motors on full speed and run away from that pirate. Perhaps they don't know it, but our boat can go three miles while the other boat is traveling one."

"Let's go aboard and show them how to run it!" suggested Case.

The prow light was still burning on the *Rambler*, and the cabin was also brightly illuminated. Through the small window on the port side, they could see Jule busily engaged over the electric coils at the back of the cabin.

"I believe I can get on board that boat without being seen," Alex declared, and before the others could offer a word of remonstrance, the little fellow was in the river swimming mostly under water toward the after deck of the motor boat. They saw him climb up on the deck and peer in at the window in the rear wall of the cabin.

"The little monkey!" chuckled Clay. "I don't think I would have undertaken a game of that kind for a million dollars."

"Well," Case said excitedly, "we're going to do exactly the same thing. Those fellows on board are so busy watching the pirates that they won't see us, and the pirates are so busy watching the *Rambler* that they won't see us. We've just got to get on board."

The mountaineer threw himself at full length on the ground and laughed until his lean sides shook.

"And what will you do when you get on board?" he asked directly. "You're the gamest lot of kids I ever saw."

"About the first thing I do," Case declared, "will be to get something to eat. I'll just bet you a red apple that Alex has got his nose into the provision chest this minute."

They all glanced toward the *Rambler* at mention of the boy and saw that the after deck was vacant.

"It's a sure thing he's got his nose into some kind of food if he's inside the cabin," Clay remarked.

"But, honest, now, boys," the mountaineer asked, "what do you think of doing after you get on board? You can't fight the pirates on your boat and the pirates on the *Hawk* too."

"Why," Clay said, "we'll run away from that boat in a minute. In three seconds after we get our hands on the motors, we'll be going so fast downstream that a bullet from the *Hawk* couldn't catch us."

"You kids certainly beat my time," chuckled the mountaineer. "If I didn't have plenty of business at that little aeroplane factory of mine up in the hills. I'd be tempted to go with you."

"This man," Case explained to Clay, "makes moonshine whiskey up in the hills. He calls his still an aeroplane factory because his product sends people up in the air."

"It will send a man pretty high up in the air if he drinks enough of it," the mountaineer chuckled.

"Why don't you quit it and play fair with the Government?" asked Clay.

"Sho', boys," answered the mountaineer, "I wouldn't enjoy life if it wasn't for the skirmishes I have with the Government officers. Besides, there ain't nothing else a man can do in this country. When a man can make a hundred dollars' worth of moonshine out of ten dollars' worth of corn, and do it with mighty little trouble, what's the use of his coming down into the valley and shoveling coal into a steamer for a dollar and a half a day?"

The argument was never completed, for at that moment the boys saw the cabin door open and Teddy, standing erect in a boxing attitude, move out. He was getting to be quite a good-sized bear now, and he bulked fierce and heavy against the lights. At first, neither one of the river thieves on board the *Rambler* saw him.

In fact, the first indication Mike had of his presence was when he felt a sharp claw laid on the arm lying across the gunwale. He turned quickly, looked for one instant into the pig-like eyes of the bear, and with a cry which echoed down the river, sprang into the stream.

"I guess he thought the bear was going to eat him!" Case observed.

The mountaineer now lay rolling and tumbling on the bank of the river. The scene had opened so unexpectedly; the bear's appearance had been so fierce and intimidating, that he had at first felt a little shiver of fear, but now he saw that the bear was merely performing tricks he had been taught. While he chuckled, Gid also leaped into the river, and then he saw Case and Clay, followed by Captain Joe, swimming lustily toward the *Rambler*.

The entire situation on board the *Rambler* had not been observed from the shore. The boys and the mountaineer had seen only Teddy in the center of the stage, so they had naturally supposed that the swift departure of the pirates had been occasioned by the sudden appearance of the grizzly. Had they been in a little different position, they would have seen Alex and Jule standing in the open doorway of the cabin with threatening automatics in their hands.

"Now, that's a funny proposition," the mountaineer deliberated, as Clay and Case clambered to the after deck. "Them pirates are watching the *Rambler*, and yet they don't see that the boys are getting possession of her. They must be a stupid lot."

The next minute, however, convinced the mountaineer that he had been mistaken in his estimate of the intelligence of the pirates. Half a dozen pistol shots came in quick succession, making little spurts of water on the surface of the river near the stern of the boat. However, Clay and Case were soon climbing, dripping with river water, through the window at the rear of the cabin.

Still watching from the shore, the mountaineer saw Clay creep up to the bridge deck which concealed the motors, keeping down below the level of the gunwale. Bullets from the *Hawk* continued to spatter about the motor boat, but seemed to do no damage whatever.

As those who have read the previous volumes of this series will understand, the entire exterior walls of the *Rambler* were sheathed with bullet-proof steel. This fact, it will be remembered, had preserved the lives of all the boys during the voyage to the head waters of the Amazon river.

Directly the watcher saw the anchor, which had been dropped again when the boat had taken her position near the shore, lifted and the next instant, the motor boat went gliding like a shot downstream.

The moonshiner bent his head forward and rubbed his eyes in wonder. It was all new to him, this wonderful speed. His acquaintance with motor boats had consisted almost entirely of a slight knowledge of the large flat-bottomed scows hardly worthy the name of motor boats. When the *Rambler* darted away at a speed not less than twenty miles an hour, it all seemed to him like magic.

He stood for a moment on the bank watching the little spurts of flame shooting from the *Hawk* and then turned into the thicket with a chuckle which shook his broad shoulders.

"Sho'," he exclaimed, "we mountaineers don't know much about river folks, after all. I never knew there was anything on the face of the earth that could go as fast as that motor boat went."

He tramped along in the darkness for a long time and then stopped and made a small fire, by the side of which he slept until morning. With the appearance of the day he was out toward the hills, and also forever out of the lives of those on board the *Rambler*.

"Now, see here," Clay suggested as the *Rambler* speeded beyond reach of the bullets from the *Hawk*, "we can't long keep this gait with empty gasoline tanks."

"If we pull in at the landing just below here," Alex laughed, "we'll all get pinched. If you leave it to that old store keeper, we're pirates, and Case and I are little rhinoceros birds sent on ahead to see whether the picking is good."

"Well," Clay continued, "we don't have to strain the motors right now, so we'll keep just enough gasoline burning to give us headway. Perhaps we'll strike a more hospitable settlement farther down."

"I don't believe that old fellow had any gasoline to sell, anyhow," laughed Case. "If you boys could have seen the rubes fall all over each other when we pulled our automatics, you'd have nearly died laughing!"

"Suppose we stop and see how they feel about the matter to-night," suggested Alex. "I'd like to drag that constable out of bed!"

"No use of looking for trouble," Clay advised. "After all, you must remember that those fellows have the law on their side."

"Yes," Case declared, "and if they could once get us into jail they'd keep us there for years. They're likely good and angry about the way we bluffed them before their own townspeople."

Teddy now came up to where the boys were standing and demanded appreciation for the part he had played in the recapture of the boat. Captain Joe, also, advised the boys of his presence by nipping them quietly on the legs.

"I know what's the matter with the menagerie," Alex exclaimed. "They haven't had any supper. And that makes me think," he went on, making a dive for the cabin, "that I haven't had any supper, either."

"What are you going to get for supper?" Clay asked, following the boy to the cabin door.

"Oh," Alex replied with a grin which wrinkled his freckled nose, "it's almost midnight now, and we'll just get a light little luncheon."

"You make lots of bad breaks trying to talk the English language," Case advised. "You mustn't say 'luncheon' unless you have pie. It's 'lunch' when you don't have pie, and 'luncheon' when you do have pie."

"I said 'luncheon', didn't I?" asked Alex.

"You certainly did," was the reply.

"Well," Alex said, "then we're going to have pie."

"The only kind of pie we can have now," Case objected, "is fish pie. I'll go and catch a couple of river perch and you can make a fish pie."

"Say, look here," Alex said, shutting the cabin door in Case's face and talking through the glass panel, "what do you know about pie? I suppose you'll be wanting me to make a liver pie next."

"That would be fine fodder!" laughed Case. "I guess you are joking!"

"You've forgotten about those canned apples," Alex insisted. "I'm going to make hot apple pie for our midnight luncheon. And we're going to have ham and eggs, and potatoes, and soda biscuit, and a whole lot of good things."

"Go to it!" grinned Case, as he went back on the prow and sat down to watch the river.

The boat slipped steadily down with the current for about an hour before any lights were seen on the Kentucky side. Then Clay got out his map of the river and they all examined it intently.

"Here's the big bend below Brandenburg," Case said with his finger on the representation of the river. "Just now, we are free of the big bend, and so that light on the south bank must be at Wolf Creek."

"Je-rusalem!" Jule exclaimed. "The name sounds fierce, all right!"

"Anyway," Clay went on, "there's a little stream enters the Ohio at Wolf Creek, and we can tie up there until morning. If they haven't got any gasoline there, we can shoot over to the Indiana shore as soon as it gets daylight and see what we can do there."

The suggested plan was carried out so far as entering the mouth of Wolf Creek was concerned. The first thing the boys did, however, was not to search the few stores the village boasted for gasoline. In the first place, they did not care to awaken the store keepers, as there was no necessity for their going on that night. In the second place, they desired to keep their arrival at the landing as quiet as possible, as some rumor of the show of arms at the landing above might have filtered down the river, in which case they would all be regarded with suspicion.

As soon as the boat was fairly at rest in the mouth of the creek, Alex opened the cabin door and announced in a joyous voice that dinner was served "in the dining-car."

For the next hour the boys paid little attention to anything save the bountiful meal provided by their chum. Alex's soda biscuit and hot apple pie proved very attractive to the hungry boys.

"Now then," Alex declared, walking out on deck after leaving the table, "I'm going to bed for the night!"

"You've surely earned a little sleep!" Case grinned. "That's the best dinner we've had in many a day."

"Oh, I guess I can go some when it comes to cooking," laughed Alex, "and I'll wake up in shape to cook another good breakfast in the morning."

"I'll be thinking all night what we're going to have for breakfast," Clay suggested. "How did you ever come to think of that hot apple pie?"

Before Alex could answer the question, Jule caught him by the shoulder and pointed out to the surface of the river almost directly opposite the mouth of the creek.

"What do you know about that?" he asked.

"About what?" demanded Alex.

"The three blue lights!" answered Jule.

The other boys were all attention now, but all declared that they could see no lights whatever. Presently Jule bounded to the top of the gunwale, steadying himself by the roof of the cabin, and looked toward the distant Indiana shore.

"There they are!" he shouted, "There they are! Three blue lights! Now what do you suppose they mean?"

"They're probably in a boat?" Clay asked, tentatively.

"Nix on the boat!" Jule protested. "They're just floating right down flat on top of the wet water."

Clay now vaulted to the gunwale and followed the direction of the boy's pointing finger. As he did so, a sharp detonation came from the river, echoing down the stream weirdly, and then the lights he had seen only a moment before disappeared from view.

That was the boys' first experience with the three blue lights!

There was a blank look on Clay's face as he stepped back to the deck of the *Rambler*. Jule also showed great excitement as he faced his friend.

"Did you see them?" the latter asked of Clay.

"See what?" demanded Alex.

"The three blue lights!" Jule answered.

Alex and Case punched each other in the ribs and chuckled.

"You're the boy that's been reading out of the dream book," the latter said.

"Didn't you see three blue lights right down on the surface of the river?" asked Jule, again turning to Clay.

"I certainly did!" the latter answered.

"Then they're there yet," Alex insisted, vaulting to the top of the gunwale. "They must be there yet, for no boat could disappear so quickly. I'll take a look at them myself."

"But I tell you they wasn't in any boat!" insisted Jule. "They were floating right on the surface of the water—three large and very brilliant blue lights."

"Did you see them, Clay?" asked Alex, scornfully.

"Yes," replied Clay, "I did, and they were actually floating directly on the surface of the river."

"Why can't I see them, then?" demanded Alex from his position on the gunwale.

"Because," laughed Jule, "it is only the eye of the believer that sees. Clay believed, and he saw."

"Honest, Clay?" asked Case.

"Yes, I saw three blue lights down to the level of the river," answered Clay, "and I saw something more. You-all heard the explosion?" he asked. "Well, when that explosion came, there was a puff of smoke and the lights went out in a second."

"Wasn't there any one in sight?" asked Alex.

"No one in sight!" replied Clay.

"No boat, or anything of that kind?"

"Not a thing!" shouted Jule. "I tell you those three blue lights came right up out of the bed of the river. And then there was an explosion, and they disappeared, just like they'd been winked out. Strangest thing I ever saw!"

"Well, that's enough for me!" Alex declared. "You'll be seeing green elephants with blue tails next. I'm going to bed."

In a short time all the boys were abed save Jule, who sat on the prow with Captain Joe and Teddy, the bear. The night had not fulfilled its promise of rain, and the stars now shone dimly down from a misty sky. It was very still on the *Rambler's* deck, for no noises came from the landing, and there was no wash of the current against the boat.

The boy was puzzling over the strange appearance and disappearance of the three blue lights. There was a trace of superstition in the nature of the boy, and he was half inclined to regard what had been seen as a manifestation of the supernatural.

"If Clay hadn't seen the same thing I did," he mused, "I wouldn't have any trouble making up my mind. Blue lights don't rise up out of rivers through human agency."

The boys were all astir shortly after daybreak, and Alex went on a scouting tour up to the little river settlement at the mouth of Wolf Creek. The *Rambler* lay only a few feet from a rough pier which had been spiled out into the stream, so the boys had no difficulty in reaching the shore. The rowboat, it will be remembered, had been left up the river when the two boys had set out on their hunting trip.

Early as it was, the boy found people moving about the one street of the little town, which lay on the east bank of the creek bearing its own name. Standing on the rude platform before a small storehouse, the boy saw two men; one of sober aspect, wearing a long gray beard, and the other much younger and showing a laughing face under his dilapidated cap. As he approached the younger man beckoned.

"What do you want, boy?" he asked.

"Gasoline," was the answer.

The young fellow stepped off the platform and advanced toward the pier where the *Rambler* lay. The old man sat down on the platform.

"Is that your boat?" the young man asked of Alex.

"Yes, that's our boat," replied the boy. "Our gasoline tanks are empty. Can I buy a supply in town, do you think?"

"Certainly!" was the answer. "Father keeps it for sale. During the course of the season a good many motor boats tie up here. We keep all manner of supplies."

"Well, then," Alex replied, "We'd like to get about a dozen spark plugs. I don't think that porcelain insulation is as good as it used to be, for we break a good many. They go smash at the least little jar."

"All right!" the young man replied. "Step up there and tell father what you want and he'll open the store now. Are your friends on the boat awake?"

"Sure!" replied Alex. "They're all awake except the bear and the bulldog."

The young man laughed and turned toward the pier, while Alex hastened toward the place where the old gentleman sat on the store platform.

The boy explained his wants briefly and the old gentleman unlocked the battered door of his place of business. It was an uncouth, unpainted, sidling little store, with broken panes showing in the windows and new shingles speckling the roof.

The interior, however, showed considerable care in the arrangement of goods and the stock seemed to be large and of good quality. Without making any pretense of waiting on the boy, the old dealer, who introduced himself as Martin Groger, seated himself in a much whittled arm chair and pointed Alex to another.

"Boy," he said with a very serious expression of countenance, "did you sleep in the motor boat at the mouth of Wolf Creek last night?"

"Part of the night," answered Alex.

"What did you hear along after midnight, say an hour or two after midnight?"

"Nothing special," answered the boy.

"Did you hear anything that sounded like an explosion?" the old man went on, "—something like the explosion of a boiler?"

"Why, I heard something of that kind," Alex replied, wondering what the old gentleman was getting at. "Did you hear that, too?"

"Yes, I heard it," answered the old gentleman, drawing his long beard through his fingers and fixing his grave eyes on those of the lad. "Yes, I heard it," he repeated, "and I've heard it a good many nights when there wasn't any one else awake to hear it—when there wasn't any one else astir in the village but me, and no boat tied up at the mouth of Wolf Creek. Did you see anything?" he added eagerly.

"What would you expect me to see?" asked Alex, with a smile.

"I ain't saying anything about that," replied the old gentleman. "I'm asking you a plain simple question. Did you see anything just before that explosion?"

"No, I didn't," the boy answered, "but two of my chums did."

The merchant leaned forward with suspicion in his eyes.

"You're not lying about this?" he asked.

"I would have no object in doing that."

"Then tell me what you saw."

"Two of my chums saw three blue lights floating on the surface of the river—at least that's what they said."

"And this was just before the explosion?" queried the old man.

"The lights disappeared after the explosion," Alex explained. "Do you know anything about them?" he asked.

"Boy," the old man exclaimed, moving about in his chair excitedly, "your chums have seen what only one person in this section has ever been able to locate."

"Why," Alex declared, "any one, I guess, might have seen the lights. The boys said they stuck out from the river like a sore thumb."

"Just so!" answered the old gentleman, eagerly. "Just so! Now let me tell you something about those blue lights," he went on. "I've seen them time and time again, but the people hereabouts always deny seeing them."

"Isn't that remarkable?" asked Alex.

"There's my son Charles, now," continued the old man. "I've tried to point them out to him, but he says they don't exist. Flings out at his old father just like that. Says they don't exist!"

"How often do they appear?" asked the boy.

"I haven't heard of their being about before last night for several months," answered the old merchant. "I was in hopes they'd never be seen here again."

"What's the matter with 'em?" asked Alex.

"Matter enough," was the reply. "They bring disaster!"

"Alex restrained a burst of laughter with difficulty, but finally managed to face the old gentleman gravely.

"Bring disaster, do they?" he asked.

"Indeed they do!" was the reply. "Whenever the ghosts of the river dead walk on the surface of the water, it means trouble for all river dwellers."

"Many years ago," the old man continued, "the *Mary Ann*, as trim a passenger packet as ever sailed between Cincinnati and the Mississippi, blew her boilers all to flinders right opposite the mouth of Wolf Creek. There were two hundred passengers on board and they were dancing when the explosion took place."

"The deck where they were amusing themselves was lighted by three blue lights! Ever since that night, the three blue lights have warned of impending calamity."

"So you think they're ghost lights, do you?" asked Alex.

"I know they are!" replied the old merchant. "And I'll tell you why. Those lights never fail to appear on the anniversary of the wrecking of the boat."

"The *Mary Ann* went down ten years ago to-night, and on every anniversary of the drowning of those two hundred people, the three blue lights are seen rising over the exact place where she sank."

"That's remarkable!" exclaimed the boy.

"Those who were drowned," the merchant continued, "went down in their sins. They were dancing to the devil's music when they sank. Their bodies rest uneasily on the bottom of the river, for none of them were ever found."

"Why, that's singular!" Alex remarked. "It would seem that the bodies might have been recovered."

"They never have been found," was the reply. "River men say they were carried off by an undercurrent and whirled down into the Mississippi, but I believe the bodies are in there yet."

"And every anniversary of their death, they show three blue lights, do they?" asked the boy wonderingly.

"Three blue lights!" said the old man, "and after the three blue lights, the explosion. I have watched for the lights and the noise every night for nine years and I have never failed to see and hear."

