

The Outdoor Chums on a Houseboat

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ON A HOUSEBOAT ***

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THE OUTDOOR CHUMS ON A HOUSEBOAT

OR

The Rivals of the Mississippi

BY

CAPTAIN QUINCY ALLEN

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LAKE," "THE OUTDOOR CHUMS IN THE FOREST," ETC.

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CHAPTER I—GLORIOUS TIMES AHEAD

“Own up, Will, you’ve got hold of some great news, and you’re just keeping it back to tease us! How about that, Bluff?”

“You’re right, Frank, for I can see it in his face. His eyes are just dancing with a big secret. But wait up; here comes Jerry across the campus. Now he’ll just have to open the box, and show us.”

The college boy, called Will by his comrades, and whose last name was Milton, laughed good-naturedly, and then nodded his head.

“Why, fellows,” he said, “I saw Jerry coming, and meant to wait for him. When all four members of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club, who call themselves the Outdoor Chums, are present, I’ve got something to say that is going to set you all just wild.”

At that the young chap who went by the name of Bluff made frantic gestures for a fourth lad, just then heading in their direction, to hurry along.

Evidently this freshman must have suspected that something unusual was brewing, for he started on a run, and came up almost panting for breath.

“What’s in the wind, fellows?” he demanded, glancing from one eager face to the others. “Don’t tell me you’ve made up your minds where the club is going to put in the vacation just ahead of us, because that would be too good news. Who’s going to take pity on me, and relieve my suspense?”

“Why, Will here has got something to tell us, and wanted to wait till you joined the crowd,” said Frank Langdon, who was just a little taller, and more manly-looking than any other in the group; though they were all bright, able lads, who had seen considerable of life.

“Listen, boys,” said Will, who was inclined to be less given to healthy color than the rest, and who seemed to be not quite so sturdy in build; “I’ve had a letter from my Uncle Felix, down in New Orleans; and he made the queerest offer you ever heard about. You see, through my mother he must have learned about some of the adventures that came our way the last two years; and, what do you think?”

he wants the Outdoor Chums to take a voyage all the way down the Mississippi, just as soon as school closes.”

“What!” ejaculated Jerry Wallington, as though rather staggered by the sudden outlook; “a voyage down the Mississippi? What on; a floating log?—because we don’t happen to own any kind of a boat just now.”

“Well, Uncle Felix does, you see,” Will went on, coolly. “It’s some sort of a houseboat, that he used to live aboard for several years. For some reason, that he doesn’t take the trouble to explain, he wants it brought down to New Orleans, where he’s recovering from a bad accident, so that he just can’t come up himself. And, boys, he enclosed a check for a hundred dollars in the letter.”

“Wow! what was that for?” demanded Bluff Masters, who had a little habit of being impetuous, though at heart he was as true as steel to his chums, and always fair toward even his bitterest enemy.

“Why, to buy eats, of course!” declared Will. “You see, a houseboat doesn’t often have any way of moving along, only with the current, at least this one doesn’t, I know; and so it just has to wander down the river. That takes a heap of time; and four healthy boys have to eat sometimes five times a day to keep from starving to death; anyhow, Bluff here does, I happen to know.”

“Well, a hundred dollars ought to buy a heap of grub,” remarked Jerry, with a wide grin on his good-natured face. “But after we get there, how do you suppose we’re ever to get back home again, unless we draw some of our little nest-egg out of bank, and foot the railroad bill?”

“Trust Uncle Felix for that,” Will remarked. “He says he’ll see that we all get back home safe in good time. And, as he’s got bushels of money, and is a bachelor in the bargain, that part of the job needn’t worry us.”

“Where’s the houseboat now?” asked Frank,

“Tied up in the boatyard of a man named James Whittaker in St. Paul. There was an order on him to deliver the boat to us with all the fixtures, whatever that may mean,” Will continued.

“Oh! say, did you ever hear of such luck?” cried Bluff, throwing his cap up in the air and catching it deftly again as it fell.

“Perhaps it’s just like a palace, if a rich old bachelor has been knocking around in it for some years,” suggested Jerry.

Frank noticed that Will did not think to offer any information on this score, if he happened to possess the knowledge. Perhaps he was willing that his three chums should live in expectation, and be surprised by the wonders of the houseboat upon which Uncle Felix seemed to set such store.

“By the way,” continued Will, “there was one funny part to Uncle’s letter.”

“Tell us about it. If we’re going to make a cruise in the houseboat of a millionaire, we ought to know,” remarked Bluff.