"And trouble always comes after the exhibition?" queried the boy. "Then there is another mystery for the crew of the *Rambler* to solve."

CHAPTER XI.—CATCHING BIG CATFISH.

On his way back to the *Rambler* after his rather remarkable conversation with the old merchant, Alex met Clay and the old man's son hastening toward the store.

"It's all right!" Clay announced to the boy. "They've just got in a big stock of gasoline, and we'll fill all the tanks and buy a few red cans on the side."

"And for the love of Mike," Alex interposed, "buy about a peck of spark plugs. And say," he called out as Clay mounted the little platform in front of the place of business, "buy a couple of fish lines that would bring a freight car out of the water, and the right kind of hooks to go with them."

"What's the idea?" Clay called back.

"Well, you just bring the hooks and lines and I'll show you where the idea is," replied the boy.

When Alex reached the deck of the *Rambler* he found Case and Jule busy over a great stack of pancakes. One was spreading them thick with honey and the other was making them more eatable by the use of bacon gravy. Eggs were frying in the skillet over the stove and a great pot of coffee was simmering on the electric coils.

"Whew!" shouted the boy, sticking his nose into the cabin, "you fellows smell good in here."

"Yes," Case laughed, "and you took good care that you didn't help produce the fragrance which pervades this apartment."

"I got supper last night," pleaded Alex.

"That's all right," Jule cut in, "it was your turn to get breakfast this morning, too. You know what we all agreed to when we left Chicago on the first trip. The boy that talked slang had to cook the meals and wash the dishes."

"Aw, when did I talk slang?" demanded Alex.

"You've been talking slang for a week!" Case declared.

"What'd I say?" demanded Alex, scornfully.

"You said one of those river pirates was balmy in the head," answered Jule. "You're always making some break like that. If I had a twirler like that you carry around with you, and couldn't keep it under any better control than you do yours, I'd throw the belt off the wheels."

"I know who'll cook meals and wash dishes now," laughed Alex. "When it comes to talking slang, you've got me backed up on a blind siding with my fires drawn."

"Go to it, boys!" roared Case. "Go to it. Get it all off your chests, and I won't have to do any work for a month."

Alex was soon busy at the breakfast table, and when Clay returned with a great load of gasoline and provisions from the store, everything was neatly cleared away in the little cabin.

"There!" Clay said, throwing a great package at Alex's head, "there's your fish line and your fish hooks, and for fear you'd want to use the coal stove or one of the motors for a sinker, I brought along a section of railroad iron. I guess that'll hold your line."

As the boy spoke, he threw about four inches of steel railway iron down on the deck with a great thud.

"What did that old gentleman at the store say to you about the three blue lights?" asked Alex, as Clay prepared to get the boat under way. "Did he have a ghost story to spin?"

"He didn't say a word to me about the three blue lights," Clay replied. "We didn't have any time to talk about such things, and we haven't any time now, so you fellows just get up here and help fill these tanks."

All four boys were busy in a moment and young Groger from the store assisted materially in getting the gasoline on board.

In less than an hour all was ready for departure. The young merchant shook the boys heartily by the hand and asked them to call if they returned home by way of the river.

"Oh, we'll come back all right," Alex called out. "At least, I'm coming back. I'm bound to know something more about those three blue lights. I'm the original mystery investigator!"

"So father told you about that, did he?" queried young Groger.

"Of course, he did!" Alex replied. "He couldn't talk about anything else. He seemed to be glad that Clay and Jule saw the three blue lights. I guess he's got an idea that the people around here think he's been talking about something that never existed."

"I'm afraid he is," replied the young man. "He's always talking about the three blue lights and the wreck of the *Mary Ann*, and the explosion, and all that, but he's the only one about here who ever saw the lights or heard the explosion."

"Well, you're mistaken there!" replied Alex. "Clay saw them last night and Jule saw them, and all four of us heard the explosion."

Watching the young man's face closely as he stepped ashore, Clay thought that he saw a sudden pallor come over it. The son was evidently as fully superstitious as his father.

"Now, what did the old merchant tell you about the three blue lights?" demanded Jule, as the boat swung off down the river.

In as few words as possible Alex explained the mystery of the three blue lights according to the aged merchant's theory.

"Well," Jule said, after a moment's thought, "the three blue lights did bob up out of the river. There wasn't anything there to keep them floating down with the current, or to sustain them on the surface. And," he went on, "there wasn't anything there to cause an explosion."

"Ho!" Alex scorned. "You'll be saying next, that you believe in the ghost story! Now, just to show you that there's nothing to it," he continued, "I move that we come back up the river after a time and find out where those blue lights come from, and where they go to."

"What do you say to that, Clay?" asked Jule.

"You needn't ask me whether I'm interested or not," Clay replied. "I've been thinking about those three blue lights a whole lot. I don't believe in ghosts, or superstitions of any kind, but I do believe that there is something significant about those lights."

"Then it's settled that we'll return and investigate?" Alex asked.

The boys all replied in the affirmative and then Alex opened the package Clay had brought him and unrolled his fish lines, which looked more like cables than anything else. Case and Jule laughed until they found it necessary to hold their sides.

Clay looked on with an amused expression on his face. He knew that Alex usually had a pretty good reason for anything he did, and was expecting something novel and original. He was not disappointed.

Paying no attention whatever to the jeers of his chums, Alex bent the great hooks to the cable-like line, took a turn with each around the section of railroad iron, and moved the whole contraption to the stern.

"Now, you fellows help me to get these lines in right," he commanded. "It wants one boy to a line so they won't get tangled when I dump this sinker in. Hurry up now, we want this fish."

"Sinker?" repeated Jule. "I thought your idea was to build a submarine railroad."

"Fish!" laughed Case. "What kind of fish do you expect to catch with that layout? That won't catch fish!"

"Huh!" answered Alex. "If I had a book containing all you boys don't know about catching fish, I'd have to rent the Coliseum in Chicago to put it in. You boys mean well, but you're ignorant."

"Where're you going to put this fish after you get it?" demanded Jule, snickering. "We haven't got any contract for feeding any state troops, have we? What do you want a big fish for, anyway?"

Alex merely thrust his hands inside the waist band of his trousers and grinned.

"I've got plenty of storage room," he finally declared.

"Honest, now, Alex," Clay asked, "what kind of a fish do you expect to catch?"

"Catfish!" was the short reply.

"Wow!" exclaimed Jule. "I wouldn't eat a catfish any quicker than I would eat a cat."

"What are you putting all that weight on the lines for?" asked Case.

"It'll sink the hooks into the mud about a foot," Jule put in.

"Sure it will!" continued Case. "And catfish are never found at the bottom of the river. They call them catfish because they climb up on things."

"You're the wise little fisher boy," laughed Alex. "A catfish couldn't climb to the surface of the river if they had an electric elevator. They live in the mud and eat in the mud. After they get a square meal, they stretch out on a bed of silt like a cat on a sitting room floor. Now get these lines over and I'll show you what a real catfish looks like."

The boys took the lines into their hands and leaned over the stern. Alex with the iron poised in air stopped suddenly and laid it down on deck.

"I guess I need a little instruction myself," he said. "You can't catch catfish by trolling for them. You've got to let the line lay wiggling from a weight in the mud of the river."

The boy rushed back to the motors, shut off the power, and then dropped the anchor.

"Now, boys," he said, "if you'll all get back into the cabin and remain quiet, I'll coax a catfish two feet long out of the river."

"You have my sympathy," Case answered, "and I'll help you all I can. I'll go back into the cabin and make a noise like a dish of cream."

Regarding Case's offer as light and trifling, Alex got his lines into the water and sat down to await results.

"I don't know," he said after a while, "but I ought to have waited until we came under that wooded island just ahead. Catfish have a way of hovering in the mud around the towheads."

"We can drop down if you think best," Clay proposed.

"Just you wait a minute!" Alex exclaimed all excitement, "I've got a bite right now. Two bites!" he yelled the next moment. "Both lines are running out! Catch one, quick!"

The boy's announcement that the lines were moving out brought his three chums instantly to the front. Case and Jule both grabbed for the same line, with the result that the tops of their heads came together with a thud and the line continued to wiggle along the deck. Clay stepped on the moving line and Alex seized it.

The boy now held a line in each hand and was drawn tightly against the after gunwale.

"Hold on, Alex, hold on!" shouted Case.

"Pull 'em in, pull 'em in!" yelled Jule.

"You bet I'll hold on!" panted Alex. "Why don't you boys catch on to the line?"

The boy sprang for the lines again, but their fingers met only the bare deck. Alex, hanging on like grim death, stood for a moment with his feet braced against the gunwale and then went head-first into the river.

"Great spoons!" Jule exclaimed. "Talk about catfish! I'll bet he's got a team of wild colts at the end of those lines!"

Alex, hanging to the lines, went bobbing down the stream.

"Don't loose your fish!" jeered Jule, leaning over the gunwale, his face red with laughter.

"What do you think you are?" called Case. "A blooming pilot?"

Alex could make no headway swimming in the direction of the boat, for the creatures he had hooked were pulling him, iron and all, toward the Indiana shore. Now and then the boy was drawn beneath the surface and came up spluttering, but still grimly holding to the lines.

"Why don't the little idiot let go?" asked Jule as the boy's head disappeared under water for the third or fourth time.

"He'll never let go!" Case exclaimed. "Why don't we get the *Rambler* under motion and pick him up?"

The motor boat was soon racing toward the boy. Alex was still hanging to his fish lines, and the catfish, or whatever was at the other end, were making fast for the center of the stream.

It took some moments to reach the boy, and more time to land him on deck, for he still persisted in hanging on to the fish lines.

Not until the thick lines were securely fastened to a deck cleat would the boy release his hold.

"Now," Clay laughed, "if anybody can find a derrick, we'll get these fish on board."

"Aw, those are not fish," Jule exclaimed, "they're alligators!"

"Whatever they are," Alex grinned, "I didn't let 'em get away with me! They ducked me, but they didn't get away!"

"Well," Clay said in a moment, observing that the lines had ceased to move about in the water, "your fish must be pretty well tired out by this time, so we'll take them ashore."

"All right!" Alex replied. "While you're towing them to a shallow place, I'll go and get on some dry clothes."

When at last the motor boat drew the hooks and the sinker to a shallow spot on the Kentucky side, the boys saw two monstrous catfish squirming weakly. In grabbing for the raw beef with which the hooks had been baited, they had been caught far back in the jaws, so no amount of pulling could have released them.

"They're alive yet!" shouted Jule.

"I'll fix that in a minute!" Alex declared, appearing on deck in a dry suit. "I'll administer a couple of lead pills which will cure the ills of life."

"Hear him talk Shakespeare!" jeered Jule.

Alex considered this remark too immaterial to notice. He leveled his automatic at the fish and fired a volley at their heads.

"Now, where's that derrick?" asked Case.

As the fish were nearly two yards in length, it was evident that only one need be brought aboard for food, so one was sent sailing down the stream and the other was, with no little difficulty, lifted to the deck. Alex danced about his prize joyously.

"Why, look here!" Case exclaimed. "This fish hasn't got any scales!"

"Do you think I've been going through all this to get a sturgeon?" asked Alex. "I should think not!"

"The catfish," Clay explained, "belongs to the bullhead tribe, and has a hard, tough hide instead of scales."

"Is it good to eat?" asked Jule.

"Of course it's good to eat," answered Alex. "Do you think I'd go to the floor of the river with a fish that wasn't fit to eat?"

"I'd like to know why they call these things catfish," Case exclaimed, turning the monster with his foot.

"Huh!" snickered Jule. "They have back fences at the bottom of the river, and these fish climb up and give midnight concerts."

"Jule," said Alex gravely, "your imagination seems to be getting the best of your conscience. If we had an Ananias club on board this boat, you surely would be the Perpetual Grand."

"All right," Jule said, "when you get a club formed I'll take the office. But who's going to cook this fish?" he went on.

"I'll cook him if you'll skin him," Case offered. "We want only a few pounds of catfish steak," Clay observed.

"I'm going to boil about half of him!" Alex declared, "so as to give Captain Joe and Teddy the feast of their lives."

"It's a wonder Captain Joe didn't jump into the river after you when the fish invited you down into the mud," Jule laughed.

"Captain Joe and the bear were both asleep in the cabin," Case explained.

The boys had a merry time preparing that fish for cooking. It is not hard work to dress a catfish if you know how, but these boys did not know how. At last, however, a great hunk was boiling in a pot and slices were ready for frying. By noon the meal was ready, and the boys all admitted that Alex's, catfish was a very good substitute for salmon, although nothing at all like it in appearance.

The boys drifted slowly on the river that day, taking in the wild scenery and stopping now and then at cosy little landings on the Kentucky side. It was a warm, clear day in September, and the world never looked brighter to them than it did at that time.

They passed river craft of all shapes and sizes during the day. There were monstrous steamers having the appearance of floating hotels, there were great freight boats loaded to the guards, there were house-boats, motor boats, and great coal tows which dominated the stream as they passed.

"There's a boat," Clay said just before twilight, "which looks to me like a river saloon and I think those on board are watching the *Rambler*."

"If it is," Case suggested, "we'd better take to our heels. We don't want any more experience with river pirates."

"I should say not!" broke in Alex. "Those fellows don't own the river. We've got just as much right here as they have. If they try to come aboard, we'll set Teddy on them."

The suspicious steamer checked her speed as the boys slowed down on the *Rambler*, and it was soon evident that those in charge of the whiskey boat were desirous of speaking with the boys.

"Hello, boys!" called a voice from the cabin deck of the steamer.

"Hello, yourself!" Alex called back.

"How's the bear?" asked the voice.

"Fine!" Alex answered.

"What do you know about our bear?" Case demanded.

"I was on the *Hawk* last night," was the reply.

"Did you see those two men head for the water?" Jule asked with a snicker.

"Funniest thing I ever saw!" the other answered.

There was a short silence and then another voice called out from the steamer:

"Why don't you boys come on board?"

"Nothing doing!" answered Clay.

"Some of our people want a look at the dog and bear!" the first speaker said. "So, if you don't object, we'll come on board."

"No, you don't!" Clay answered.

"We'll see about that!" came from the boat.

The steamer shot ahead so as to come up to the port side of the *Rambler*.

"Keep off!" ordered Clay. "We don't want any of that whiskey crowd on board! If you try to put foot on our deck, we'll shoot."

"I guess not!" laughed the other.

While Clay had been talking with those on board the steamer, Case had been at work with the motors, and the *Rambler* now shot ahead at full speed, drawing swiftly away from the steamer.

There was an instant commotion on the deck of the saloon boat and then she, too, shot ahead at a good rate of speed.

Given a clear stretch of water, the *Rambler* would soon have been out of sight of the steamer, but on turning a bend, a monster coal tow came into view. There were rows on rows of barges heaped high with coal, all headed for the Mississippi. In the rear was a gamey tug swinging from side to side in order to keep the fleet under control.

"Now we are up against it!" exclaimed Clay. "We never can get by those barges!"

"How do the steamers get by?" asked Jule.

"They don't get by at all when the coal tow is passing around a narrow bend like that!" was the answer.

"Well, what are we going to do?" Alex asked. "Let those fellows come on board here and eat us up?"

"If there weren't so many people on board that saloon boat," Case declared, "I'd dynamite it. She ought to be blown out of the water, anyway. We can't be bothered all the way down with these whiskey boats!"

"We shall be if we don't make a record in some way!" Clay said. "I move we run into the little creek there on the Indiana shore and shoot if they come near us."

"Say!" Alex said in a moment. "That isn't a creek at all. Don't you see that the main river is on the other side of it? That's a big island with a lagoon in the middle, and an opening on the upper end."

"That's not the main river on the other side!" Case observed. "It is wide, but it looks shallow. If it was the main river, we could pass through there and so get in ahead of the coal tow."

"Well, then, suppose we run into the lagoon," suggested Alex.

It was now quite dark, and the lights of the saloon boat showed that those on board were holding some sort of conference with those on board the tug in charge of the tow. The boats were some distance apart, yet even in the gathering darkness the boys could see the crew of the barges racing over the coal in order to do business with the bartender on the steamer.

"Before morning," Case observed, "those saloon pirates will have every dollar there is in that bunch of rivermen. I wish there was some way to separate the two crews."

"What do we care?" laughed Alex. "Either bunch would rob us if they could."

"Now," Clay said in a moment, "turn the boat in toward the entrance to the lagoon, keep all the lights off, and let her drift. They'll think we've gone downstream on the other side of the island."

"That lagoon looks pretty good to me," Jule observed. "I feel like I hadn't had any sleep for a week. We'll just tie right up in that little pond and sleep all we want to."

"That will be a nice place to tie up!" laughed Case. "Alex won't run any risk of being towed down the Mississippi if he goes fishing again."

And so, with no lights showing, the *Rambler*, under the impetus of the last push of the propeller, glided noiselessly into the mouth of the lagoon. Both arms of the island were heavily wooded and in a moment, the boys were out of sight of the tow and the saloon boat. It was dark and still along both shores of the lagoon. Wild birds settling for the night called to each other across the narrow stretch of water, but otherwise all was silent.

"Nice and quiet," Jule declared, "but just look ahead there, if you will. You can all see the three blue lights, now, if you want to! The ghost of the *Mary Ann* must have lost his bearings."

CHAPTER XIII.—EXPLORING A LAGOON.

"Are those blue lights on the water or on the shore?" asked Clay.

"You can search me!" Alex replied.

"They're on the water!" insisted Jule. "Can't you see the blue gleam shining on the waves?"

"Wherever they are," Clay said, "I'm going down and investigate."

"That's a good idea," said Alex. "We'll go down and see what the ghost of the *Mary Ann* has to say for himself."

"I was thinking of taking Captain Joe for company," Clay laughed.

"All right," Alex grinned, "go on with Captain Joe if you want to."

"I'm afraid two will make too much noise making their way through the thickets," Clay said thoughtfully.

"How are you going to get ashore?" asked Alex, briefly.

"I'm going to pole the *Rambler* up close enough so I can jump," was the answer.

"I guess you can do that all right," Case cut in. "This water seems to me to be about fifty feet deep."

"This is an odd looking island," Jule observed. "The land seems to be shaped like a horse shoe."

"There are numerous odd-shaped islands in the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. You can see easily enough how this peculiar formation came about," Clay observed, "some forest fire burned the timber out of the center of the island. When the roots and stumps died out, the river carried the soil away. If the big trees on the two arms of the island should be cut down, the river would eat the soil away in a very short time."

"Well, what are you going to do when you get over to shore?" asked Alex.

"I'm going to sneak down to where the lights show, and see what it is that makes them."

"All right," Alex said with an aggrieved air, "while you're out having fun with the blue lights and the dog I'll go to bed."

"Oh, come along if you want to," Clay laughed.

"No," Alex replied more cheerfully, "I think I'll go to bed. You boys can blunder around all night if you want to."

The boy made his way to the cabin, and Clay warped the boat toward the north shore. In a few moments the keel seemed to strike bottom and then the boy examined the bank with a searchlight. All was clear so he sprang lightly across the narrow stretch of water and disappeared in the darkness.

The three blue lights were still observable not far from two hundred yards from the boat. They lay in a straight line up and down the lagoon.

The boys heard Clay making his way through the thicket for a few moments, and then all sounds on the shore ceased.

"I don't believe he'll find anything in there," Jule said.

"Then what makes those lights?" demanded Case.

"The old merchant up at Wolf Creek told us what made the three blue lights," chuckled Jule.

"I just believe," Case replied, "that that is some signal."

"What would be the use of a signal, out in the middle of the river opposite Wolf Creek?" demanded Jule.

"I can't explain it," Case answered, "but it's a signal, just the same. It just can't be anything else."

"And what would be the use of a signal in this little old shut-in lagoon?" continued Jule.

"Then if it isn't a signal, what is it?" asked Case.

"It's just some natural phenomenon," was the reply. "When Clay gets down there he won't see anything at all. It may be that you can't see the lights from any direction except this! You've seen wandering lights in swamps, haven't you? Well, it's my idea that this is that kind of a light."

"We may know something more about it when Clay comes back," Case suggested. "He may find out what it means."

While the boys sat on the deck watching the mysterious lights with puzzled eyes, there came a quick, sharp explosion and the lights disappeared. The explosion sounded like the touching off of dynamite.

Both boys arose to their feet and leaned over the gunwale of the boat, gazing down the lagoon with mystified faces.

"Alex went to bed too early!" Case suggested.

"Yes, he should have seen that little old Fourth of July celebration," Jule replied. "Let's wake him up and tell him about it."

"You wake him up," Case answered.

Jule made his way into the cabin and felt around on the bunk occupied by the boy. Teddy, the bear cub, lay there sound asleep but Alex had disappeared! Jule returned to the deck with a grin.

"That little idiot," he said, "has left the boat again."

"We might have known he would!" answered Case. "He runs away from the boat in the night every time he gets a chance, especially if Clay is ashore. They'll both be back here before long."

"Clay probably will," Jule observed, "but we don't know when Alex will return. We usually have to get him out of some scrape."

In the meantime Clay was pushing steadily through the thicket which lined the north arm of the peculiar-shaped island. For some moments he guided his steps by the blue lights which seemed to him to rest upon the water. Then came the explosion which the boys had heard and the lights were no longer in view.

"Now that's a funny proposition," the boy mused. "Why should those lights be hidden in this out of the way lagoon, and why should they pop out like that?"

Captain Joe, following close at the boy's heels, now forced his way through the underbrush to the

water's edge and began uttering a series of low growls. Clay whistled softly but the dog refused to return. In a moment he ceased his verbal demonstrations and lay still, looking across the lagoon to the other shore.

"What's the matter with you, Captain Joe?" Clay demanded in a whisper. "If you see some one who might have produced those lights, why don't you say so? And don't make so much noise about it, either!"

The dog advanced a few feet into the water until his shoulders were well covered and then backed out again. All this time his snarling muzzle was directed toward the opposite bank.

Directly he came out of the lagoon and crouched down at Clay's feet.

"There's something going on here, dog," Clay whispered, patting Captain Joe on the head, "and we'll just settle down right here and find out what it is. All you've got to do in order to help out is to keep still."

The dog nodded his head knowingly, and the two crouched down in the darkness of the thicket to listen and to watch.

While they waited, the lights of the *Rambler* showed farther up, and Clay understood that something unusual was in progress there.

"They might as well invite that saloon boat to come sailing in here as to turn on those lights!" Clay muttered. "There must be something serious or they never would illuminate the *Rambler* in that way."

Captain Joe now began moving restlessly about, and finally started up the lagoon toward the motor boat. Clay followed slowly, and soon came within the circle of light from the deck. He found Case and Jule looking over the gunwale.

"Why don't you put out the lights?" he asked.

"We turned them on to direct you boys home," was the reply.

"You boys home?" repeated Clay.

"Yes, you boys!" answered Jule. "Alex jumped out about as soon as you left. Did you see him anywhere?"

"I don't think he came out on this side" Clay replied.

"If he didn't," Jule went on, "he's in some mixup over on the south arm. There's doings of some kind over there."

"How do you know?" asked Clay.

"Because, just a few moments after we discovered that the boy had gone, a large rowboat came in at the mouth of the lagoon, passed along our port side and ducked into the bank some distance down. We couldn't see her, of course, only just for a second as she came opposite us, and then only indistinctly, but we could hear her when she landed."

"The question before the house now," Case observed, "is about getting you on board again. You can jump from the gunwale to the shore but you can't jump from the shore back to the gunwale."

"There's a long board under the forward deck between the storage bins," Clay answered. "Get that out and I'll climb it."

The board was brought, and Clay was soon on deck. The first thing he did was to turn off the lights.

"What did you do that for?" asked Case. "Alex never will find his way back here in the darkness!"

"Alex can hide in some thicket until we find out what's going on," Clay answered. "As for the *Rambler*, we want to drift down so those in the boat won't know exactly where she lies."

The boat drifted down on the sluggish current of the lagoon for perhaps two hundred yards, and then the anchor was dropped at a point very near to where the three blue lights had shown.

"Now, we'll keep as quiet as three bugs in a rug till we find out what's going on," Clay said.

"What did you find out about the lights?" asked Jule.

"They went out before I got to them," Clay answered.

"What do you think about them?" Jule insisted.

"I don't think!" was the reply.

"Case insists that they are merely signals," Jule went on.

"That's my idea, too," Clay answered. "The lights certainly do not come up out of the water."

"But who would be signaling in this lonely old lagoon?" demanded Jule.

"That's what we don't know," Clay returned. "All we've got to do is to lie here and watch."

"Say!" Case exclaimed in a moment. "What did you do with Captain Joe?"

"Why, he was right there when I came on board," Clay replied. "I thought he came up the long plank right after me."

"Well, he didn't?" Case went on. "I took in the board after you came up, and the dog was nowhere in sight."

"I'm glad of that!" answered Clay. "I certainly am glad of that!"

"I don't see any good reason for celebrating the disappearance of the dog!" growled Case.

"I do!" Jule cut in. "Captain Joe will go and find Alex."

"Sure he will!" admitted Case. "I never thought of that."

The three boys sat for a long time on the deck of the motor boat looking out into the darkness. Now and then they heard the sound of rustling bushes on the shores, but as a rule the scene was very still. It must have been near midnight when Jule caught his chums by their arms and drew them closer to the port gunwale.

"There," he said, nodding his head to the west, "there are the three blue lights. They are close to the south arm of the island this time. Now what do you make of it?"

"Let's wait and see if they blow up like the others did," suggested Case. "They, too, may explode with a loud noise."

"What else can we do?" chuckled Jule.

"There's only one thing we can do," Clay advised, "if we want to settle this mystery right here and now, and that is to turn on the motors and shoot down there like a rocket."

"I'm for it!" Jule declared. "Let's ram the ghost out of the water!"

CHAPTER XIV.—CAPTAIN JOE HELPS SOME.

Alex did not remain long in the cabin of the *Rambler* after Clay's departure. His two chums were seated on the prow of the boat, and the lights were out, so he had little difficulty in dropping unobserved into the water. Before leaving the cabin, he had drawn on an old suit of clothes used for just such purposes, so he did not mind getting wet.

Once in the water, he struck out for the south arm of the island. It was his idea that the coal tow and the saloon boat would hover about that spot for some little time. Those who had whiskey to sell would be sure to keep in the company of the tow, and those who had the whiskey thirst would be pretty apt to rush on board the steamer for the purpose of satisfying it.

The boy, of course, did not understand that the tug in charge of the barges could not have held them against the push of the current in any event. His idea that the tow and the saloon boat would keep company, however, was the correct one.

Almost as soon as his feet came in contact with the sloping shore of the south arm, he heard shouts of laughter coming across the wooded stretch of land between the lagoon and the main channel of the river. Proceeding on as rapidly as was possible in the darkness, he soon came to a position from which he could see the lights of the steamer. She was standing perfectly still some distance down the stream from the mouth of the lagoon, and the tug and barges seemed to have halted, too.

Directly he saw lights flashing along the barges and heard exclamations of anger and dismay from the front ranks. Then he saw what had taken place. The crew of the tow had paid too much attention to whiskey and too little to navigation.

The front line had grounded at a bend just below, and the others were piling against them. Even with his limited knowledge of river work, the boy saw that it would be hours before the barges could be towed off the bar. A good many of the men supposed to be in charge of the tow were still drinking on board the saloon boat.

"That's always the way with whiskey," Alex said. "It jumps into the places where it can make the most trouble. "If I ever take a drink of the stuff, I hope I'll get five years for every drop I swallow. A person who drinks whiskey is no good, anyway, and might as well be in prison as anywhere else."

There was now a great commotion on board the steamer, and the boy saw that those in charge of the tow were forcing their unruly employes back to their duty. Directly the steamer anchored a short distance up the river. The barges which were grounded were detached from the main tow, and the whole mass went swinging down the river again, followed by shouts of laughter from the steamer.

"Now," mused the boy, "I wonder whether that pirate boat will keep on after the tow in order to get what little money those poor fools have left, or whether it will be kept here in the hope of annexing the *Rambler*?"

The question was answered in a moment, for the steamer edged in close to the shore and threw out an anchor.

"That's fine!" Alex muttered. "Now they'll be running over this island to find the *Rambler*, caught like a rat in a trap. I'm glad they haven't got sense enough to run up and block the lagoon!"

The lights of the steamer made a fair illumination on the bank where Alex lay, and directly he saw a boat put out and head for the very thicket which concealed him. He crept softly back toward the interior and waited for developments. When the boat touched the shore two men stepped out and pressed through the thicket toward the lagoon.

"This is foolishness," the boy heard one of the men say. "I tell you, Bostock," he went on, "that the motor boat made the north passage and went on down the river while we were fooling with that tow crowd."

"I don't believe it, Davis," was the reply. "They just doused their lights and dropped into the lagoon. I was watching the river and no lights showed below the island."

"Well," Davis said, "we can soon find out. It isn't far from here to the lagoon, though it's mighty unpleasant traveling in the night time. You may be right, but I don't believe it."

The two men passed within six feet of where Alex lay, concealed, and as soon as the thicket closed behind them, he crept along in their wake. As the men made considerable noise themselves, he figured that they would not be likely to hear any racket he might make.

In fifteen minutes the three reached the highest point on the island, from which, in daylight, both the main channel of the river and the lagoon might be seen. Just at the moment they came within sight of the inner channel the lights flared out on the *Rambler*.

Alex restrained an exclamation of disgust with great difficulty.

"The confounded idiots!" he said under his breath. "To go and light those lamps at this time! Why, we crawled in there to hide!"

"There!" the boy heard the man who had been called Bostock exclaim, "I told you the motor boat had made for the lagoon!"

"Well, you were right," was the reply.

"Now, all we've got to do," Bostock went on, "is to run the steamer up to the mouth of the lagoon and nail these boys in good and tight."

"That's right," the other answered, "and once we get hold of that motor boat there isn't a thing we can't do on this river. I've heard of the exploits of those boys all the way down from Pittsburg. That boat is built with the motors of a sea-going tug, and can outrun anything on the river. Besides that, unless I am greatly mistaken, the cabin and the deck under the gunwales are bullet-proof."

"Right you are!" Bostock answered. "There isn't a thing we can't do after we get hold of that boat, but what are we going to do with the boys?"

"We'll have to make some arrangements for keeping them out of the way," Davis suggested. "If they put up a fight, well, the lagoon is a pretty good place to leave them."

"Now, then," mused Alex, "the thing for me to do is to shoot both of those murderers, and so get

the *Rambler* out of this scrape!"

Without any intention of following his own advice, the boy thrust his hand into his pistol pocket and found it empty.

"Anyway," he muttered, "it wouldn't have been any good after swimming over here. It seems as if I never did have a gun when I wanted one."

The boy struck off to the east, his idea being to gain a position a short distance above the *Rambler* and then swim aboard. He had proceeded but a few yards when a rustling in the bushes just ahead attracted his attention. The rustling was soon followed by a low growl, and directly the damp muzzle of the bulldog was thrust into the boy's face.

"So you've gone and run away, too, have you Captain Joe?" demanded Alex. "I've a great mind to send you out to eat up two pirates."

It was too dark to see the bulldog distinctly, but Alex knew that he was accepting the commission joyfully.

"I don't think it will do any good, doggie," the boy finally whispered. "Those pirates are about like skunks—you kill one and half a dozen more come to the funeral. If those fellows don't get back to their steamer directly, there'll be a mob of their companions on this island before daylight. All we can do now is to get to the *Rambler* and head her out of this lagoon before the steamer gets to the entrance."

With this object in mind, the boy and dog made their way swiftly through the thicket, paying little attention to the noise they made. Far in the rear they heard the river pirates calling out to them, but paid no attention. When Alex reached the shore of the lagoon he was at a loss which way to turn. There was now no illumination to show the location of the *Rambler*.

"What's your notion now, Captain Joe?" he asked of the dog. "If you can tell me which way to turn to find that motor boat, I'll give you a chunk of catfish as big as your head when we get aboard."

Thus urged and bribed, the dog lost no time in turning to the west.

"I think you're wrong, Captain Joe!" Alex urged.

The bulldog insisted that he was right, and as the boy had no good grounds upon which to dispute his judgment, he followed along after him. It was by no means good walking along the bank, for in many places trees and shrubs had been undermined during high water, and trunks and masses of smaller growth often stretched out into the water.

"I tell you what it is, Captain Joe," Alex said as they went along. "If you dare to take me back where those saloon pirates are, I'll advise Teddy to take a bite out of your ear when we get aboard the *Rambler* again, if we ever do."

Captain Joe's only reply was to seize Alex by one trousers' leg and hustle him along over a mass of boughs which seemed to the boy to be several miles high.

At last, after a great deal of this climbing, Joe stopped on the bank of the lagoon and pointed with his nose out over the water. The two of them must have made considerable racket scrambling along the beach, for just as Joe stopped a soft whistle came out of the darkness.

"Captain Joe," whispered Alex, patting the dog on the head, "you're the candy kid! That's Clay, without the shadow of a doubt. Now you tell him that we want to come aboard."

As if understanding every word spoken to him by the lad, the dog fawned about for a moment and then uttered a short, sharp bark.

"Come aboard, you runaway!" a voice whispered from the boat.

"Don't you think we won't! exclaimed Alex. "Can't you show a light just for a minute? It's so dark I wouldn't know the river was wet if I didn't feel it."

A flashlight was turned on for just an instant and then shut off. Captain Joe greeted the finger of light with a joyous bark and plunged into the lagoon. Alex was about to follow his example in the matter of taking to the water when he felt himself seized by the collar and drawn back. It was evident that the two had made altogether too much noise, and had been followed by the men from the steamer.

"Keep your mouth closed now!" whispered one of the men in Alex's ear.

"Ram your gun down his throat if he doesn't!" another voice said.

Alex knew that the purpose of the pirates was to prevent his warning his companions of the presence of the steamer and its crew in that vicinity. He knew, too, that unless he could notify those on board the *Rambler* of the intentions of the pirates, their retreat from the lagoon would soon be shut off.

He knew, too, that he was taking great chances in making the situation understood. Still, he decided to risk his own life in order to warn his friends. With the pirate holding him by the collar, he sprang forward and cried at the top of his voice:

"Captain Joe! Captain Joe!"

Something in the tone of the boy's voice told the dog as well as those on board the motor boat that Alex was in deadly peril. It was not his habit to ask for assistance unless it was very badly needed.

Answering the indefinite but well-understood appeal, the dog turned back to the shore, unseen but plainly heard in the disturbed waters.

One of the men struck fiercely at his head with the butt of a gun as he swept past him. The man who had hold of the boy fired a shot at the dim rushing figure. The bullet went wide of its mark.

The next instant the bulldog had a set of very capable teeth clamped about the throat of the outlaw. The man struggled and gurgled horribly as the impact of the dog's body threw him back, releasing Alex from his grasp. The boy sprang away and shouted:

"Turn on the lights, boys, turn on the lights!" In a second the powerful searchlight on the prow of the *Rambler* was turned on the spot from which the call had proceeded. It revealed one of the men lying helpless on the ground, writhing under the dog's jaws and the other disappearing in a thicket.

Alex picked up the outlaw's revolver, which had fallen to the ground, and called the dog away. He was stooping over the prostrate figure to ascertain, if possible, the extent of the injuries inflicted by

the dog when a shot came from a tangle a short distance away.

"Come on, Captain Joe!" the boy shouted. "Let him alone."

Leaving the two outlaws on the bank, one-half unconscious, the other raging helplessly in the jungle, the boy and the dog sprang into the lagoon. As they did so another harmless shot came from the interior, and then the lights on the *Rambler* were switched off.

Several spiteful shots were now fired toward the boat, but the two swimmers were, of course, out of sight of the outlaws, so the bullets were not directed at them.

In a very brief space of time, Alex and Captain Joe were hauled on deck, where they lay dripping and panting for an instant before a word was spoken. The lights were still out.

"You're a beautiful pair!" Jule whispered, then. "We were just talking about you two getting into a scrape before we got out of the lagoon."

"Never mind the scrape!" Alex panted, still breathing hard. "Put on full power and steam up out of the lagoon. That whiskey boat is going up to block the way!"

Without waiting for further information on the subject, Clay sprang to the motors and the *Rambler* was soon making her way upstream.

When they came to a low-lying portion of the south arm, they saw the lights of the steamer across the point, trying to head them off.

"Just let me get up on the prow with a gun!" Alex exclaimed, pulling himself out of a puddle of water on the deck. "I want to get a couple of shots at those devils on board that steamer!"

"What did they do to you?" asked Case.

"They didn't do nothing to me, only choked me nearly to death with the collar of my own shirt," said the boy, "but I heard them planning to leave us lying at the bottom of the lagoon and steal the boat."

"That's what they're here for!" Clay answered. "When you see a whiskey boat on any river, you may make up your mind that the men on board will commit murder if they find it necessary."

"If we don't get more speed on," Case exclaimed, pulling Alex away as he made a dash for the prow, "they'll beat us to the entrance to the lagoon now."

Clay rushed back to the motors to see if another ounce of power could not be turned on while Jule seized the lines and headed the boat off on the port side.

"They'll come in from the river side," he said to Case, "and we may slip through between their prow and the little bend which tops the lagoon on the north side."

The *Rambler* was moving much faster than the steamer, but the latter had several rods the start. As they raced desperately for the narrow strip of water between the two arms of the island it was an open question as to which would win.

"I just believe she's going to get there first!" Jule said drawing still farther away to port. "Can't you make her go any faster, Clay?"

"Every pound of power is on!" Clay replied. "You boys would better be getting your guns ready. If we come together they may try to board us. If you shoot, shoot to some purpose."

"We ain't a-going to come together!" Jule whispered to Alex, who now occupied a position at his side. "At least, we're not going to come together so they can jump over on our deck."

"What are you going to do?" Alex asked. "Look here!" Jule queried. "The *Rambler's* sides and prow are braced with steel, aren't they?"

"You know it!" Alex answered with a chuckle as he began to understand the purpose of his chum.