"He says," Will went on, "he's mighty particular about whom he allows aboard his boat, and wants to impress upon us all that during the cruise we must keep off all undesirable characters."

"Sure thing," remarked Bluff, with a wise nod. "I've always heard that the Mississippi is a tramp's paradise, and that they just swarm down there. It's only right that a rich man would want us to keep such characters off his fine houseboat."

"Hold on there," broke in Will, "I haven't said it was such a palace, have I, Frank? Here Bluff keeps on getting more and more extravagant with his adjectives every time he mentions the boat."

"Oh! well," the other ventured, "it stands to reason that a rich old chap who spends lots of his time on board a pet boat would have things just scrumptious. Me for the first choice of bunks aboard! Wonder if he has silk eiderdown quilts for covers. Yum! yum! we're just the luckiest lot of freshmen that ever squeezed through their first year at college; and, Will, I feel like giving you a bear's hug for bringing us this great news."

"Please don't!" cried Will, half alarmed, for Bluff was a bit rough in his way; "because I'm carrying a bunch of lantern slides in my pocket; and I'd hate to have them broken;" but the observing Frank detected what seemed to be a gleam of suppressed amusement on Will's face, that gave him an inkling as to the true state of affairs.

Will had always been the official photographer of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club, and was something of an expert at snapping pictures to commemorate stirring and unusual events in the outdoor experiences of the chums.

"Was that all he said about not letting strangers aboard unless they brought letters of introduction?" asked Jerry.

"He warned us to be particularly careful not to harbor a certain party named Marcus Stackpole, who seems to be some sort of particular enemy of my uncle, though just why he would want to get aboard the houseboat I can't imagine."

"Say, that's queer, now," remarked Bluff.

"Guess he's had some reason for believing this Stackpole to be a thief, and he thinks he's run away with some of the things your uncle carries aboard," Jerry suggested.

Will simply elevated his eyebrows as he replied, evasively:

"I don't know, and that's all I can say, fellows; but suppose we go over to my rooms, where we can read the letter again, and take a look at the course of the Mississippi River from St. Paul to New Orleans."

It happened that Will and Frank had rooms at some little distance from the college buildings, making quite a walk along the road that ran beside the little river. And as they are trudging along, indulging in considerable excited talk, we

can devote a few paragraphs to some of the pleasant things that in times past were experienced by these four comrades.

The organization of the club, and what happened to the boys shortly afterward, has been detailed, at length, in the first book of this series, called: "The Outdoor Chums; Or, The First Tour of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club." In the second story are given some of the wonderful happenings that befell them while camping on an island in Camelot Lake, which had, up to that time, been shunned by most people, because of the fierce bobcats that were said to hold possession there. These exciting events you will find narrated in "The Outdoor Chums on the Lake; Or, Lively Adventures on Wildcat Island."

During the Easter holidays another campaign was undertaken in search of excitement and pictures, as well as camping experiences. It had been reported that a ghost roamed over a certain section of the country some miles away from the town of Centerville; and the four boys determined to find out the truth of this rumor. As to what befell them, the reader will find the full details in the third volume, called "The Outdoor Chums in the Forest; Or, Laying the Ghost of Oak Ridge."

When Christmas came, the chums received permission to pay a visit to the Sunny South. And what strange things happened to them on a Florida river, as well as upon the great Mexican gulf, have been told in the fourth book, under the title of "The Outdoor Chums on the Gulf; Or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists."

Then came a delightful visit to the Far West, where they saw what life on a cattle ranch was like, and had some thrilling times among the wild animals that Will was always anxious to take pictures of, at no matter what risk to himself. You can find all these narrated at length in the fifth book, just preceding this, and bearing the title of "The Outdoor Chums After Big Game; Or, Perilous Adventures in the Wilderness."

"There's that fancy dresser, Oswald Fredericks, and some of his chums, coming this way, Frank!" remarked Bluff, as the four boys were walking along the road.

Frank frowned. If there was one fellow in all the hundreds attending college with whom he had never been able to get on, it had been the rich man's son, Oswald Fredericks. They had never actually come to blows, but for some reason the other had shown jealousy toward Frank, and seldom let an opportunity pass for sneering at him, or doing some small thing to indicate what his feelings toward Frank were.

"And we're bound to meet the bunch just in that narrow part of the road, too, where the river runs close beside it," remarked Will, in disgust.

"Well," spoke up fiery Bluff, "you don't expect that we're going to stand here, and wait for the procession to pass by; do you? I guess four of us ought to

be a match for as many of the Fredericks crowd, if they try to muss us up.”

“Oh! I don’t think Fredericks would try anything like that,” Frank remarked.