"Well, then," Jule declared, "I'm going to ram her! If that steamer gets her nose in our way, I'm going to send the *Rambler* plumb through her. I wonder how they'll like that?"

"If you do," Alex advised, "reverse the minute you strike. If you don't, you are likely to get wedged into any hole you may make."

"I tell you I'm going to send the *Rambler* clear through her!" insisted Jule. "I'm going to bang her with all the force of the motors."

"Go to it!" Alex exclaimed. "I'm game for any racket of that kind. Only don't you say anything to Clay about it. He'd be afraid of breaking the motors or something."

The *Rambler* was now almost to the entrance. The steamer was still moving upstream. As the boys looked the prow of the whiskey boat turned almost directly into the path which the motor boat must follow in order to leave the lagoon.

Jeers of triumph arose from the cabin deck of the steamer as those on board took in the significance of the situation. They now considered it certain that the *Rambler* would soon be at their mercy, blocked beyond the possibility of escape in the lagoon.

Jule at the helm of the motor boat, however, had a very different idea as to how the scene ought to terminate. In a second the great steamer, lumbering and loosely built, lay broadside to the oncoming *Rambler*. Clay gave a cry of warning as the boy swirled the boat so as to strike the steamer amidships, but Jule held on to his course.

Before Clay could utter another cry of warning, the steel prow of the *Rambler* crashed into the steamer about a third back from the prow!

It seemed for a moment as if Jule's prediction that he would go clear through the lumbering old steamer was to be fulfilled, for the steel prow cut into the thin sides of the steamer as a knife cuts into cheese. The shock was terrific.

The boys were knocked off their feet, and Jule found himself rolling on the deck with the tiller ropes still grasped in his hands!

Shouts of rage and alarm came from the sinking boat, and there was an immediate rush for the railing overlooking the motor boat. The steamer was still staggering under the impact of the blow, and those on board were reeling like drunken men.

Clay's first act was to reverse the motors. Much to his delight and surprise, the *Rambler* backed slowly out of the cavity she had cut into the side of the steamer. The side wall of the ponderous old boat had been shattered into bits many feet on either side of the actual cut!

As the *Rambler* backed away, the steamer began drifting downstream, moving as chance would have it, toward the main channel of the river instead of toward the lagoon. The boys saw at once that she was filling with water, and would probably sink where she lay. They saw, too, that men with pistols in their hands were threatening them from the cabin deck of the steamer.

With fear and trembling Clay set the motors going again, wondering whether they had been injured in the collision so as to render the *Rambler* unmanageable. The motors responded nobly, however, and in a moment the boys had the satisfaction of seeing her glide past the dipping prow of the steamer.

It was dark as ink over the surface of the river, and Alex turned on the lights as the *Rambler* rounded the sinking saloon boat and swept on downstream. Once well under way, Clay walked up to the prow and looked it over.

"Any harm done?" called Jule.

"No harm that paint and putty won't repair," answered Clay. "That is, not here," he added. "Some of you boys would better look into the cabin."

The cabin certainly was in a mess. Alex's cherished catfish lay rolling on the floor, with Teddy shambling back and forth after it. Many of the lockers had been burst open, and a heap of broken

crockery lay on the floor not far from the electric coils. The glass panel in the cabin door was shattered, and the coal stove, which had been used in lower latitudes to keep the boys warm, lay on its side.

"Everything's all right in here!" Alex cried sticking his freckled nose through the sash formerly occupied by the glass panel. "Nothing wrong in here at all, except that the stove is tipped over, and the dishes are all broken, and our expensive wardrobes are rolling in the dirt, and Teddy's eating up my catfish. Oh, we're all right in here!"

Clay left the prow and looked through into the cabin.

"We ought to charge this to Jule!" he said with a laugh.

"All right!" said Jule. "I wouldn't have missed that for a thousand dollars. Do you think I sunk that boat?"

"You certainly did!" answered Clay. "The last I saw of her as we came around the bend her cabin lights were shining mighty low."

"And now," Case complained, "they'll be sending word on down the river to have us arrested for piracy on the high seas."

"Don't you ever think they will!" Alex put in. "I don't believe there's a man on board that boat that dare step foot either into Indiana or Kentucky. They sell drugged moonshine whiskey, and they rob every man that comes on board, so it's a sure thing that there's a warrant for them in every town along the river."

"I didn't think you had it in you, Jule!" Clay laughed.

"What's the answer?" Jule questioned.

"I didn't think you had the nerve to ram a boat the size of that one. It was a desperate thing to do."

"Huh!" grinned Jule. "I guess if I hadn't rammed her, we'd be packed like sardines in some dirty old steamer hold now."

"And that's no dream!" Alex shouted.

With her prow light burning brightly, the *Rambler* proceeded slowly down the river. In a few moments they came to four great coal barges stranded on a sand bar. As they glided by a man in a rowboat shot out into the circle of light and called out:

"What's the trouble up the river, boys?"

"Oh," Alex answered, "a saloon boat ran into something and broke in two. I guess she's sinking."

"I thought I heard a crash of some kind," answered the stranger. "Anybody likely to get drowned?"

"I hope so!" Clay answered. "That's one of the meanest outlaw boats on the river. I was glad to see her going down."

"Indeed it is," agreed the other. "I saw the men on board of her getting the bargemen drunk. You see the result here. Hundreds of tons of perfectly good coal wasted."

"Suppose we run into a cove here, or up against one of those barges," Jule whispered, "and see if this man knows anything about the three blue lights."

The *Rambler* was steered under the lee of the lower barge downstream from the sand bar and the stranger rowed alongside.

Clay was about to question him regarding the phenomenon, now twice witnessed, when the hum of low voices came from the shore. The boy listened intently and the next moment the heavy tramping of horses' feet came to his ears. Directly the sharp whinny of a restive horse cut the still air!

The stranger looked at the boys sharply as they stood listening to the noises on shore. There was an expression of displeasure on his face as he noted how watchful they were.

"What's that?" asked Alex.

"Sounds like horses and men," replied the stranger, speaking sharply and turning away as he did so.

"What are they doing out on the river bank at this time of night?" queried Jule. "What's coming next, I wonder?"

The stranger, who had turned away abruptly, now moved back so that his face was plainly seen under the prow light of the *Rambler*. When he spoke it was with an attempt at heartiness, but the boys saw that he was worried.

"I may as well tell you all about it," he began with an insincere air. "You've heard the horses trampling, and heard the men talking, so you may as well understand what they're here for. These river pirates have been making a lot of trouble lately. They coax our plantation hands on board their pesky boats and that's the last we ever see of them. There's many a good crop gone to waste along the Ohio river because those outlaws carry whiskey to sell."

"We've seen quite a lot of that," Clay suggested.

"Everybody who is on the river sees a lot of it," the stranger continued. "Well, now we've decided not to stand it any longer. We came here to destroy that boat, and I'm half sorry that an accident prevented our accomplishing the work. One boat nicely blown up would warn a score away. They need the lesson."

"Well," Clay laughed, "it wasn't an accident that destroyed the steamer. She tried to block us in the lagoon and we rammed her with our steel prow. That boat will never make you any more trouble."

"You are to be congratulated!" the stranger observed. "You have my permission to ram every whiskey boat on the river."

The man's face was smiling enough, and his manner was sufficiently friendly, still the boys all found themselves wondering if he was telling the exact truth. They knew very well that many people scattered along the river on both banks were in touch with the whiskey boats, even supplying them with moonshine and tobacco.

"Why don't some of those men with the horses show up?" asked Jule presently. "Why are they hiding in there now?"

"Because they don't care about being identified as being mixed up in a raid on a whisky boat!" was the reply. "Only for the fact that you got the start of us we could have destroyed that boat without one of us being recognized. We don't care for lawsuits."

"If they remain here a few hours," Case suggested, "they will probably have a chance at another boat. The *Hawk* was not far from this place not very long ago."

"And you had a bit of a tussle with her?" laughed the stranger.

"Oh, they got a little gay, but we managed to keep away from them," was the reply. "They tried to steal our boat."

"Yes, I presume they would like a trim little motor boat like yours," suggested the stranger. "And now," he continued, "I may as well get back to my friends. It will be daylight in an hour or two, and we've got to work at this dirty business in the dark if we work at all."

Jule opened his lips to ask the man a question regarding the three blue lights but Clay, as if understanding his purpose, drew him back and whispered in his ear:

"No more questions just now, boy."

"Why not?" Jule asked impatiently. "That's just what we came up here for—to find out something about the three blue lights."

"I have an idea," Clay explained, "that this man didn't tell the truth about the other things, and that he won't tell the truth about the three blue lights—that is, if he knows anything about them at all."

"I've been a little bit leary of him all along," Jule replied.

While the boys were talking together, the stranger left the stranded coal barge upon which he had been standing and, pushing his boat along, joined his friends on the bank. The boys could hear a murmur of conversation following his arrival there, and now and then the light of a match flared up.

"There's one thing I can't understand," Clay said as the boys put out into the current again, "and that is, why we have seen no wreckage from the steamer coming down."

"That's easy," Alex grinned, "the boat must have dropped into the mouth of the lagoon."

"No she didn't!" Case cut in. "She sunk south of the arm of the island. She's lying there now in twenty feet of water unless I am very much mistaken. Still, we should have seen wreckage by this time."

"Suppose we take a run up and see what the situation is there," suggested Alex. "It would give me great joy to see a lot of those fellows marooned on that island, with nothing to eat or drink for a week."

"We'll only get tangled up in some kind of a mess if we go there," Clay advised, "so I think we'd better go on down the river and see if we can't shake off all this trouble and have a pleasant, leisurely river trip. We've had trouble in plenty on all our other trips, but I thought the Ohio journey would mostly consist of floating in the sunshine through cities and back yards."

"All right!" Alex said. "I'm just as willing to get out of this mess as any one. Anyway, it will soon be daylight, and we'll then be needing breakfast. Who does the cooking this morning?"

"We all cook," answered Case, "for we all talk slang except Captain Joe and Teddy, and they probably have done something in that line themselves only we didn't understand them."

"Look here!" suggested Jule when a faint line of daylight began to show upstream. "Suppose we

pull over to that wooded cove and build a roaring fire on the bank. Then we'll send Alex out to get another catfish and bake it Indian fashion."

"He didn't make a success of Indian cookery on the St. Lawrence," suggested Case. "I don't want any foolishness about this breakfast."

"Well," Alex laughed, "there was something the matter with the soil over there. I guess it leaked gas or something of that kind. Anyway, the clay along the Ohio is all right."

"Very well," Clay said, "we'll run into the cove and give the boy a chance to serve catfish a la Indian. The combination of gritless clay and green leaves ought to produce fine results."

"You just watch me!" Alex insisted.

The *Rambler* was accordingly anchored in a pretty little cove whose banks were covered with trees of large growth. At first, Alex tried to capture a fish from the stern, but, not succeeding in this, he ran out into the river and anchored there, leaving the other boys on shore. It was broad daylight when he felt a strong pull at his line and knew that he had hooked some denizen of the stream.

So busily was he engaged in playing the fish that he heard nothing of the shouts from upstream, or the warning from his chums on the bank. Directly, however, he glanced up to see that a coal tow which appeared to fill the entire width of the river was drifting down upon him.

"Get into the cove! Get into the cove!" cried Clay.

"You'll be struck in a minute!" shouted Case.

"Release your anchor line and shoot downstream!" Jule suggested.

This last advice appeared to be not only the most desirable but the easiest to follow, so the boy severed the manilla line with one blow of a sharp hatchet and sprang to the motors. When at last the boat was under way headed downstream, the foremost barges were almost upon her.

The men on board the tow seemed to be taking great delight in the thought that the *Rambler* would soon be completely at their mercy. Several of them stood at the top of their barges making crude and humorous suggestions to the boy.

With the boat under way and headed downstream at a speed with which the tow could by no means compete, Alex amused himself by making scornful faces at the men on the tow.

"Come back here, you river rat!" one of the men shouted. "You'll get a bullet in your back if you don't!"

"Fire away!" shouted Alex and promptly ducked down under the protected gunwale of the boat.

The boys on shore saw the *Rambler* speeding away with many expressions of disgust. Jule even started on a run down the bank, but soon gave over the attempt to catch the swiftly disappearing boat.

The men on the tow, observing the boys on the bank, greeted them with insulting epithets and amused themselves by heaving chunks of coal toward them. Case replied with a pistol shot but did not succeed in wounding any of the men. The coal came thicker after that for a time, but the barges were soon too far down the river to make such an attack effective.

"Now, we're in a nice box!" Jule cried, as the steamer in charge of the tow disappeared around a bend in the river. "How do you suppose that little monkey will ever get that boat back to us?"

"Aw, that's easy enough!" Case answered. "River boats pass those coal tows every day in the week, and I guess Alex can get the *Rambler* upstream again. In fact," he added, "I don't think he needed to run down so far. He might have ducked over to the other shore and let the barges go by. Anyway," the boy added with a smile, "he'll lose his fish. And serve him good and right at that!"

"And we lose our fish breakfast!" Clay returned. "And that won't serve us good and right!"

"That's a fact!" shouted Jule. "We haven't got a thing to eat on this bank!"

"We probably won't have to wait long for the boy to come back," Clay assured the others. "He may be afraid the bargemen will make trouble for him, and may run down until he comes to the mouth of a creek or deep cove in which he can hold the *Rambler* until the tow passes by. In that case, he may be away an hour or so, but I reckon we won't starve to death in that time."

"I've a good notion to go and hunt out some farm house and buy something to eat!" Jule declared. "We're most out of eggs, anyway."

"It seems to me," Clay laughed, turning to Case, "that Alex and Jule have been having most of the adventures lately. Now what I propose is that you two boys stay here and wait for the *Rambler* to return while I cut back into the country and see what I can buy in the way of provisions."

"That will be all right," Case replied. "And while you are gone, Jule and I will flop into a thicket and go to sleep. I've had to prop my eyelids open with my fingers for the last hour. The bulldog can keep watch while we get our forty winks."

"Why," Clay said, "I didn't see Captain Joe come on shore. I guess you'll find that he's on board the boat with Alex and the bear."

"Oh, he was here all right," Case insisted. "I saw him running about on the other shore of the cove acting as if he had got scent of a rabbit or a squirrel."

"Then he'll be back all right!" Clay replied. "Be sure that he is before both of you go to sleep. He'll stand guard, all right, if you tell him to watch for Alex. You wouldn't like to have the *Rambler* come back here and not find you!" Clay added.

And so, leaving the boys preparing a bed of leaves in the thicket, Clay turned away to the south and disappeared in the forest.

CHAPTER XVII.—THE TWO CLAIMANTS.

Sailing swiftly down the stream in the early morning, Alex was not at all in bad humor as he regarded the general situation. He figured that he could very readily elude the coal tow and return upstream to his chums. In fact, the portion of the incident which he regretted most was the loss of his fish.

"Now," he pondered as he whirled the boat over towards the Indiana shore in order to find open water for his passage upstream, "I'll have to go and hook another catfish before we can have breakfast."

He chuckled softly to himself as he thought of the chums marooned on the shore of the little cove without a thing to eat. At the time of his sudden departure with the *Rambler*, no supplies of any kind had been carried ashore. He laughed as he thought of the rage of the boys.

"I'll throw out a troll-line as I go up," he mused, "and perhaps I'll have a pickerel or something of that kind all ready for the hot stones when I get up to the cove."

When within a short distance of the Indiana shore, the boy saw a long line of floats extending out from the bank, indicating the location of a fishing net. The boy sprang to the motors in the hope of saving the net by shutting off the power, but he was too late. In fact, his effort only made the meeting with the net more disastrous.

Running at full speed, the boat might have cut the net and passed on, but drifting with the current as she was when she came to it, something like two hundred feet of stout fibre were wound about the propeller, about the skag, and about the rudder and rudder-post, as the motors were reversed in an effort to back away.

As the boy leaned over the stern to ascertain the extent of the damage, the clatter of the motors died out and he knew that the clogging of the propellers had been responsible.

In a moment the *Rambler* was drifting aimlessly downstream, swinging this way and that with the current, spinning along broadside to the wash of the river oftener than in any other position.

"Now, I'm in a beautiful mess!" the boy declared. "I shall never be able to get that stuff out of the propeller without beaching the boat."

As the boy was lifting a heavy oar in the hope of sending the motor boat over to the Indiana side of the river, he heard a slow, drawling hail from the mouth of a little creek some distance down.

"Tend to your rudder!" shouted a hoarse voice. "You'll go over the rapids in a heap if you keep on that way!"

"Propeller and rudder clogged!" shouted Alex. "Come on out and tow me in! You'll be well paid for your work."

The boy thought, in a moment, that the last sentence had been entirely superfluous, for their experience on the river had been that waterside characters were always too willing to assist any crippled boat. At all times their charges were exorbitant.

"All right!" the man called from the shore, and then the boy saw a small skiff shoot away from the side of a dilapidated-looking shanty boat which lay half hidden by a thicket at the mouth of the creek.

When the man in the skiff reached the *Rambler*, he rowed completely around her as if examining her good points. He was a long, lanky, sour-visaged individual with long black hair and beard. He was dressed in the homespun cotton so common with rivermen.

"Right pert boat you've got there," he said, at last.

"Never mind the boat now," Alex answered. "She's drifting downstream every minute. Tow her to shore and help me to get this net out of the propeller."

"So it's a net in the propeller, is it?" snarled the man from the houseboat. "I hope you hain't gone and took up my net."

"Did you have a net out in the river?" asked the boy.

"I certainly did!" was the reply. "And if you've gone and cut it up, you'll pay for it."

Alex knew very well that the man from the houseboat had never owned a net of the value of the one he had destroyed, but he decided to have no words with the fellow until the *Rambler* was ready to proceed on her journey. He saw that the man was evidently seeking a quarrel.

"Yessir!" the riverman went on. "If you've gone and cut up my net you'll pay me a good price for it. There's too many of you sports romping up and down the river with your gasoline boats."

"Time enough to talk about that when we get the boat over to the shore," Alex declared. "I don't want to drift downstream any farther."

Scowling and complaining over the exertion required, the fellow finally managed to work the *Rambler* into the mouth of the creek where the houseboat lay. As Alex took in the situation at one quick glance, he saw two evil-faced fellows lounging on the deck of the houseboat.

"What you got, Mose?" one of them called out to the riverman.

"I've salvaged a motor boat!" was Mose's reply.

"What's the trouble with her?" was the next question.

"She's got my net wound around her propeller!" answered Mose.

"Sho'," returned the other. "That new net of yours that cost a hundred not a week ago?"

"Yessir, that same new net!" returned the riverman.

Alex saw that the men were preparing to make trouble for him. He knew that they could not collect a cent of salvage for towing his boat out of the stream. He was positive that the net did not belong to them. Houseboat people of their class consider themselves fortunate in the possession of ordinary fishing lines and spears.

However, he only smiled as they talked of their hundred-dollar net, and dropped over into the shallow water of the creek to inspect the damage done to the propeller and rudder.