“You never know what such a fellow might do,” declared Jerry. “Once I used to like him; but he got going with a fast set, and I had to cut him dead. He isn’t altogether bad, but apt to feel himself superior because his dad’s a millionaire.”

“And the queer thing about it,” broke in Will just then, “is that he lives in St. Paul, where we have to go after our houseboat, and I’ve often heard him tell about the dandy craft his father owns, used for making cruises down the river. It’s got an engine aboard, too, and can run like a steamboat.”

“Oh! shucks! I just wish he’d take a notion to make a cruise about the same time as we did,” said Bluff in a low voice, for the other party was now quite close by. “Say, wouldn’t we have some bully times, though, running races with his old tub?”

Frank somehow felt that the other students were up to mischief. He had noticed that they kept their heads together, and seemed to be whispering suspiciously.

On that account he was on the lookout for trouble. Consequently, when, just as the two parties were passing, some of the others gave Oswald a sudden shove, as doubtless arranged beforehand, and he was thrown toward Frank, the latter deftly jumped aside.

The consequence was that the well-dressed Oswald, not running up against the object he had anticipated shoving over the edge of the bank into the river, made a few wild movements of his arms, as though seeking something to stay his own progress; and then quickly vanished from view over the edge, to the dismay of his companions, and the delight of Bluff and Jerry.

They heard him give a sharp yelp; and then a splash announced that he had plunged into the swiftly-running stream.

CHAPTER II—LAYING PLANS

“Listen to that, will you?” cried Bluff Masters. “He’s in, all right!”

The boys hastened to the edge of the bank. The river ran about six feet

below, and as there was a fair stage of water at this time of year, Oswald had ducked completely under when he fell in.

He was making frantic efforts to drag himself out, and was spouting water like a geyser. One of his comrades immediately hastened to lower himself by means of some friendly rocks, so as to give the unfortunate Oswald a helping hand.

Dripping from head to foot, and looking like a half-drowned rat, the son of the St. Paul millionaire finally managed to regain the road. He was certainly a forlorn-looking figure. Even a couple of his friends grinned a little behind his back; while Bluff and Jerry made no pretense of hiding their delight. Frank half expected that the other would attack him, though there was not the slightest reason for it, since he had not even touched young Fredericks when so deftly stepping aside.

“What did you do that for, Langdon?” spluttered the other, shivering, either with the cold, or the excitement following his unexpected dip in the water.

“I don’t know that I did anything, except to get out of your way,” returned Frank, quietly. “You seemed to want the whole road, and I was for giving it to you. What do you find about that to complain of, Fredericks?”

“Oh! go on,” sneered the other. “You knew mighty well that if you jumped out of the way I’d go into the river.”

“Well,” remarked Frank, steadily, keeping his eyes on Oswald, “it was either you or me; and I wasn’t at all anxious to get wet; so since you would have it, I let you have first choice. If you’d kept to your side of the road nothing would have happened. You’ve only yourself to blame. You tried to put up a little game on me, and the biter got bitten himself; that’s all there is to it.”

“Think you’re pretty smart; don’t you, Langdon?” snarled the other, who in his anger quite forgot his elegant ways, and seemed ready to descend to the manner of a common bully. “You set up that game on me, and you know it. Didn’t I see you telling Bluff Masters what you would do if I happened to brush up against you? I’ve a good notion to give you what you ought to have had long ago.”

“You don’t say?” remarked Frank, pleasantly; “and suppose you tell me what that might be, Fredericks.”

“A sound drubbing; and I can do it, too, I want you to know!” snarled the other, making a forward movement, though two of his boon companions managed to get a grip on his shoulders and hold him back.

Frank deliberately took off his coat, and handed it to Will Milton.

“That’s a new coat,” he said, calmly, “and I wouldn’t want to get it soiled by rubbing up against your dirty and wet clothes. Now, suppose you start in, and give me what you say I need; because to-morrow may be too late, as we start

for home in the morning. This is a nice, quiet spot, and we stand little chance of being bothered by any outsiders.”

“Let me go; can’t you, fellows?” cried Oswald, making a great show of trying to break away from the detaining hands of his chums; though Bluff noticed that it was something of a pretense after all.

“Don’t be a fool, Ossie,” said Raymond Ellis, in a low voice; “you know that Langdon’s said to be as strong as an ox. He made the baseball team, and will be in the football squad next fall. Let it drop; can’t you? It was a bad job all around, and you got caught in your own trap.”

“But I tell you I can do him up right now, if you only let me loose!” declared Fredericks, with another vain effort to break away, making his friends only seek the harder to keep him back, the third one now lending a hand, and trying to soothe him with soft words. “What have I been taking boxing and wrestling lessons all winter for, if not just this opening? I knew some day we’d have it out; and why not now? Let loose, Duke Fletcher; I want to show him!”

“Well, you just can’t right now, and that’s all there is about it,” declared the lad last named, as he tightened his grip. “You’re soaked to the skin, and excited in the bargain; while he’s as cool as a cucumber. Just hold your horses, and maybe some fine day you’ll get your chance on even terms.”

They started to lead the expostulating Oswald away. Every little while he would break out into another wild series of exclamations, and struggle with the chums who kept their detaining hands on him.

Frank quietly recovered his coat and put it on. There was a curl to his lips as he turned his face toward his chums.

“What do you think of it, boys?” he asked.

“He never wanted to fight, even a little bit!” declared Bluff, scorn in his tones.

“That’s right,” remarked Jerry. “For all his squirming, he didn’t want to break away from his friends. Why, he could have done it in the start, easy enough; but it was all a big bluff. But say, did you ever hear a splash like that, fellows?”

“It certainly did make a noise,” remarked Frank, laughing.

“Noise!” echoed Bluff, doubling up with laughter; “why, if you didn’t know what happened, you’d think a house had dropped kerplunk into the river. Only time I can remember anything like it, was when Jerry here went overboard once—”

“That’ll do for you, Bluff,” interrupted the one mentioned; “I could refer to a few of your troubles in the past when it comes to speaking about splashes. Just drop personal things, and let’s speak about Fredericks.”

“Oh! if I’d only had my little snapshot camera along,” exclaimed Will, suddenly remembering what a startling picture he might have taken of Oswald go-

ing over the edge of the bank; to be followed with another showing him as he climbed, dripping, out of the river.

“Well, that’s nearly always the way,” grunted Bluff. “What wonderful things we do see when we haven’t got a gun.”

“But he’s going to set that bath down against you, Frank; and some day try to hand you back something in return,” remarked Jerry.

“How could you be so cruel as to side-step, and let the poor chap go over into that cold water?” asked Bluff.

They were all in high spirits as they started once more for the room where Will and Frank boarded. Healthy boys see no shadows ahead when fortune beckons. And these chums knew of no reason why they should not look forward with delight to that long trip in a houseboat down the Father of Waters.

“I’m going to take the pains to tell Duke Fletcher what our plans are for the summer,” said Jerry, who was by long odds far from being one to seek trouble; but in this case he seemed to think it might liven things up if only Oswald and several of his cronies chose to make a similar cruise, and that fortune threw them together now and then.

Frank rather doubted the wisdom of notifying the others of the intended voyage; but he neglected to ask Jerry not to mention it, and so the fact was forgotten until later.

Once they arrived at the room, the letter, with its enclosures, was produced, and for a full hour the boys studied it.

“I declare I can’t make head or tail of it,” Jerry finally admitted, with a puzzled expression on his face.

“Me, too!” declared Bluff, ready to confess himself “stumped,” as he called it. “What do you suppose there is so valuable about this houseboat that would make anybody like Marcus Stackpole want to get it, if only he got on board?”

“Say, perhaps Uncle Felix keeps some of his expensive curios aboard, and this Stackpole knows it, and means to get hold of ’em. I’m going to make it my job to find out if that’s so, and you fellows needn’t be surprised to see me poking around in any old dark corner, and tapping the walls of the cabin to find concealed treasures.”

“That sounds just like you, Jerry; always thinking you’re going to strike it rich,” jeered Bluff. “Now, I’ve got a notion it’s the craft itself that’s so expensively built, and Stackpole, who must have wanted to buy it from Uncle Felix, and has been refused, is just bound to get hold of it.”

Frank laughed at all these wild theories. He did not know himself what the solution of the mystery could be, but felt positive that it was along different lines from anything as yet suggested in the fertile brains of his companions. Besides, he wondered what that occasional smile he saw upon the face of Will meant.

Evidently the other was keeping back something from his chums; and it must have a connection with the houseboat.

As they expected to start home on the following day, it would not be long before they would arrive in St. Paul, ready to purchase their provisions for the beginning of the river trip, and start down stream.

It was the last night at college for that term and all sorts of affairs were going on among the students, who would separate for two months and more on the morrow. When morning came there was a grand exodus, and the station of the college town presented a gay appearance, as scores of young fellows, with suitcases in their hands, boarded the train that pulled out.

Those who were going later gave the college yell when the whistle of the engine announced that the parting minute had arrived. And amid a shrieking of hundreds of voices the train started that was to bear the four chums to their homes in Centerville.