So far as he could see, there was nothing broken. The net which was wound about everything at the stern of the boat seemed to him to make a bundle as large as a whiskey barrel. He took out his knife preparatory to cutting it away.

"Look here, you boy you!" shouted Mose. "Don't you go to cuttin' up that net. You just take your consarned old propeller and rudder off the stern so that we can unwind it."

Alex knew that this would be impossible. His idea was to cut the net away, spring to the motors, and pass out of the reach of the houseboat men before they suspected what he was up to.

Therefore, he at once set to work with his knife and began slashing the strong threads of the net. The three men looked on angrily for an instant and then Mose said:

"I told you not to cut that net, boy!"

"I'm afraid there is no other way," Alex answered very civilly.

"I hope you've got the money in your jeans to pay for it," Mose shouted. "If you haven't, I'll just naturally have to take charge of that boat. I can't afford to lose that net."

"All right," Alex replied, cutting industriously away at the obstruction, "my chums are up the river a short distance and they will be down here directly. Then we can talk about paying. We'll fix you out all right as soon as they get here."

"You better see that you do!" Mose responded angrily.

It took some time to cut away the great net, but the propeller and rudder and skag were free at last and then Alex climbed back on the deck.

"Here, you," shouted Mose, presenting the muzzle of an old-fashioned double-barreled shotgun. "Don't you go near those motors. I've been expecting you'd try to run away without paying your just debts."

"No fear of my going away just yet," Alex answered. "I've got to wait somewhere along here until my chums come."

While Mose held the rusty old gun in a threatening manner, his two companions attached a heavy cable to the forward bitts of the *Rambler* and carried it ashore. After winding it around the trunk of a great tree, they returned to the houseboat and lay down on the forward deck to gaze impudently at the boy.

"Now, we'll see if you make a sneak down the river!" Mose cried triumphantly. "The best way for you to get away from this creek is to lay down about a hundred and fifty dollars."

"I didn't know there was so much money in the world!" laughed Alex.

"If your chums don't come in one hour," Mose went on, "we'll take possession of your boat. This man here," pointing over his shoulder with his thumb, "is a constable! Ain't you, Clint? And he can sell your boat right here on the river bank. Can't you, Clint? We'll see if these sports are coming down here and destroy our property without paying for it!"

In all his experience in river journeys, Alex had never been confronted by so puzzling a proposition. He knew that the rivermen had no claim upon him whatever, although he considered Mose entitled to some compensation for his friendly act. Still he realized that for the time being the fellows held the whip hand.

It happened that he had considerable money—two or three hundred dollars in his possession, having taken charge of the expense fund only a few days before. His inclination now was to pay the men the money demanded and get away. Then he reasoned that the exhibition of such a sum of money would only arouse the greed of the outlaws. That they would never let him depart with any money at all in his possession, he knew very well. It was a trying situation.

While he stood deliberating over the problem, a loud hail came from upstream and turning he saw the coal tow sweeping down the river.

"Hold that boat!" shouted a harsh voice from one of the foremost barges. "Hold that boat 'till we get there."

Scenting an additional profit in the arrival of the tow, Mose sprang into his skiff and rowed out. As the first barge came down, Alex saw two men spring into the skiff which was at once headed for the shore. The two men lounging on the houseboat at once sprang over to the deck of the *Rambler*, the man with the rusty shotgun keeping it in full view.

When the skiff reached the *Rambler*, the two men clambered on deck while Mose ran the skiff up into the creek. The two men were extremely well-dressed although their clothing showed connection with the water of the river and the smut of the coal barges. They were both very much excited, and the first thing one of them did was to shake his fist under Alex's, nose.

"Now, you young thief!" he shouted. "We've got you at last!"

"No rough house, pardner!" exclaimed the houseboat man who held the gun. "No rough house here, because, you see, we've got a claim on this boy ourselves. He just destroyed a net worth a hundred dollars!"

"A hundred dollars!" snarled the whiskey boat man. "Do you know what he did to us?" he went on. "He stole this motor boat and sunk our steamer with it. He's cost us more than twenty thousand dollars!"

Alex stood silent in the face of all these accusations. He had recognized the two men from the barge as men he had seen on the whiskey boat, and he knew that they would do their best to make him trouble. For a moment it seemed to him that the fate of the *Rambler* was sealed.

"What do you say to all this, boy?" asked the man with the gun.

Alex sat down dejectedly on the gunwale.

"I guess I'll let you fellows fight it out between you," he said.

"I can't see as there's anything to fight out!" one of the men from the whiskey boat shouted.

"This is our boat and we're going to take it away! As for this boy, we'll place him in the custody of the first United States marshal we come to!"

Once more the rusty barrel of the old shotgun in the hands of the houseboat man was hoisted to a threatening position.

"Don't you forget," the man said viciously, "that this boat busted our net. We don't care whose boat it is, we're going to hold it until we get paid for our property!"

"You talk like a fool!" shouted the man from the steamer.

"And you act like a fool!" insisted the other.

"I don't believe you fellows ever owned any net!" the enraged outlaw shouted. "I've seen your old houseboat sneaking along the river here for months. You're the kind of men who never have the price of a drink unless you can steal it. If you try to hold this boat, I'll fill you both full of bullet holes!"

The eyes at the stock of the shotgun flashed wickedly, but the man's voice was remarkably smooth as he said:

"If you move, either one of you, or try to get out a gun I'll blow the tops of your heads off! You observe," he went on, "that there are two barrels to this gun, and I'll tell you right now that they're both loaded with slugs."

"This is nonsense!" roared the man from the steamer.

"That's what I've been calculatin'," replied the other.

Alex was thinking fast. It seemed to him at that time that it would be better to leave the *Rambler* in the hands of the houseboat men than in those of the men from the steamer.

The houseboat men would be satisfied with a small amount of money as soon as they discovered that they could get no more, while the other outlaws would insist on taking the *Rambler* for their alleged debt.

Taking this view of the situation, he turned to the man who was holding the shotgun.

"These two men," he said, "are whiskey boat men. They have no more claim on this boat than you have."

CHAPTER XVIII.—A FORBIDDEN SUBJECT.

While Alex was having his troubles with the two gangs of outlaws, and while Jule and Case were asleep in a thicket at the cove, Clay was pushing his way through a heavy undergrowth in the direction of a shabby-looking farm house which stood in the center of a weed-grown tobacco field not far away.

As he approached the uncared for fence which surrounded the field, he heard horses stamping and champing at their bits in the woods not far away to his left.

At first he thought seriously of visiting the undergrowth on a tour of investigation, but finally decided that his actions might be misconstrued, so he passed on toward the house in the tobacco field.

It seemed to him that half a hundred dogs of all sizes and breeds leaped out as he advanced through the weeds toward the front door.

He was having his hands full with the dogs, fending them off, when the door opened and a woman made her appearance on the threshold.

"Down, you ornery purps!" she shouted in a voice that sounded more like that of a man than that of a woman. "Come right along in, stranger," she added. "I reckon they won't bite you up none."

Under the protection of the woman's voice and presence, Clay finally succeeded in making his way to the house.

"I'm sure ashamed of them ornery purps," the woman declared, striking at a large brindle dog with a mop stick. "Somehow I can't beat no manners into 'em!"

"They appear to be a fine lot of dogs!" Clay said, resolved to conciliate the woman if possible. "I'm used to Kentucky dogs, so I was not at all afraid of them."

"What mought be your business, stranger?" the woman asked then.

"Well," Clay answered, "I'm looking for something to eat."

"Sho'!" answered the woman. "A nice, likely lookin' lad like you goin' around hungry! I'd be glad to give you a set-down of flapjacks and coffee. Come right in."

"That would help some!" laughed Clay. "But what I want is provisions to carry away to my chums—eggs, chickens or anything of that sort you may have to sell."

"And where mought your chums be?" asked the woman, a little suspiciously as Clay thought.

"We came down the river in a motor boat," the boy replied, "and I left the boys in a cove some distance from here."

"I wonder, now," the woman queried, "whether you might have been on the river last night."

Clay replied in the affirmative.

"Well," the woman went on, "I've been waiting all morning for news from the river. My men went out last night at dusk and haven't returned."

"There were horsemen along the river last night," Clay suggested.

"That would be them."

"And I heard horses champing their bits just as I came up to the fence," Clay went on.

"Sho'!" answered the woman. "My men always have fresh hosses near the house. What did you hear on the river last night?" she added.

"It seemed rather quiet," Clay replied, "except that a whiskey steamer got wrecked some distance up."

"That's too bad, now!" declared the woman.

"There's one thing peculiar I noticed about the river last night," Clay went on, "and that was something which looked to me like a signal. We saw three blue lights resting on the surface of the water. Then there came an explosion and they disappeared."

The woman almost staggered back in the doorway. Her ruddy face became slightly pale, and Clay saw that the work-worn hands were trembling.

Clay sprang to a pail of water which stood near, dipped up a liberal supply in a gourd which hung on a wall, and approached the woman with it in his hand.

"Sho', now!" the woman almost gasped, placing her hands at her sides, "here I be havin' another spell with my heart. Seems like I was always havin' trouble with that pesky organ."

Clay did not believe the explanation given by the woman for her sudden fright. He had no doubt that the mention of the mysterious three blue lights had led to this alleged heart failure.

"I'll shore be better in a minute," the woman said, dropping into a home-made chair which stood just inside the house. "What was it you said about the three blue lights? I was took sudden just as you began speaking of them."

Clay repeated what he had said regarding the mysterious lights, watching the woman closely every second. She did not again show sign of emotion of any kind.

"Why," the woman said directly, "them's the ghost lights that are often seen on the Ohio. The steamboat *Mary Ann* went down with a dancing party on board ten years ago, and ever since then the lights have been seen on the river."

"But the *Mary Ann* went down just off Wolf Creek," Clay suggested.

"There is a story," the woman began in a hushed voice, "that the lights show every year about the time the boat went down, at the exact place where she sunk. And then, again," she continued, "they do say that wherever a body from the *Mary Ann* remains unburied at the bottom of the river the three blue lights show at least once a year."

"So they really are ghost lights?" asked Clay.

"Why, stranger," the woman continued, "boats have been pushed directly into them lights as they floated on the surface of the river, and they have burned right on after being submerged! Them explosions have been heard time and time again, and nothing has been found which could have produced them. We people along the river are mighty skeery of them ghost lights."

"I have heard that they bring disaster," Clay suggested.

"They sure do!" replied the woman. "But come in," she went on, "here I've been talkin' like a

foolish old gossip, and you standing hungry in the doorway. Come in and sit down."

Clay took the proffered chair but he was not thinking of the breakfast being prepared for him.

He was thinking, instead, of the sudden panic into which the old woman had fallen at the mention of the three blue lights. He saw now that there was some significance to the signal.

He came to understand, sitting there watching the still troubled face of the woman, that the three blue lights indicated some desperate action on the part of the river people—some desperate action which took the men away from their homes and left the women anxious and afraid. He saw that the woman in trying to deceive him by her words was still telling the story of some terrible situation by her voice and manner. He wondered but could reach no conclusion.

The boy was supplied with a bountiful breakfast of corn pancakes, fried eggs and coffee, and then he opened negotiations with his hostess for a supply of provisions for the *Rambler*. The woman looked distressed and answered his inquiries with downcast eyes.

"I'm sure sorry," she said, "but we had a lot of friends here to dinner yesterday, and they eat about everything in the house. Them eggs you've just et were laid this morning."

"I'm sorry, too," Clay replied, "but if you haven't got provisions, you can't sell them. Perhaps I can find a supply at some near-by farm house. How far is it to the nearest one?"

"It is a long way through the thicket," the woman answered, "and I wouldn't advise no boy like you to be wandering in the woods in this vicinity right now. It ain't safe!"

"Why, there ought not to be anything to be afraid of!" Clay suggested.

"You don't know this region as well as I do, boy!" the woman replied. "These folks that come up from the river are mighty bad sometimes, and I've known people that didn't live on the river to do desperate, bad things occasionally."

Clay sorely puzzled, looked the woman frankly in the face and asked:

"Do you imagine trouble because the three blue lights showed on the river last night?"

"Well," was the reply, "they surly do bring trouble."

"In what way?" insisted Clay.

"Oh, there's wrecks, and burnings, and shooting, and all manner of things going on, somehow, after them three blue lights show."

"Then perhaps I'd better be getting back to the river!" Clay suggested.

"I wouldn't leave no boat that was worth ready money long alone along the Ohio river at this time of year," the woman answered. "And let me tell you another thing," she went on. "If you see three blue lights, keep away from them! Don't go near where they are, and get out of the vicinity of them as fast as you can."

"We're not afraid of ghosts!" laughed Clay.

"I can't say more!" the woman continued. "I don't know but I've said too much now. I hope you'll take an old woman's advice and keep out of trouble. Where might you boys be from, now?"

"Chicago," replied Clay.

"Sho', now!" exclaimed the old woman. "I've never seen any one from Chicago before. "I've heard of it often, though. Must be a right pert place. Some one told me it was almost as big as Paducah."

"Yes," Clay replied, "Chicago is some city. Will you accept pay for my breakfast?" he continued.

"You're only a boy," the woman replied, "and so don't know any better than to offer a Kintucky woman pay for a feed. But I wouldn't do that any more if I were you."

Thanking the woman from the bottom of his heart for her hospitality and her kindly advice, the boy started away in the direction of the river.

On his return he took care to pass through that portion of the thicket where he had heard the horses on his way in. He found three remarkably fine-looking animals, all saddled and bridled, standing in the thicket. As he stepped toward one of them, a boy, certainly not more than twelve years of age, leaped at him.

"What you doing here?" the youth demanded.

"I have just come from the house," Clay replied. "Your mother gave me a fine breakfast."

"Did she, now?" asked the boy suspiciously.

"She certainly did," answered Clay resolved to continue the conversation with the lad until he learned something more concerning the three blue lights. The boy dropped his hostile attitude at once.

"I was going on to other houses in search of provisions," Clay went on, "but your mother advised me that it wouldn't be safe."

"It shore ain't safe!" the boy replied.

"She told me," Clay resumed, "that it was never safe in this section when three blue lights burned on the river."

"Did she, now?" asked the boy. "And did you-all see the three blue lights?"

"Twice," answered Clay. "Last night and the night before—once opposite Wolf Creek and once in the lagoon at that odd-shaped island just up the stream."

Clay thought that the boy shivered a little in his ragged clothes.

"What is all this about the three blue lights?" he asked in a moment.

The boy shook his head gravely.

"We-uns ain't allowed to talk about the three blue lights," he answered.

"You think they are ghost lights, eh?" asked Clay.

"We-uns ain't allowed to talk about the three blue lights," repeated the boy. "We never mention them."

Seeing that further conversation with the boy was likely to prove without result, Clay again turned to face in the direction of the river.

"I wish I knew," he mused, as he pushed his way through tangled thickets and descended and ascended rocky slopes, "I wish I knew exactly why that woman came near fainting when I mentioned the three blue lights."

"I have an impression," he went on, "that there's some feud coming to life. In the first place, I

don't believe the story told at the stranded coal barges last night.

"Those men never sought the river with the intentions of destroying that steamer. They wouldn't have brought their horses along if that had been their object.

"The horses, of course, might have been used in the way of transportation to the river, but, at the same time, men out on such a mission would not care to be seen riding so openly through the country."

It is needless to say that the boy did not believe one word of the story told him by the woman who had given him his breakfast. He was too hard-headed to believe in ghosts or supernatural demonstrations of any sort.

He knew however, that there must be some reason for the display of the lights, and knew that no little ingenuity had been shown in the placing and extinguishing of them. So studying over the problem, the boy finally came to the little cove where he had left Case and Jule.

Captain Joe fawned about him as he advanced, but when he approached the thicket where the boys had been preparing their rough beds, he saw that they were not there. He lost no time in making a close examination of the ground, both at the landing and at the entrance to the thicket.

What he saw set his heart to bounding excitedly: At both points there many indications of a desperate struggle.

Had he known the plight in which Alex found himself at that moment, Clay would have been doubly alarmed.

"What's that you say?" thundered one of the men from the steamer, as Alex explained to the houseboat men that neither party had any interest whatever in the *Rambler*.

"You'd better keep truth on your side, young man!" the other whiskey boat man put in.

"That's right," Alex declared, dodging away from one of the men who made an attempt to seize him. "That's right! These whiskey boat men never saw this craft until last night. We rammed their steamer because they tried to block us in a lagoon, and I hope we sunk her."

"You did all of that!" one of the others replied.

"According to the boy's statement," Mose cut in, "you fellows have no right on this boat at all, so I'd advise you to make yourself skurce."

The recent arrivals saw that they were not making good in their bluff to the houseboat men and so resorted to sterner measures.

Quick as a flash one of them seized the muzzle of the rusty old shotgun, drew it away from the clumsy hands holding it, and dropped the weapon into the river. Almost at the same instant, two automatic revolvers flashed out of the hip pockets of the outlaws.

"Now," the man who had been doing most of the talking thundered, "you river thieves get off this boat!"

"We will when we get pay for our net!"

"You never owned a net!" shouted the other. "You never had the price of a dozen fish hooks at one time, say nothing about a net!"

"Anyway," Mose insisted, "I brought you over to this boat and kept the boy from running away before you got here."

"Now, you're talking sense," the outlaw sneered. "Throw him a couple of dollars, Chet," he added.

The fellow's companion tossed two silver dollars scornfully down on the deck and turned to Alex.

"You get into the cabin," he said, "and stay there. We'll settle with you later on."

Alex had no idea of remaining on board the *Rambler* after it had passed into the possession of the outlaws. He knew that the desire for revenge on their part might lead to murder. He had no fear of being turned, over to the officers of the law, for the outlaws were in no position to make charges against others. He stepped into the cabin as requested and closed the door after him.

"Now, Teddy Bear," he said, "you and I have got to jump away from this darling old boat, and we've got to do it right soon."

Teddy, awakened from a sound sleep, scratched his nose with a soft paw and replied in the most polite of bear talk that he would do whatever Alex thought best.

The men who belonged on the houseboat were by this time off the deck of the *Rambler*. The outlaws, however, were watching the boy very closely. They laughed when they saw him talking with the bear.

"That's a cute pet you have there!" one of the men exclaimed, speaking through the broken panel of the door.

"It is indeed," Alex answered cheerfully. "Teddy Bear is a pretty good friend. We've had him a long time."

"What're you going to do with him?" asked the outlaw.

"Take him back to Chicago with us."

The outlaws laughed and regarded the boy and the bear with humorous faces. Alex sat down and watched them curiously.

"I don't see you getting back to Chicago right away," one of them finally said. "That is, not to-day nor to-morrow."

"Oh, we're going down to Cairo first!" Alex grinned.

The two outlaws turned away with a laugh, and as soon as their backs were in view Alex opened the swinging sash of the rear window and motioned for Teddy to leap out.

The bear cub followed instructions, and landed lightly on the after deck. In an instant Alex was through the window and the two sprang into the water and made for the shore.

The outlaws would doubtless have remained unconscious of the escape until the boy and his companion had reached the thicket only that the men on the houseboat shouted and pointed at the bear.

"Look at the menagerie!" one of them cried.

This brought the outlaws to the shore-side of the boat, and directly several harmless bullets whizzed close to the two swimmers.

"Go it, boy! Go it, bear!" was shouted from the houseboat.

The three men already disgruntled by the manner in which they had been treated by the outlaws, were now inclined to support Alex and the bear in their efforts to escape.

While the men on the *Rambler* sent badly aimed bullets after the two in the water, the men on the houseboat hurled billets of wood and whatever else they could lay their hands on at the outlaws.

This action on their part, while doing no physical harm whatever, had the effect of directing the attention of the outlaws from the boy and the bear to the three men. When Alex and Teddy disappeared in the thicket on the east side of the little creek, immediately in the rear of the houseboat, the outlaws were still firing, and the others were still pitching wood and pieces of coal over the deck of the motor boat.

After a very long run upstream, out, perhaps fifty yards from the water's edge, the boy and the bear threw themselves down on the moss beneath a forest tree and panted out congratulations to each other on their escape.

"Teddy," almost whimpered Alex. "We've gone and lost the *Rambler*!"

The bear looked very grave indeed.

"We've gone and lost the *Rambler*!" Alex went on, "and have nothing to show for it at all! I set

out to catch a fish, and lost the boat!"

Teddy rubbed his soft muzzle against Alex's, cheek and looked sympathetic. He seemed to understand every word said.

"And now, bear," the boy went on, "we've got to walk five or ten miles up this bank of the river and swim across. I guess the boys must be pretty near a dozen miles away."

Teddy, while looking sympathetic, thrust his muzzle into Alex's, pocket looking for crackers.

"Je—rusalem!" exclaimed Alex. "I wish I had some, Teddy. I never was so empty in my life!"

After a short rest, the boy arose and the two proceeded on their difficult journey. Now and then they came to weedy fields where corn had been grown and where great shocks of stalks still stood, but for the most part their way lay through a narrow slice of forest which fringed the river. Alex took occasion, after a time, to investigate some of the corn shocks but found no ears.

"Pretty soon," the boy mused, "I'll be hungry enough to eat the stalks. And the boys must be hungry, too," he went on, "but all the provisions we had are on board the *Rambler*. I don't know what they'll say to me when I go back and explain what happened."

After a long, long walk, during which it seemed to the boy that he had covered at least a score of miles, he discerned on the opposite bank of the river the little cove in which the *Rambler* had been moored that morning. Although he strained his eyes hoping to see the familiar figures of his chums, he could see no motion whatever.

"I guess they've got starved out and gone away," the boy complained. "I suppose when I get over there, there'll be only a burned-out camp-fire and nothing to eat. The next time I go out fishing for catfish, I won't go. It always brings bad luck."

Realizing that he might have to swim across the whole width of the river, the boy kept on upstream knowing that it would be better to have the current in his favor when he entered the water.

While he sat looking across the stream, several river craft passed, some going up and some going down. Once he thought of calling to a small motor boat and asking the occupants to ferry him across the river. But he soon changed his mind not knowing what sort of people he would be likely to find in any of the river boats.

While the boy stood near the bank of the river looking out, Teddy, as usual, was nosing about looking for something to eat. The boy had hardly noticed the absence of the bear when a succession of long shrill squealings came from a thicket not far distant.

"There!" the boy mused, starting away on a run. "Teddy has gone and scared the life out of some one."

"Fo' de Lawd's sake! Fo' de Lawd's sake!"

The voice died away, and was succeeded by a commotion in the bushes just ahead of the running boy.

The next moment a little short, fat, dumpy negro with a fringe of gray hair running around an otherwise bald head, came into view, trying to run very fast, but succeeding only in stumbling over every obstruction which came in his way, and landing flat on his back with his heels high up in the air. The sight was indeed a comical one.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake! Fo' de Lawd's sake!" repeated the negro, his eyes rolling in his head like great white marbles.

Teddy, evidently unconscious of the sensation he was creating, came dashing after the fallen darkey, and at once assumed a boxing attitude.

"Take him away! Take him away!" roared the negro. "Ah's done bein' eat up! Take de b'ar away, take him away!"

Instead of taking the bear away, Alex, hungry and tired as he was, threw himself down on the grass and roared with laughter.

"Ah's done bein' eat up!" shouted the negro although Teddy was at least two yards away.

"He won't hurt you," Alex said as soon as he could control his voice. "Teddy is a tame bear."

"Ah never did take to bears!" the negro shouted rolling his fat body farther away. "Ah don' see no good in b'ars."

After some persuasion the boy induced the negro to come nearer. This he did with fear and trembling, and ever with a watchful eye on the playful cub.

"What's your name?" asked Alex.

"Uncle Zeke," was the reply.

"Do you live here?" was the next question.

"Ah libs way up de ribber," was the guarded reply.

"Then you must have come down in a boat?" asked the boy.

"Ah sure did!" answered the negro.

"Well," Alex said then, "we want to get over to the other side of the river. Will you take us across?"

The negro backed away from the bear again and seemed to be about to take to his heels. He turned back in a moment, however, as if anxious to be friendly with the boy and declared:

"Ah nebber did cotton to no b'ar!"

"Oh, he won't hurt you," the boy explained, "he's just a tame cub. We've had him ever since he was as big as a kitten. Row us across to that little cove over there and I'll give you a dollar."

Uncle Zeke fingered his bald pate and entered into negotiations for the job, still with his eyes fixed suspiciously on Teddy.

"Ah'll done row you over for a dollar," he said.

"But the bear's got to go," Alex insisted.

"Dat'll be anudder dollar," insisted Uncle Zeke.

"All right," Alex laughed, "where's your boat?"

Delighted with having made so good a bargain, Uncle Zeke led the way to the river bank not far away and pointed out a fair-sized rowboat rocking in the water.

"Why!" Alex exclaimed excitedly. "Where did you get that boat?"

"Ah bought it," replied the negro.

The boat was the one belonging to the *Rambler*!

It had been left, it will be remembered, on the Kentucky shore of the river some distance above Wolf Creek. The boys who had landed in search of gasoline and spark plugs had left it hidden in a thicket. During their absence, the *Rambler* had made her way downstream for some distance, and so the rowboat had not been recovered. It looked familiar to Alex now.

"Where did you buy it?" asked the boy.

"Niggerman sold me dat boat," answered the other.

"All right," Alex said. "Take us across and I'll give you the two dollars."

He had no intention of leaving the *Rambler's* boat in the possession of the negro, but he thought it advisable not to make any claim to the boat until he had reached the other side of the river.

With Teddy sitting at the very stern of the boat as far as possible from the rower, the two were ferried across, striking the bank a few paces above the east shore of the cove.

"Now," Alex said as he stepped ashore, "come on over to the camp and I'll give you your money." Uncle Zeke eyed the bear critically.

"Ah nebber did cotton to no b'ar!" he said.

"Well," Alex went on, "you'll have to come over to the camp or I can't give you your money." Very reluctantly the fat, old negro waddled over to the heap of embers which was all that remained of the fire the boys had built early that morning. Alex's wandering attention was brought back to the negro directly by a short, sharp cry of alarm.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake!" he cried. "Fo' de Lawd's sake!"

CHAPTER XX.—THE PIRATES' NEST.

Alex sprang to his feet just as Captain Joe came dashing up to the negro, looking fierce enough to consume him at one bite.

If there had been any extra hair at the top of the old negro's pate it must have stood horizontal at that moment, for Teddy shambled up to the bulldog and began a series of boxing antics such as the old fellow had never witnessed before.

"Gimme mah two dollahs!" he finally managed to shout. "Gimme mah two dollahs, and Ah'll done go 'way!"

Before Alex could reply, Clay came into the little opening and stood gazing about with wondering eyes.

"Did you see Case and Jule?" was the first question he asked of Alex.

The boy shook his head silently.

"I left them here!" he said.

Clay stepped toward the bank and looked out over the cove.

"Where is the *Rambler*?" he asked, not without anxiety in his voice.

"The pirates got her!" was Alex's reply, and there were actually tears in his eyes as he spoke.

During this short conversation between the two boys, Uncle Zeke had stood, trembling, by the heap of embers, gazing from boy to boy and from bear to dog.

"Ah nebber did cotton to no bulldog!" he said.

"Where did you get that?" asked Clay, forgetting for a moment what Alex's reply meant to the party.

"That's Uncle Zeke," answered Alex with a grin. "He rowed Teddy and I across the river."

"Ah'm goin' to hab two dollahs!" put in the negro.

Clay again turned toward Alex, his manner showing great excitement.

"Tell me about it!" he said kindly.

Alex told the story, already well known to the reader, in as few words as possible. Clay did not interrupt him, and at the close stood looking out on the river with a very grave face.

"We've got to get her back!" Alex shouted in a moment. "We've just got to get the *Rambler* back!"

"Of course," Clay said stubbornly, "of course! I was only thinking how. There surely must be some way."

"Where are Case and Jule?" Alex now asked.

"I don't know!" was the reply. "I went away to look up something to eat, and when I came back, they were not here."

"They probably went after something to eat, too!" Alex suggested.

"No," Clay went on, "I was to bring back provisions, if I succeeded in finding any. When I returned, Captain Joe was here, but they were gone."

"That's strange!" Alex muttered. "I don't see why they should leave camp when they were expecting you to bring them something to eat."

"I don't think they left the camp voluntarily," Clay continued. "If you'll look at the head of the cove, and at the side of the thicket where they were preparing their beds, you'll see evidences of a struggle."

"I'll tell you what it is," Alex began, "those pirates from the steamer we sunk got down here on that coal tow and swam ashore."

"That is very likely!" Clay replied. "We know, at least, that two of them were on the coal tow."

"Yes, sir," the boy went on, "they saw the fire here, and recognized the *Rambler* lying just below the barges, and swam ashore to punish us for ramming their old whiskey boat."

"There may be something in that," Clay returned.

"And, then, after the *Rambler* was crowded downstream, and after you went away to get something to eat, they attacked the two boys and lugged them away. I wish we'd killed them all."

"You're the bloodthirsty little fellow this morning!" Clay smiled.

"I don't care!" Alex responded. "Just think of our motor boat, with all the provisions and ammunition on board, falling into the hands of those outlaws! I'll just tell you right now, Clay," he went on, flushing with anger, "if I'd had a stick of dynamite handy, I'd have set the fuse on fire before I crawled out of the cabin window."

"Then I'm glad you didn't have any dynamite handy!" smiled Clay.

Uncle Zeke, who had been standing motionless in mortal terror of the dog and the bear, now stepped forward.

"Ah done hear what you-all said," he remarked.

"Of course," Clay answered, "have you any idea in your head at all which points to the recovery of our motor boat?"

"Ah nebber done cotton to dem pirates," said the negro.

"Well, then, show us how to get our boat back!" Alex laughed.

"Ah suah will," replied the negro. "Dem pirates," he continued, "has a nes' nex' de big bend Ah been dere many a time. You go more 'n forty miles aroun' de ben' an' you go ten miles across."

"Aw!" laughed Alex. "There isn't any such bend on the Ohio river in this vicinity. There's a bend below here that makes a circuit of about ten or twelve miles to get one mile downstream."

"Ah don' know 'bout no miles," Uncle Zeke answered. "Ah know 'bout dat pirate's nes' at de horseshoe ben'."

"Can you get across the neck in a rowboat?" asked Clay.

"Ah suah can," was the reply.

"You didn't know, did you, that the boat you have is one that belonged to our motor boat? We lost it a ways up the river."

"Ah done gib two yaller-legged hens for dat boat," insisted Uncle Zeke. "Ah buy it of a black nigger."

“Well, I suppose it was abandoned property, anyway,” Clay said, “so we’ll pay you for it if we find that we need it again.”

Left alone in the thicket at the head of the cove, Case and Jule waited for some time for the appearance of Captain Joe. While not actually afraid of any attack upon themselves in that quiet place, they much preferred leaving the bulldog on watch when they went to sleep.

"Captain Joe ought to be here before long," Case observed searching the thickets with his eyes in the hope of discerning the bulky form of the dog. "It is a rare thing for him to go away alone, but when he has done so in the past he soon returns."

"I wish he'd come back right now," Jule replied, "I'm so sleepy I couldn't eat a breakfast if we had one. Look here, Case," he went on, "why is it that we always have such infernal bad luck when we start out on a river trip? Its been night-and-day trouble ever since we left Pittsburgh."

"Yes," Case replied, "and it was night-and-day trouble on the Amazon, and on the Columbia, and on the Colorado, and on the Mississippi, and on the St. Lawrence. I'll tell you what I think we ought to do," he continued with a grin, "we ought to take an aeroplane along so we could mount up into the blue sky when things got mixed."

"I wouldn't mind being several miles up in the blue sky right now," Jule laughed, "if I could find a nice soft cloud to sleep on. They look like feather beds, don't they?" he asked, pointing to wandering clouds in the sky some of them tipped with the early sunlight.

"They certainly do," answered Case, "but I'm afraid you wouldn't find them very soft or very dry. In fact, you'd fall right through and probably tumble into the river. Did it ever occur to you," he went on, "that a cloud is a great big bluff? It looks solid and handsome, and all that, from the surface of the earth, but it's nothing but a great big fog."

"I never lost much time considering clouds, Jule replied. "Suppose you go out into the woods and see if you can't find Captain Joe."

"No use to look for him," Case replied, "if he's got the trail of a rabbit, he'll run from now until next week at two o'clock."

"Then let's go to sleep," Jule proposed. "We can lie right down here in the thicket, and if anyone should come poking around, they wouldn't be able to see us. We didn't have any sleep last night at all, you know."

"I don't know what's the matter with the bunch, anyway," Case said, rather crossly. "Clay goes off to get breakfast and doesn't come back, and Alex goes out to get fish and gets chased off by a coal tow, and Captain Joe runs away and doesn't return!"

"Alex ought to be here by this time," Jule complained. "There's plenty to eat on board the *Rambler*, so if Clay doesn't find any provisions we won't go hungry. Everything seems to be going wrong."

"Moved and supported that we go to sleep," Case replied. "The ayes have it! Motion prevails! You just watch now and see me flop down here in the bushes. I'm going to sleep a week!"

"All right!" Jule answered with a yawn. "When it comes to sleeping, you haven't got anything on me."

"And when we wake up," Case continued, "we'll see the *Rambler* riding out there in the cove, with Alex cooking the catfish a la Indian, and Clay exhibiting the eggs and milk he bought at some romantic farm house."

"Go to sleep and dream all that!" Jule snorted.

The boys lay down on the beds of leaves which they had prepared in the undergrowth and were soon sound asleep. After all, they had nothing serious to worry over, for they both believed that a situation something like that forecast by Case would present itself when they awoke.

The sun rising over the river cast long lances of light into the thicket where they lay. The cool breeze of the morning stirred the leaves about them like a lullaby. The birds darted and sang in the sweet air. The scene was as peaceful and pastoral as one might well imagine.

But only for a time. Directly the heavy tramp of horses was heard, the rattling of rings and the champing of bits.

The riders, a score or more, advanced through the woods to the cove and halted on the east shore. There they tied their horses to trees and threw themselves upon the ground. They were sturdy men, clean-limbed, alert, with fierce eyes and determined faces.

All unconscious of the presence of the riders, the boys slept on. Presently a lean hound belonging to the company ran sniffing and snarling around to the thicket where Case and Jule lay. There he sat up such a baying as might have awakened the Seven Sleepers.

The two boys sleepily rubbed their eyes and looked about. It seemed to them at first that Captain Joe had returned, but they soon saw the difference between the lean hound and the white bulldog.

"What's got into your dog, Peck?" one of the men asked.

"He's found something in the bushes."

"The consarned brute is always finding something in the bushes, when we want to keep under cover!" snarled the other man.

"Look here, Hart," Peck said sternly, "you let the dog alone. He's done us many a good turn in his time, and he's likely to do more. I wasn't thinking about the dog at all," Peck went on. "Just take a couple of sniffs at the air and see if you can locate that wood fire."

"There surely is a fire hereabouts!" Hart answered in a conciliating tone. "Perhaps there are tramps here and the dog has come and caught them. If so, we'll send them about their business."

The two men arose, passed around the cove and soon came to the thicket where Case and Jule were struggling to their feet rubbing their eyes sleepily as they did so.

"Hello here!" Hart exclaimed. "This seems to be quite a find."

The two boys, now thoroughly awake, reached for their automatics as they gained their feet. The men's faces glared down upon them sinister and suspicious.

They glanced eagerly about hoping to see the *Rambler* riding in the cove but, as the reader understands, the motor boat was not there. Clay had not returned and the fire built for the purpose

of cooking the fish had burned down to embers.

"None of that, boys!" Peck threatened as Case and Jule reached their hands back to their hip pockets. "You don't have to draw any guns on us."

"If you try it," Hart cut in angrily, "you'll get a taste of good birch rods. We have no time to fool with boys."

By this time the men lounging on the bank of the cove were on their feet, taking note of what was going on near the fire. Seeing their companions talking with two boys who seemed to them to be tramps, they dropped back to the ground again without interest.

A tall, rather pleasant looking man however soon left the group and approached the place where the boys were standing.

"What seems to be the trouble, Peck," he asked as he drew near.

"Well, Ball," Peck answered, "we seem to have come upon two boy tramps. They're harmless enough, I guess."

"Where are you going, boys?" Ball asked.

"Waiting for our chums to come back with the boat," answered Case.

"So you've got a boat have you?" Hart exclaimed.

At the mention of a boat, Ball leaned forward and eyed the boys critically, a suspicious gleam in his eyes.

"Where is the boat now?" he asked.

"Down the river," was the reply.

"You see," Jule went on, helping Case to answer the question, "one of the boys went out to catch a fish and a coal tow chased him down. He'll be back directly. Ought to be here now."

"What kind of a boat is it?" asked Ball.

"Motor boat," replied Case.

Ball beckoned Peck and Hall a short distance away and the three stood for some moments in earnest conversation.

"Oh, I don't believe there's anything wrong with the boys," Peck was heard to say. "No use to trouble them."

"We can't afford to take any chances," Hart replied. "Just where did you see that motor boat?" he went on turning to Peck.

"Some distance up the river," was the reply. "I went out to a bar where several coal barges had stranded to see if the pirates had had anything to do with the trouble, and there I saw a motor boat."

"Did you talk with the boys?" Peck asked.

"Yes," Peck answered, "I talked with the boys, and they talked straight enough, but I didn't like their suspicious actions. They couldn't give any account of themselves, except that they were going down the river just for the fun of the thing. Besides, I'm certain they heard the men talking and the horses fussing on the bank. I saw them looking that way several times. I'm rather afraid of them!"

"Did they ask you a lot of questions?" demanded Hart.

"Why," was the reply, "I told them we were out after the river pirates, and they seemed satisfied with that."

"It seems to me," Hart insisted, "that we ought not to turn these boys loose. I just believe they're spies sent here by our enemies. It can't do any harm to take charge of them for a little while, anyway."

"Still, this motor boat," Peck suggested, "is a mighty fine craft, and these boys appear to me to belong to wealthy families. The boat will soon be back here, if what the boys say is true, and then inquiries will be made, and the first thing we know the District Attorney will have every one of our names before the grand jury."