"There's your dear friend, Oswald Fredericks, Frank!" said Will, as the party hung partly out of a couple of windows in the car they occupied.

"And he's got his eye glued on you, too; don't forget," remarked Jerry.

"Oh! he's a good hater, all right," said Bluff. "If he didn't have any reason to wish you all sorts of bad luck before, that souse in the river settled it. From now on he'll never hear the name of Frank Langdon without getting mad, you mark me. And some day, sooner or later, he hopes to have a chance to even up the score."

"Huh! it may come sooner, then," remarked Jerry, significantly.

"See here," remarked Frank, turning to look at the last speaker, "did you keep your word, and tell Duke Fletcher about our plans this summer?"

Jerry nodded his head coolly.

"Course I did," he admitted. "You heard me tell I was going to do it, and nobody said a word. I like to have things going on all the time! What's the use of living, if you can't have some excitement once in a while? Besides, I'm hoping Oswald will find a chance to 'hop' Frank here. You see, I know what will follow; and he needs a lesson, that upstart does, to take the conceit out of him."

"Oh! well," remarked Frank, with a whimsical smile, "I believe the old Mississippi is something of a river; and even if they do start down in another houseboat, the chances of running across us wouldn't amount to much, anyhow. So what's the use of worrying? We've got all we want to do to keep watch for this tricky Marcus Stackpole, the man Uncle Felix seems to think will try to either rob the boat, or steal the entire outfit."

"Somebody pinch me," said Bluff, as they sat down facing each other in the double seat; "because I just can't believe it's so, all these fine times ahead of us, with a houseboat all our own for weeks, and we living on the fat of the land as

we go, taking toll of game and fish by the way.”

“Huh!” grunted Jerry, “much game you’ll get, with the law on nearly everything that flies; and Frank here a regular stickler for obeying what the law says. But say, we take our guns along, I certainly hope, boys?”

“That’s a settled thing,” Frank replied. “We might need them in lots of ways; and while Uncle Felix may have a stock of firearms aboard his boat, we would be foolish to take any chances.”

“Hear! hear! that makes me happy!” Bluff exclaimed.

“Now he’s just thinking about that pump-gun he owns, and what havoc he can make if ever he sees a flock of ducks on a sand bar!” chuckled Will; for the gun had never been a favorite with either himself or Jerry, who declared it was unsportsmanlike to be able to send a volley into a bevy of quail, from a repeating shotgun, though with a rifle the case was different.

And, throughout all that long journey, from the college to their home town, the four chums talked of hardly anything else but the pleasure they anticipated when once they were launched on the mighty Mississippi, bound for the distant Southern metropolis, known as the Crescent City.

CHAPTER III—BLUFF NAMES THE BOAT

“Well, hold me, somebody, I’m going to faint!”

It was Jerry who made this remark; and he did actually pretend to fall over against Will, who happened to be standing next to him at the time.

The four chums were in St. Paul, and had just been shown the interior of the houseboat, on board of which they expected to make the voyage down the river, over the many hundreds of miles separating them from New Orleans.

Even Frank was smiling as though surprised; while Bluff stared around in wonder. Will was chuckling to himself, as though he had known about it all along, and wished to spring a surprise on his mates by keeping still. That was what his smiles meant, Frank now knew, at the time the others were speculating as to what the houseboat of a wealthy old bachelor might be like.

“Talk to me about a dilapidated old craft, this sure takes the cake!” ventured

the plain-spoken Bluff, presently, when he could catch his breath. "Why, say, I've seen some shantyboats that could give this one a handicap, and still win out. Do you mean to say, Will Milton, your Uncle Felix is afraid of somebody running away with this old tub? That must be his little joke on us."

"Oh! nobody ever said there was anything palatial about uncle's houseboat," Will hastened to declare; "you fellows made up that fairy story to please yourselves. If you knew my uncle, you'd never think of him wasting his money on a floating palace. Fact is, boys, I do know all about this same craft; and if you sit down I'll tell you how he came to get hold of her in the first place."

"Might as well take a little rest, because I do feel sort of weak after such a shock," declared Jerry.

"Well, now," remarked the man who had accompanied them aboard the boat, and who had unlocked the door very carefully, as though the cabin contained some wild animal he was afraid might escape, this being the boat builder, Mr. Whittaker; "I'd like to hear that myself. You see, all I know is that Mr. Milton left this boat in my charge, and I was to keep constant watch over it, for which he agreed to pay in full. I've looked it over from stem to stern, and I declare if I was ever able to make up my mind what there was about the old thing to cause him to be so anxious. So tell us about it, my boy, if you please."

"Why, it's just this way," Will went on to say; "Uncle was knocking around down South some years ago, when he got in a tight scrape, and might have lost his life only for the fortunate coming of the man who owned this houseboat. I guess at that time it was called a shantyboat, Bluff, for a fact. Well, it seems that my uncle, who does lots of queer things, I'm told, thought so much of the boat that he bought her from the man, who was a traveling bee-keeper, and who said he had purchased the craft from a clock peddler, who used to drop down from town to town finding odd jobs to do. Now you've got the history of the gallant craft."

"And what did he want her for; just to keep on account of having his life saved by her coming at the right time?" demanded Jerry.

"Oh!" said Will, readily enough; "he used her several seasons as a houseboat; and after drifting as far down the river as he cared to go, he'd have her towed up again. Few shantyboats ever come back again, you know. Once they get South, they're sold, and broken up for firewood. But I rather think Uncle Felix must have had some pleasant days and nights aboard this same boat, and that's why he values her, in one way."

Bluff broke out into laughter, doubling up like a hinge.

"It makes me weep, boys, to think of the adjectives we've wasted on the old tub. I reckon among the lot we've called her everything that stood for a grand outfit. Why, I've often shut my eyes, and tried to picture the finest thing that

ever was built. And now to see this old boat gives me a fit. Where do you suppose the silk-covered eiderdown quilts are stowed away; eh? And the mahogany trimmings; with the gas range Jerry was speaking about? Oh! my, here's a little old wood-burning stove, with one lid cracked. And well, here's luck, boys, just four bunks, arranged on the two sides of the cabin, one for each."

Frank had not allowed himself to indulge in any of the high-flown anticipations that had captured his two chums. That queer little smile on Will's face had warned him against such a course. And so now he was in a position to look at things from a sensible point.

"Hold on, fellows," he remarked, quietly; "if you've had to take a tumble, whose fault is it but your own? Will never gave you to understand that this was going to be a voyage in a floating palace; you just chose to picture all that sort of stuff for yourselves. And after all, when you take an inventory of things here, it isn't so bad a handout."

"Good for you, Frank," said Will, as if pleased.

"Just forget all that nonsense you imagined about sailing down in a gilt-edged houseboat, boys, and look the thing squarely in the face. The boat is still in good condition, and as staunch as anything. There's plenty of room for getting around, and for storing our stuff, bedclothes and eatables. Will you tell me what more the Outdoor Chums need in order to have a jolly good time?"

Bluff and Jerry looked at each other. The former scratched his head, and then the disappointed expression vanished from his face.

"I guess you're about right there, Frank," he admitted; "we've been through all sorts of times, and we never yet asked for more than just ordinary comforts. Leave the millionaire boats for the sons of rich men, who are so soft and pampered that they just can't rough it any. We've shown we could stand a lot; and anyhow, we can have a heap of fun aboard this old she-bang, once we cut loose from St. Paul."

"But what strikes me in the funny bone is this," declared Jerry. "If it looked queer to us why a fellow named Marcus Stackpole would want to sneak aboard a palatial craft to steal something, or get away with the boat itself, now what under the sun could anybody in their right senses expect to find on this tub worth taking; tell me that, will you?"

And all of the others only shook their heads in the negative, as though the conundrum were too much for them.

"Ask me something easy," remarked Bluff; "like the number of stars in the Milky Way, and I might give a guess; but I'm stumped when you want me to say why anybody would spend good hard-earned dollars to have this old boat guarded for months in Mr. Whittaker's yard here; and then warn us to be careful how we let any strangers travel with us."

“Well,” said Jerry, “you know what I said about his having something hidden aboard, that this other fellow knew about, and wanted. I still stick to that, more than ever; and I’m never going to rest till I find out.”

“Just like you, Jerry,” remarked Frank; “like as not you’ll be wanting to tear away the whole inside planking piece by piece, in hopes of making a discovery. There never was such a fellow for investigating things; and there never will be again.”

“Sure,” replied the other, with a grin. “But when do we get our duffle aboard, fellows? Can’t start any too soon to please me.”

The disappointment had been keen, for Bluff and Jerry had foolishly indulged in all manner of extravagant ideas concerning the luxuries they expected to find on board a houseboat owned by a rich man like Uncle Felix; but after all they were sensible boys, and could extract a lot of fun out of very small material.

The main thing was that they had a boat, strong and serviceable, to bear them on the long voyage; plenty of money with which to purchase provisions; and the whole summer before them in which to make the trip.