"You may be right," Hart said reluctantly, "and if I thought the boys would go on about their business as soon as the boat returns, I'd be in favor of letting them alone, but I don't believe they will. They'll just sneak and pry around here until they get us into trouble."

"Perhaps we'd better put the whole matter up to the others," suggested Ball, "then, whatever action is taken, we can't be blamed."

"Now see here, fellows," Peck exclaimed, "there are quite a number of reckless fellows in that company over there, and I'm afraid they wouldn't take into consideration the fact that they are dealing with little boys. Now I'll tell you what I propose."

"If you think best, I'll take the boys up to the house and leave them there with the old woman. Then we'll scatter, and by the time the boys get back with their friends, the country will be as peaceful as a stony farm in Massachusetts."

"That will be all right," Hart agreed, "provided some of us remain here and take charge of the other boys when they return."

"Yes, I think that advisable," Peck admitted. "Now, I'll tell you what you do, Ball, and perhaps you'd better go with him, Hart—you take these boys over to my place and leave them there with instructions to the old lady to keep them safe and sound until I get back. While you're gone. I'll dismiss the company and stay on watch here."

"That's a good idea!" Ball declared. "We don't mean any harm to these boys, but we certainly must keep track of them until they get out of the country. If their friends come back here and seem to be all right, we'll pack them all off in their own boat, and wish them good luck on their trip down the river. We can't be too careful, you know."

The plan mapped out in this conversation was carried out. Case and Jule were marched to the farm house where Clay had taken his breakfast and locked up in a room guarded by the motherly old lady who had been so kind to Clay. Dismayed but not disheartened at the sudden change of fortune, the boys sat down on rude chairs in their not very secure prison and regarded each other with humorous glances.

"And when we wake up," Jule mocked, "we'll see the *Rambler* riding in the cove and Alex cooking

a catfish a la Indian at the fire! If I couldn't get things any straighter than you can, Case, I'd certainly go out of the prophet business! As a forecaster of future events, you're about as big a frost as the weather department of the United States Government! What does all this mean, anyway?"

"You can search me," Case answered a little sourly. "I don't know whether we're under arrest, or whether we've been snatched up by a choice collection of river pirates, or stored away for ransom by whitecaps."

"The leading impression in my mind, if you want to know," Jule announced, "isn't in my mind at all; it's in my stomach!"

"You're always hungry!" laughed Case.

"Hungry!" repeated Jule. "The word hunger doesn't express it. I wonder if the old lady will give us something to eat."

"And indeed I will!" cried a feminine voice from the other side of the door. "Sure I will, boys! Somehow it seems to be raining boys on this 'tarnal old farm this morning!"

"Let us out," Clay suggested, "and we'll help you get something to eat. You'll want water or wood to be brought, or something of that kind. We won't run away."

"I reckon my old batter pail will be empty if any more hungry lads come up from the river," Mrs. Peck went on, opening the door.

"Did you have one hungry boy here this morning?" asked Case.

Mrs. Peck replied in the affirmative, and Case and Jule exchanged significant glances. They understood very well who that hungry boy was, and, in answer to questions asked of the friendly old woman, were soon in possession of all the facts connected with Clay's visit to the place and return to the river.

And while the boys were eating a generous breakfast prepared by their kind-hearted jailor, Alex, Clay and Uncle Zeke were discussing the possibility of reaching the *Rambler* by the cut-off across Horseshoe bend.

While they talked and planned two pair of black, suspicious eyes were gazing out at them from the undergrowth on the east side of the cove, and the dog was sniffing suspiciously in that direction.

While the two boys laid their plans by the embers of the camp-fire, Peck and his companion, the watchers, moved stealthily over in their direction and came within sound of their voices.

"Now, Uncle Zeke," they heard Alex say, "if you can get us through the cut-off and bring us out to where the pirates have their 'nest', as you call it, we'll give you ten dollars, and if we succeed in getting the *Rambler* away from them, we'll take you down the river with us and get you a good job up north."

"Ah'd hab to work up norf!" Uncle Zeke answered with a grin.

"You certainly would," Clay laughed.

"Ah nebber did cotton to no work!" the negro replied.

"Well, then," Alex promised, "if we get the boat, we'll give you twenty-five dollars. Now, you'll do your best to get us through, won't you? We've just got to get that craft and slide out of this country."

"That's about what I thought!" Peck whispered to his companion. "All the boys want is to get their boat back and get out of the country."

"What was it that kid said about pirates?" asked the other.

"Perhaps the pirates stole their boat," suggested Peck.

"If we keep still, we'll soon find out, probably."

"Before we leave this country," Clay said in a moment, "we ought to get even with those pirates in some way. They tried to shut us into the lagoon so they could get possession of the boat, and we got away from them. Now they've actually captured the *Rambler*, and may do a lot of harm to the motors before we can get it back. I don't believe they know how to run a boat like the *Rambler*!"

"There!" Peck exclaimed, nudging his companion in the side. "Them pesky pirates are to blame for the boys being here. Now if these boys have seen anything that might make us trouble, these river robbers are to blame for it. I wish we hadn't sent the two kids we found here up to the house. They are having troubles enough of their own."

"Well," Peck's companion observed, "I don't see any necessity for us to remain here after this. We've got to see a lot of the boys to-day, after we find out exactly what is to be done to-night, and so we may as well go on about our business."

Peck hesitated for a long time before he replied.

"The boys," he said then, "seem to be bribing the old nigger to show them the way through the cut-off."

"That's the way I get it."

"And the old coon's been telling them that the pirates have a rendezvous somewhere near the end of the cut-off. Is that the way you understand it?"

"That's what the boy said," was the answer. "Anyway, they're expecting the nigger to take them to the pirates' rendezvous and help them get their boat back."

"Then," Peck continued, "if you're satisfied that it's the right thing to do, I'll go back to the house, turn the other boys loose, and tell them where they can find their friends."

"That'll be all right so far as I'm concerned."

Captain Joe ran inquisitively toward the thicket as the men moved away, but made no demonstration, as the intruders were not approaching the fire.

"Now," Alex said, "if we can persuade Uncle Zeke to bring in a large, long piece of firewood, or a stone from the river, or some edible thing of that sort. I'll have breakfast. If you can't find anything of that sort that I can digest, Uncle Zeke," he went on whimsically, "pass me one of the oars and I'll take a light lunch off that."

"Why," Clay laughed, "what's the matter with Uncle Zeke going out and getting a fish?"

"That may be all right," Alex replied. "But look here, Uncle Zeke," he went on, "if you get hold of a fish of the forty-mule-power variety, don't you ever try to pull him in! He'll drag you down the river, and there's a party of thieves in a houseboat down there who are waiting for some nice fat darkey to cook for their dinner."

"Ah nebber did cotton to no houseboat trash!" the negro exclaimed.

"Can you catch a fish for this starving boy?" demanded Clay.

"Ah suah can!" answered Uncle Zeke. "Dar's plenty ob fish in de ribber, but Ah hain't got no hook an' line."

"Can you find bait?" asked Alex.

"Worms and grubs!" replied the darker pointing to the bank of the river.

"Well," Clay informed him, "there are hooks and lines under the prow of the rowboat. You'll find all kinds of fishing outfit there, including a piece of a jointed bamboo rod. If I wasn't so nearly dead for want of sleep, I'd go and catch a fish myself!"

"That's the ticket!" cried Alex. "You crawl under there and go to sleep, and when Uncle Zeke and I come back from our fishing trip, you'll be somewhere up in the blue sky looking for Case and Jule."

"Mighty funny thing where those boys went to!" Clay suggested. "Do the pirates ever come over into this cove, Uncle Zeke?" he added.

The negro, being somewhat puzzled at the abrupt question, Clay explained to him that two of their chums had disappeared in a mysterious manner. After listening to the explanation, the old negro made a circuit of the cove, examining the turf closely as he passed along.

When he returned to the embers of the fire, what was left of his gray hair was standing almost on end notwithstanding its natural kinkiness. The terror he had felt at the sight of the bear was nothing to this.

"What is it, Uncle Zeke?" Alex asked.

"Night-riders!" replied the old darkey.

"You'll have to get a new dream book, Uncle Zeke!" Alex laughed. "Ten or fifteen years ago there

were night-riders, and all that sort of thing in Kentucky, but nothing of that kind goes now."

"Ah nebber did cotton to no night-riders!" exclaimed the negro.

"What makes you think night-riders have been here?" asked Clay.

"'Cause," answered the negro, "dey're gettin' mighty promiscuous lately. Ah'm feared ob dem night-riders."

"What did you see over there?" demanded Clay,

"Hoss tracks!" answered the negro.

The two boys looked at each other with understanding in their eyes.

"Do you remember the trampling we heard at the bar where the barges were stranded?" asked Alex.

"Yes," replied Clay, "and I remember, too, the horses tied in the thicket near the house where I had breakfast."

"Do you think the night-riders carried the boys away?" asked Alex.

"Ah sure do!" replied Uncle Zeke. "Mighty 'spicious people, dem night-riders! Ah nebber did cotton to 'em."

"Well," Alex suggested in a moment, "you go see if you can get a fish. I'll stay here with Clay and watch for night-riders. If they show up while you're gone. I'll pick out the fattest one and eat him for breakfast. I'm hungry enough to eat a night-rider, horse and all!"

Uncle Zeke disappeared in the direction of the boat with a grin on his black face, and in a few moments Alex had the satisfaction of seeing him haul a couple of good-sized perch from the river. The boy instantly darted into the thicket after dry wood, and before many minutes the old darkey was on shore with his catch.

"Now," Alex asked, "how am I ever going to get them cooked?"

"Why," Clay answered, "there's a small frying-pan in the bow locker of the boat. Don't you remember how we always kept a few provisions and cooking utensils in there in case of accident?"

"What kind of provisions?" shouted Alex, dancing about.

"Why, canned beans, and tomatoes, and chicken!" answered Clay.

"Je—rusalem, my happy home!" shouted Alex. "Do you mean to tell me that all that good eating has been in the boat all this time while my stomach has been growing to my back bone?"

He dashed off to the boat as he spoke, and soon returned with a beaming face, his arms piled high with tinned goods. He soon had some of the cans opened and before many minutes, the perch were sizzling in the frying-pan.

"Ah sure should know 'bout that chicken!" grinned Uncle Zeke as he watched the boys open a tin can.

Clay sat back and laughed heartily at the puzzled expression on the negro's face.

"If you'd only known about that chicken being there, you'd have found a place for it long before this, wouldn't you. Uncle Zeke?" he asked.

"Ah sure would!" replied the old darkey. "Ah sure done gettin' hungry right now! Yaller-legged chicken! Huh!"

"All right!" Clay suggested. "As soon as Alex gets the fish ready, we'll all have breakfast. I've had one good feed this morning, but I can stand another."

"Tell you what," the old darkey continued with his eyes fixed ravenously on the frying fish. "Ah don't go through no cut-off wid de sun up! Dat country's full of pesky pirates."

"Mother of Moses!" cried Alex. "Have we got to wait here until night? If we have, I'll spend the time eating."

"That might not be a bad idea!" Clay exclaimed. "Case and Jule may come back before long. If they really have been captured by the night-riders, they won't be held very long."

"We don't know that," Alex insisted. "The man we talked with up at the barges was probably a night-rider, and he talked fair enough, but if they suspect the boys of being spies, it will be a long time before they gain their liberty."

"Anyway," Clay suggested, "if we have to remain here until twilight, we can look about on the chance of finding the kids."

"Ah'm advisin' you boys not to do no lookin' about in dis here country!" Uncle Zeke exclaimed. "Mighty 'spicious people, dem night-riders!"

"That's exactly the idea, Alex!" Clay expressed himself. "The night-riders probably suspect that we are here as spies and that's why they have taken the boys away. Now there'll probably be something doing here before long, for the riders seem to be out in force."

"After they have accomplished the purpose of their gathering, they'll probably disband, and there'll be no more trouble with them until they get ready to burn down another tobacco warehouse, or beat up some defenseless grower, whose only crime is to want to get rid of his product."

While these events had been taking place at the landing, Case and Jule, very much to their surprise, had been released from surveillance at the farm house and advised to make their way back to the river.

"My old man declares there's no harm in you-ins," Mrs. Peck said, as she patted the boys on the shoulder in a motherly way and wished them good luck. "You'll probably find your friends at the cove," she said, "for our folks just returned from there, and the boys were waiting for you to show up. Only don't say a word about having been brought here at all. It will be better for you not to."

The boys agreed to this, and shot away at a double-quick pace toward the cove, anxious to meet their chums, and doubly anxious to be on the deck of the good old *Rambler* again. They were hardly outside the clearing in the middle of which the old farm house stood when a party of a dozen men came dashing across the weed-grown field and approached the old woman now standing in the doorway.

"Where are those boys?" the man who seemed to be the leader of the party demanded. "Bring them out here, quick!"

As he spoke, several members of the party flourished long beechen whips which had evidently been cut from the forest very recently.

"What do you-uns want of the boys?" asked the old lady mildly. "We'll explain that to them!" answered the leader, his face flushing with anger. "We don't have to be cross-examined by you."

"I sho' hope those boys hain't done no mischief," the woman replied.

"They're spies!" the leader shouted. "We've just found out that they're spies! The word came down the river! Where are they?"

"I'm sure sorry," Mrs. Peck answered, "but Ball done brought me word from my old man to turn the lads loose."

"Which way did they go?" demanded the leader. Mrs. Peck hesitated. She knew what her fate would be should she attempt to deceive these lawless night-riders, and should be detected. Her idea was to protect the boys as far as lay in her power, yet she did not want to render herself and family liable to the wrath of the riders.

"Sho', now," she said after a moment's silence, "them boys ducked out of the clearing somewhere west, and I was that stupid that I didn't see whether they kept straight on west or not."

"Oh, what's the use of talking with a woman?" demanded one of the riders. "The boys undoubtedly returned to the river. We'll find them there if we make haste."

"And when we do find them," the leader declared spitefully, "we'll give them a bit of instruction according to Doctor Birch. We have desperate work on hand for the next week, and we can't afford to have our plans frustrated by a few school-boys!"

The party dashed away at a gallop. The old lady saw them approach the forest with a sinking heart.

Before they reached the tumbled-down fence, however, she saw them wheel suddenly about and point with their whips to the south, where a mass of flame and smoke was roaring skyward.

Unmindful of the peril which they had so fortunately escaped, Case and Jule made their way through the forest in quick time and finally came to a point from which the camp at the head of the cove was to be seen. It is needless to say that the sight of their chums was more than pleasing.

At the moment of their approach, Alex was taking the fish from the fire, Clay was opening tinned goods, and Uncle Zeke stood mourning over the fact that he had not sooner discovered the presence of the yellow-legged chicken.

The boys dashed down to the fire with shouts of joy, and the reader may well understand that their welcome was a hearty one.

"Where's the *Rambler*?" Case asked of Alex after the greetings were over. "She ought to be put there in the cove."

"The pirates got her!" Alex answered briefly.

"Have you been to breakfast?" Clay cut in.

"Have we been to breakfast?" repeated Case,

"We've been captured, and fed, and released since we saw you. Do you know, boys," he added, dancing cautiously around, "that I've got an idea that we're mixing up with night-riders."

"We have just been informed of that fact by Uncle Zeke," Clay answered. "Where did you see night-riders?" he added.

"Just after you left," Case explained, "a company of men came here on horses. We heard them talking about our being spies. Then we were taken to a house back in the country and locked up. Then we were given a peach of a breakfast by the kindest old lady you ever saw and turned loose. Now what do you think of all that?"

"Night-riders!" exclaimed Alex. "Why do the riders ride, and why do the riders ride at night?" "You've come to the right shop for information," Jule replied with a grin. "Just before we left Chicago I was reading a book about night-riders. They ride because they can't get over the ground fast enough on foot, and they ride at night because they don't want any one to see them riding."

"That's all right!" chuckled Alex. "Now tell me what they ride for. In other words, what's the answer?"

"The night-riders want ten or twelve cents a pound for their tobacco, and the planters on the lower lands near the river are willing to sell theirs for five or six cents a pound, because they can raise more crops a year and because their land is easier tilled."

"And so they're getting up a combination in restraint of trade, eh?" laughed Alex. "That seems to be the proper thing to do."

"I don't know about that," Jule went on, "but they're trying to equalize prices by reducing the supply. Whenever these river planters get nice big warehouses packed full of the weed, the night-riders make their appearance in the dark of the moon and burn them down."

"This night-rider business was all right ten or fifteen years ago," Clay insisted, "but I don't believe there's anything doing in that line now."

"Then what are all these men out with their horses for?" demanded Jule.

"Yes, and why did they lug us off to a farm house, and lock us up until some one sent word that we wasn't spies?" Case demanded.

The boys now turned their attention to the old negro who stood on a little elevation at the back of the cove sniffing suspiciously at the air.

"Where did you get that coon?" asked Case.

"He brought our boat down the river to us," laughed Alex.

"Honest, did he?" demanded Jule.

"If he hadn't, we wouldn't be eating tinned goods would we?" asked Clay.

"Why, you might get those out of the *Rambler*," Case ventured. "That was a joke about the pirates getting the motor boat, wasn't it?"

"Indeed it wasn't!" Alex replied gravely, and in a short time the story of the boys' morning adventures was told.

"Now, that's what I call rotten!" Jule cried out. "And I move that we get to a telegraph office somewhere and notify some central point from which all the police boats on the river can be notified of what has been done. We've got to get the boat back!"

"I don't like to call out the state troops," Clay grinned. "We got into this scrape, and I want to get out of it without any help from the officers if possible. Uncle Zeke thinks he can take us to the *Rambler* to-night, and we're going to wait here until the edge of the evening and make the attempt."

"What's the matter with Uncle Zeke?" asked Case. "He stands up there snuffing the air as if he smelled more chicken."

In a moment the old negro came dashing down to where the boys stood, his eyes almost starting from his head.

"It doesn't take much to frighten you, Uncle Zeke," Clay laughed as the old darkey came up on a run. "According to all accounts, you have fits on the slightest provocation. The bear and the dog and the tracks of horses' feet have all set you going this morning. What is it this time?"

"It's done broke out! It's done broke out!" exclaimed the negro looking wildly about and even starting for the rowboat.

Clay caught him by the arm and held him back. "Here," he said, "you ain't going away with that boat right now! See if you can't catch your breath long enough to tell us what's 'done broke out'. Put us wise to what the trouble is."

"De night-riders done broke out!" cried the old negro. "Ah smell 'em!"

"What is it you smell?" asked Clay.

"Burnin' 'baccy!" was the reply. "Dey done fire some warehouse!"

"Not in the daytime!" exclaimed Jule. "They don't set fire to warehouses in the daytime!"

"Cain't nebber tell whut dem night-riders gwine do nex'," answered Uncle Zeke. "Dey're pow'ful ornery trash!"

"I know what I'm going to do next!" Alex exclaimed. "I've got a misery in my stomach and I'm going to quell it right now!"

"You hungry, Uncle Zeke?" asked Clay.

"Ah sure got mah eye on dat chicken!"