Imagination, such as is always rampant in the mind of a boy, did the rest. They could anticipate all manner of glorious adventures as taking place before their distant destination was reached.

Frank was ready to settle that matter without delay.

“I don’t see any reason why we couldn’t move out of here before night comes,” he remarked. “Bluff could see to getting all our stuff aboard, while some of the rest accompanied me to buy the provisions. They’ll deliver the stuff here right away; and then we can cut loose. We’ve got clothes and ammunition and all such things, including blankets for the crowd.”

“Hurrah! I’ll get a move on right away, and yank that lot of bags down here in a jiffy,” declared Bluff, always ready to do things in a hurry.

“Well,” remarked Mr. Whittaker, “I reckon you boys expect to have a great time of it this summer; and if I was some years younger I’d just like to be along with you. From the way you talk I rather imagine this isn’t the first trip you four’ve taken in company.”

At that the boys looked at each other and laughed.

“What the Outdoor Chums have gone through with would fill lots of books,” Frank took occasion to remark; “and if I had the time I’d like to tell you a few of the good times we’ve had together. But we’ve got to get a hustle on if we want to drop down the river this afternoon; because there’s always lots to do at the last minute. Off you go, Bluff; and Will, you come with me. I think Jerry had better help Bluff manage the luggage.”

And so they separated, each couple going about the business in hand with the energy boys can always display when they expect to have a good time.

“Be mighty careful with my camera case,” called out Will, after the others. “If anything happened to that tool of mine, you’d never hear the last of it. And then, however would we get any pictures of the queer things that happen by the way? I expect to snap off some striking views of you fellows doing stunts. Remember some of the ones we’ve got in the album at home?”

“Just forget about them right now,” answered Bluff, who knew that he himself figured in not a few of them, often in rather undignified attitudes, for instance where the wide-awake artist had happened to catch him sitting astride a limb, with an angry bull below.

Within two hours they had come back again to the boatyard; and Bluff, with the help of Jerry, managed to get aboard all their traps, brought from home.

“Good, there’s going to be plenty of room,” Bluff declared, as he tugged several of the last bundles up the gang-plank leading to the deck of the boat; “because we carry enough duffle to sink a small boat—guns, cooking utensils, blankets, clothes bags with changes of woolens, photographic stuff by the bushel. And there come Frank and Will, loaded to the gunwales with packages, too.”

“Is that all the grub we’re going to stack up with, for a voyage that may take four or six weeks?” demanded Jerry, in dismay, when the newcomers put their packages down aboard the houseboat.

“Oh! dear me, no,” said Will; “these are only the little extras we picked up on the way here; fruit and cakes, and some things we happened to forget in the grocery. The wagon-load will be along shortly now.”

“That sounds about right,” declared Jerry. “Honest, now, I’m that hungry a wagon-load of grub has the proper sort of ring, because I think I can make away with the entire collection at a sitting. Bring on your whole ham, and a dozen or two fried eggs. Think of the delicious coffee our friend Bluff here used to make, when he got his hand in. Oh! how can I wait till we’re afloat, for supper to come along?”

“Well, there’s the wagon right now,” said Frank; “so we needn’t be long in having Mr. Whittaker set us afloat on the river. After that some of us will have to man the big sweep here, and guide the boat.”

“And think of us wise ones figuring on having an engine to do all the work?” exclaimed Jerry, throwing up his hands. “But Bluff here has got a nice little surprise for you, boys.”

“What is it, Bluff?” asked Will, eagerly.

“It’s about a name for our new craft,” replied the other, with a knowing look on his face. “You see, we had it all made up to call her the Paragon or perhaps the Wanderer. But, fellows, after setting my eyes on the condition of affairs here, it struck me that names like those would be sort of out of order. And while Jerry was waiting to see the rest of our things loaded on the wagon, I just stepped into

a paint shop, and had him fix me up something on a neat little board. This goes over the door here, and can be read half a mile away. Now, hold your breath, boys!”

With that he began to undo a package he had brought, and which was carefully tied up in brown paper. Whipping the long narrow board free, presently Bluff held it up to the very spot where he had declared he meant to fasten it with nails. And as the others read what he had had painted on the signboard, they gave a shout of appreciation, for the name seemed to just hit the right chord.

It was “Pot Luck!”

CHAPTER IV—THE PERIL ON THE RIVER

“What do you think of it, boys?” asked Bluff, as he stood there, still holding up the board over the cabin door.

“Couldn’t have picked out a better name if you’d looked over the whole dictionary,” declared Frank. “It strikes right at the heart of things.”