"Well," Clay went on, "if you run up through that fringe of trees and see what's burning, I'll give you some chicken as soon as you get back."

The old negro was off like a shot. In ten minutes he was back with the report that he had learned from a farmer who was hastening toward the conflagration that the Slocum warehouses, not more than half a mile away, had been set on fire just before daylight and had smoldered for hours before bursting into flames.

"It strikes me," Case suggested, "that the best thing we boys can do is to get out of this country right now. We've bumped into river pirates, and night-riders, and the next we know, we'll be arrested by some fresh officers charged with being in cahoots with the incendiaries."

"I'm not going to run away without that motor boat," Alex muttered, his mouth full of fried fish.

"What's the use?" asked Jule. "If we start out now, we're likely to be followed, and if we remain here in camp we may escape observation. The night-riders know we're here, of course, but they'll be too busy getting under cover to pay any attention to us to-day."

"That listens good to me!" Alex put in. "We'll stay here till night and work our way through the cut-off by the light of burning warehouses. I wish I could say 'by the light of burning saloon boats', too."

"Talk about your wild life at the head waters of the Amazon!" roared Clay, "this peaceful little old Ohio river beats anything we have encountered yet. We seem to get into the thick of it everywhere we go."

The boys were not molested during the day.

Shortly after noon a negro who looked about as badly frightened as one could imagine, came down the river in an old canoe and stopped to talk with Zeke.

He stated that the night-riders had destroyed several warehouses the night before, and had also whipped several planters who had resisted.

"Ah nebber did done cotton to no night-riders!" the old darkey informed the boys as he repeated the story.

"I wonder if those outlaws will make trouble for Mrs. Peck for letting us go," mused Case. "Say, Uncle Zeke!" he said in a moment. "If you'll send this friend of yours up to a farm house in the interior, we'll give you a dollar."

"Ah wants dat dollah!" Zeke exclaimed.

"All right, go yourself if you want to," Case answered. "We want to know if the woman in the farm house has been troubled at all by the night-riders. We want you to go and tell her that we're down here in the cove, and will do all we can to help her if she gets into trouble."

"Dat's mah dollah!" cried Uncle Zeke already on his way.

In a couple of hours the negro returned with the information that he had talked with the woman, and that she had seemed grateful for the offer made. He stated, too, that there were men about the house, and that they had been highly amused at the message he had delivered.

"Dey sure done laugh at dis ol' coon!" Uncle Zeke added, "when ah tole 'em you-all wanted to come up an' fight for de lady what gib you-all pancakes an' coffee. Dey sure did roar!"

"What did they say about the burning warehouse?" asked Clay.

"Ah sure don' mention no burnin' warehouse where dem men is," replied the darkey. "Mought be dey set dat fire demselves."

"Well," Case said handing the darkey a silver dollar. "Here's your money. I would have given more to have informed the old lady that we felt grateful for what she did for us this morning."

"She shore glad you-all feel so!" Uncle Zeke replied.

At five o'clock in the afternoon, Alex sent Uncle Zeke out to catch more fish and began building up the fire.

"What's coming off now?" asked Jule.

"What do you 'spose is coming off?" demanded Alex. "I haven't had anything to eat for two or three hours."

"The kid is all right!" Clay declared. "We must get supper early and make up a lot of sandwiches for midnight. We may have to lay and wait in the cut-off for hours before we can get to the *Rambler*. We can't show any lights, and so it will be impossible to cook. So, as Alex will be sure to be hungry, we'll take our midnight supper with us."

"What you going to make your sandwiches of?" asked Jule.

"Huh," laughed Alex, "I'm going to take fat perch and stuff 'em with beans and chicken. How would a sandwich like that go on South Clark street?"

"It would go down mighty quick!" laughed Jule.

After eating their supper and putting up a large supply of provisions for the night, the boys made ready for their trip to what Zeke declared to be the pirates' nest. They were at twilight, moving slowly, silently across the river and then down the cut-off, which at high water was navigable for small boats, and which would soon make an island of the peninsula enclosed within the rim of the river.

By nine o'clock it was very dark. The trees overhanging the narrow channel through which the boat was poled and dragged—the water being too shallow in places for the use of the oars—stood like grim walls, shutting out what little light came from the uncertain sky.

Owing to fallen trunks and heaps of rubbish washed in by a recent freshet, the cut-off was difficult of navigation, but just after midnight the lads saw across a wooded point of land a strong light flash out for a moment and then die away.

"And there burn the *Rambler's* light" Alex cried.

I'd give a good deal to know just how many people there are around that boat!" Clay whispered.

"If you'll just push this old scow up a little closer, I'll sneak over there and find out," said Alex.

"If he tries to get away, tie him up with a rope!" whispered Jule. "Every time that boy gets out of sight, he lands in trouble up to his long ears!"

"There were only two when I left the *Rambler*," Alex exclaimed, making a sly face at Jule. "They shot a dozen bullets at me while I was getting away, and never turned a hair!"

The boat was worked slowly through another hundred yards of the cut-off, and then the boys could see the bulk of the *Rambler* outlined against a cloudy sky. There were no lights on board and no sounds were heard.

The boat lay in a sort of a bight carved out by the river as it bent away to the north just before it made the western turn. Behind it was a tangle of swamp.

In front swept the heavy current of the river. The rowboat halted within perhaps a hundred yards of the place where the stolen *Rambler* lay.

"If they had had the good sense to anchor on the other side of the river," Case whispered to Alex, "they might have made us a lot more trouble. I'm glad they stopped where they did."

"I'm afraid there are a whole lot of outlaws on board," Clay whispered, as the boys sat in the rowboat, watching the dim bulk of the *Rambler*.

"Then the two thieves who stole the boat have picked them up out of the river," Alex insisted. "There were only two when I left the deck, and they came off from a coal tow which was going downstream."

"If there were only two, we ought to go and blow the tops of their heads off, and take the boat away from them, just to show that we can," said Jule. "We ought to do something to show them that they're not the only apples on the tree. Don't you think so, boys?"

"You're the bloodthirsty little pirate now!" laughed Clay. "I'll be satisfied if we can dump them in the river and get on board the good old *Rambler* again."

The boys sat still in the boat for a long time, hardly knowing what course to pursue. The sky was clearing of clouds, and the glow of the stars shone dimly down on the *Rambler*. Although no lights showed on board the motor boat, suspicious noises in the cabin and on the deck informed the lads that people were moving about there.

"They're awake and watching us, all right!" Alex whispered, after a time. "We've got to do something to place them off their guard!"

While the boys were listening and waiting, Captain Joe sprang out of the boat and waded and swam over to the hard ground on the south of the cut-off. The boys saw only a white flash as the bulldog left the water and disappeared in the darkness of the jungle. Teddy, the bear, seemed inclined to follow him, but the boys held him back by main force.

"Now I wonder," whispered Jule, "if the pirates are over there, too! If they've got us surrounded, we're likely to open a barrel of trouble in about a minute."

The noise made by Captain Joe and also by the struggle with the bear apparently attracted the attention of those on board the *Rambler*, for a faint light blazed up in the cabin of the motor boat for an instant and was then extinguished.

"They're getting their guns ready, I guess," Clay whispered. "Suppose we pull the boat under the shadow of the bank and take to the shore. We might be safer there."

"I'll tell you what I think," Case observed. "When those fellows turned on the light they were getting ready to set the motors going. If we don't watch out, they'll have the *Rambler* whizzing downstream at the rate of twenty miles an hour."

"Well," Jule declared, "if we go ashore we may get into trouble there, so I propose that we land on the north side of the cut-off and try to make a sneak on board."

"Whatever we do," Clay advised, "we ought to keep the boat within reach so that, if they do go on downstream, we can follow them as fast as the current will carry us."

The boys argued in whispers for some time over Clay's proposition and then Alex broke out:

"If you fellows will push over to the south shore for a minute, I'll get out and see what is going on there. I don't like the idea of having a gang of pirates come up behind us after we land and advance to the *Rambler*. That wouldn't look well."

"Don't you never let him go!" Case advised. "If you do, he'll get mired in a swamp or bring a company of night-riders on top of us."

Alex, however, did not wait for the boys to either pole the boat to the south shore, or to decide as to whether he ought to land. Before any further objections could be offered, he was up to his waist in water moving toward the shadows on the south bank.

"The little monkey!" whispered Case. "I wish I had a rope around his neck!"

"What shall we do now?" asked Jule. "We can't go away and leave him in that patch of woods."

"I think we'd better go on over to the north shore and see if we can retake the *Rambler*," Clay answered. "Alex, probably, has some notion in his head which we don't understand, and, anyway, he is capable of taking care of himself."

In accordance with this idea, the three boys landed and, leaving Uncle Zeke in charge of the boat and the bear, with instructions to answer Alex's call from the south bank, they took their way to the bight in which the *Rambler* lay. They had only a shore distance to go, and were soon within a few feet of the motor boat, which lay within a couple of yards of the shore.

From the position they now occupied, they could see a dilapidated old houseboat lying beyond the *Rambler*, her nose resting lightly on the bank.

"That's where the pirates have been living!" whispered Case. "If we could only do something to drive them back to the old hulk, we might possibly get the *Rambler* away."

All remained dark and silent on board the motor boat, still the boys knew that the men on board were awake and alert. They had seen the prow light turned on when farther up the cut-off, and only

a few moments before a light had shone in the cabin.

The boys waited for what seemed to them an hour or more, watching and listening, hoping for Alex's return, and hoping, too, for some indication of the intentions of the pirates.

"We've just got to make a break pretty soon," Jule said. "I believe those fellows on board the boat know that we're in the vicinity. They're not asleep, and they wouldn't be sitting there in the dark unless they were suspicious."

"If you boys will stay here," Clay suggested, "I'll attempt to gain the after deck of the *Rambler*. If I succeed, I may be able to drive the pirates out of the boat."

"I was just thinking of that myself!" whispered Case.

"You remain here," Clay went on, "and I'll see what can be done."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the "chug, chug, chug," of motors was heard, and the *Rambler*, still showing no lights, glided softly upstream!

After proceeding a few paces, however, the power was shut off, and she remained swinging in the almost stagnant waters of the bight. Her position was, perhaps, a hundred paces to the north of the cut-off, and perhaps ten paces from the shore where the boys were.

"I guess they've got us going now!" Case exclaimed regretfully. "They'll shoot upstream in a minute, and that'll be the last of the merry old *Rambler*! We'll have to build another boat, boys!"

No one replied, for just at that moment the splash of oars and poles was heard, coming swiftly down the cut-off. The boys turned their eyes in that direction and almost shouted in their amazement as three blue lights, following the channel of the cut-off, proceeded to the west, to all appearances floating six or eight feet above the surface of the water! The boys stood silent for a moment.

"Now, what do you think of that?" whispered Clay. "Three times and out!"

"I know now what the three blue lights mean!" gasped Case. "They constitute a signal used by the night-riders!"

"There ain't any tobacco warehouses to burn here!" Jule scoffed.

The three blue lights came on steadily, stopping after a time at the very mouth of the cut-off, two or three hundred feet from where the *Rambler* lay.

Heretofore the lights had seemed to be floating in the air. Now the boys could faintly distinguish the bulk of a boat looking weird and ghostly under the mysterious illumination.

"I wonder if that won't scare the pirates?" asked Jule.

The answer came from the *Rambler* itself, for the motors were turned on and the boat whirled swiftly away toward the opposite bank of the river. Then a volley of shots rang out from the mysterious boat, and a voice called over the water:

"Obey the signal, boys! If you don't, we'll fill you full of lead! You know what three blue lights mean!"

Much to the amazement of the boys, the motors ceased their clatter and the *Rambler* lay swaying just at the edge of the current.

"Do you mind that now?" whispered Case. "The pirates on board the *Rambler* don't know that the outer walls are all bullet-proof!"

The next moment the great flashlight on the prow of the *Rambler* blazed out over the waters.

"Why!" exclaimed Clay, "that's our boat, and there's some one holding three blue lights up on a stick!"

"Yes," exclaimed Jule, fairly dancing up and down in his excitement, "and that little monkey in the prow is Alex! He's the one that's holding up the three blue lights! Now where do you suppose he got that layout?"

"He has a way of picking things out of the atmosphere!" laughed Case.

"Looks like a scene in a play!" cried Jule.

"That would be a mighty good place to drop a curtain!" suggested Case.

"Not quite yet," Clay insisted. "The scene mustn't close just yet. The audience wants to know what the three blue lights are going to do to the *Rambler*."

The boys were not long kept in waiting in this regard. The rowboat, sunk almost to the guards under the weight of four men and a boy, swept up to the *Rambler*. Directly all were on the deck of the motor boat. Alex dancing excitedly up and down when he was not waltzing over the deck with the white bulldog.

"Why don't you let us in on that?" demanded Jule from the bank.

"Oh, there you are!" shouted Alex springing up on the gunwale. "We thought you boys had gone and got lost. Wait a minute, and I'll row the boat over to you."

The lad dropped into the rowboat with a tunk, and soon had his wondering companions on the deck of the motor boat. What they saw there added, if possible, to the surprise of the previous five minutes.

Four men, two of whom Alex recognized as the men who had stolen the boat, lay tied hard and fast on the deck, and four other men, two of whom had visited the camp at the cove during the forenoon, were standing over them with guns in their hands. The prisoners seemed to be trying to the best of their ability to conciliate their stern-faced guards.

"We didn't know that you had an interest in the outfit," one of the prisoners was saying. "Those boys rammed our steamer, and we were bound to get even with them."

"It's hands off the boys!" exclaimed Peck sternly. "What do you think we ought to do with them?" he asked turning to his companions.

"We ought to stretch their necks!" was the fierce reply.

"I wouldn't mind assisting at a necktie party," Peck answered, "but, under the circumstances, I think we'd better not become too prominent in any such society event. You three men pitch them over into the old houseboat and drift along the river until you come to a Government steamer. Then turn them over as outlaws and return on the Government steamer if it's going upstream to the cove. If it's going downstream, get the first upboat you can."

Peck's authority seemed to be supreme, for in five minutes the four bound men were transferred to the houseboat which was then nosed out into the stream by the *Rambler*. This done, Peck sat down in a deck chair and regarded the four boys quizzically.

"Where's the old negro?" he asked in a moment.

"Didn't you hear him splash in the water?" asked Alex. "When you showed the three blue lights, he waddled ashore with a face so white it made a chalk-mark on the night."

"What does it all mean?" asked Clay.

As he spoke he pointed to the blue lights still burning on the prow of the rowboat.

"It's all easily explained," Peck replied with an engaging smile. "Just after two of you boys left my house to-day, a gang of good fellows laboring under a misapprehension came up with a supply of birch whips intended for the backs of you kids. Their attention was attracted to a burning building, or they would have overtaken the lads before they reached the cove and beaten them half to death.

"When I reached home, my wife told me of the incident, and I began worrying for fear the boys would be caught and mistreated. While we were talking it over, that old nigger came up and said that you boys wanted to do something for my wife because she had been so good to you.

"This kindness on your part—this willingness to do anything you could if we needed your help—stirred me up considerable. So we started out through the woods for the cove. When we got to the cove, which was after dark, of course, you were not there, and we've been floundering around in the water and woods and bushes ever since. We crossed the stream in a rickety old scow and landed on the peninsula, thinking that perhaps the river pirates, known to have headquarters here, had made trouble for you.

"Just as we were about to turn back, this little chap," pointing at Captain Joe, "came plunging through the bushes and we knew that you were not far away. Then this boy came panting along and we grabbed him. He was frightened half to death for a minute, but when things were explained, he told us the kind of a mixup you were in.

"Well, we came down to the cut-off and got into the boat and came down here. Then we remembered that the river pirates stand in deadly terror of the three blue lights—our boys having been a little rough with them!—so we put up the signal you saw, and I guess that's about all!"

"I guess I know what the three blue lights mean," Alex blurted out. "They constitute a signal used by the night-riders. I don't wonder the pirates are afraid of them!"

"And I guess the night-riders are the ones who keep the ghost stories about the lights going!" Jule added.

"Of course," Peck replied with a whimsical smile, "I don't know anything about that. One of my friends, here, just happened to have three blue lights with him, so we put 'em up to scare the pirates. We thought that if we could make the outlaws believe that we belonged to the night-riders, we could throw a bigger scare into them."

"Of course," Case laughed, winking at Peck, "we never thought for a moment that you gentlemen belonged to the night-riders!"

"Of course not!" laughed Peck, winking back. "Nobody around here belongs to the night-riders! You might travel up and down the river, and over the mountains, for a thousand miles, and not find a night-rider in the whole country! Fact!" he added, significantly.

"Do they put out blue lights whenever they're going to burn some one's warehouse?" asked Alex.

"Boy," answered Peck, patting Alex kindly on the shoulder, "you mustn't ask any questions about the night-riders in this section of the country. They think they are protecting their own interests in what they do, and that's all I know about it."

"I'd just like to know how they make the lights go out so quickly," Jule grinned. "They go out with a loud noise, don't they."

"I had that explained to me once," replied Peck with a queer smile, "and if you won't say anything about it. I'll tell you how it's done."

"The three blue lights are placed on a board, either floating on the water or suspended from some elevation. On the same board is a stick of dynamite with a long fuse. After the lights burn a few moments—they are just little kerosene lamps with blue globes, you know—the dynamite explodes and that ends the display. Perfectly simple, ain't it, boys?"

"I should think it was!" answered Clay.

Peck remained on board the *Rambler* until daylight, and then the boys took him back up the river to the little cove near his own home. When at last he shook hands with the lads at parting, they did their best to reward him, but he refused every offering made.

"I did this for you boys," he said, "just because you sent that word up to my wife. You thought she was alone, and might be in trouble, on account of the rough characters you had seen about, and you notified her that you were ready and willing to fight for her if she wanted any assistance. That was enough for me!"

After cooking breakfast at the old camp at the head of the cove, the boys again set out on their journey. During the rest of the trip they avoided saloon boats and coal tows.

They also tied up at night near some city or town. Now and then they read in the daily newspapers stories of alleged outrages by night-riders, but their experiences with the men of the three blue lights led them to make many excuses for them.

They spent nearly a month loitering along the river, stopping here and there, sometimes tying up for two or three days at a time. When at last they saw the lights of Cairo they were heartily sorry that the journey was ended.

"We have had a pleasant trip, mixed with a little healthy excitement!" laughed Case, as they threw out their lines at one of the lower wharves.

"A little excitement?" repeated Alex. "Say, look here, kid, the Ohio is the sixth river we've navigated, and she's given us the liveliest run for our money we've had yet."

"And now," Case said rather soberly, "we'll sail up the Mississippi, through the Illinois river and the canal, and get back to our little pier up on the South Branch."

"Whew!" exclaimed Alex, "won't Captain Joe, the old sea-captain, be glad to see us come sailing in?"

"I don't believe he'll accept half our three-blue-lights' stories as true!" Jule put in.

"Anyway," Clay replied, "we've had the experiences, and Captain Joe can think what he likes!"

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RIVER MOTOR BOAT BOYS ON THE OHIO;
OR, THE THREE BLUE LIGHTS ***

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