“We’re sure going to take *pot-luck* while we’re aboard this jolly rover!” remarked Jerry, with a rollicking laugh, as he swept his hand around at the bare condition of the cabin’s interior. “Your uncle must have known what sort of boys we were, and how we’d manage to get along with a makeshift boat.”

“Well,” said Bluff, “I’m glad you like my choice. Just happened to think of it, you know; and seemed like it covered our case. And so *Pot Luck* goes; eh, boys?”

“There’s a hammer, and some nails on a shelf inside here, so you can hang it up where it belongs in a jiffy,” remarked Will, darting inside to bring the articles he mentioned to Bluff, who was still standing there with his arms extended.

And a few lusty blows from the hammer served to fasten the board up securely.

“Hurrah! three cheers for the good old *Pot Luck!*” cried Jerry; and they were given with a will, much to the amusement of some ship carpenters repairing a tugboat near by.

“If we had our flag hoisted now,” observed Bluff, “I’d dip the colors to the christening of the houseboat. As it is, we take off our hats to her.”

“Long may she wave; or, rather, ride the waves!” commented Frank.

“And safe may she carry the Outdoor Chums on their voyage to the Sunny South,” remarked Will. “May no tempest toss her about like a chip; and may she skip all the sand bars they say are always lying in wait to grip a floating boat.”

The arrival of the wagon carrying their supplies put an end to further talk; and for some little time all of them were as busy as bees storing the things on board.

“Never mind where they go now,” Frank had said, in the beginning. “After we get fairly afloat we can stow them in a better way. All we want now is to make sure they don’t get under our feet.”

“Or else drop overboard,” added Jerry, who had made sure to hang a canvas-covered ham where it would be particularly safe; for fried ham was one of his favorite dishes; and Jerry had dozens of them in his list of prize feeds.

Finally the empty wagon told that all had been taken aboard. Frank checked off the articles, and announced that nothing they had paid for was forgotten.

“And now to see about getting pushed out in the current, where we’ve got to work our passage,” he observed; at which the others manifested their delight.

Will, true to his passion, had seized upon his camera, and seemed ready to get some sort of snapshot of the “launching,” as he termed it. Whenever anything out of the usual was about to take place, Will could be depended on to show up, eager to transfer the scene to a plate or film, and so insure its being enjoyed for all time to come, affording much amusement and often laughter.

Jerry was already going around the inside of the cabin, with a mysterious look on his face, sounding the wooden walls, and evidently trying to locate some place of concealment where a queer old fellow would be apt to hide a lot of valuables, and then forget all about them until stricken down by some accident in far-away New Orleans.

Apparently the others would never hear the end of that idea until the cruise came to a termination, or the persistent Jerry unearthed a solution of the mystery.

The boat builder had a way of warping the houseboat out of his enclosure, and setting it adrift on the bosom of the Mississippi. At this point the river looked to be quite a good-sized stream to the boys; but later on they would deem this next door to a creek, after they had navigated the lower reaches, where it is sometimes twenty miles across from bank to bank.

The last word was said, and Mr. Whittaker waved his hand to the four young voyagers, wishing them the best of luck.

“Whoop! we’re off at last!” cried Bluff, as the current took the floating houseboat in its grip, and began to carry the unwieldy craft slowly along.

“Take a hand here, and be ready to swing her further out into the river,” called Frank. “It’s dangerous to keep near the shore, the boat builder said. All

together, now, boys; away she goes!”

When four stout young college boys put their shoulders to the task, something has just got to be doing. And as they toiled at that big sweep the clumsy houseboat slowly but steadily lurched away from the shore, and began to get more of the force of the current, that always runs stronger toward the middle of the river.

The city lay behind them now, and none of the boys felt the least bit of regret. They loved the open, and outdoor life was with them a passion.

Looking back, they could admire the picture that was presented to Will when he snapped his camera upon the last glimpse they would have of St. Paul, lying on the upper reach of the mighty river.

“Oh! don’t I feel like whooping it up, though!” cried Jerry; “because we’ve made a start on our long voyage!”

“Makes me think of that other trip we took down in Florida, when we had that fine little launch to handle, and saw something of life along the coast after we came out of that river,” Frank was saying, as he kept pushing with the sweep, so as to clear the shore more than ever.

“Sure it does,” echoed Bluff, enthusiastically. “Fact is, fellows, we’ve been through so many exciting affairs that nearly everything that happens is bound to make us remember some other adventure. Hey! me to sound the well here, and see if she’s taking water fast. Wouldn’t be a very nice thing to have our boat go down with us, before we’d been moving an hour.”

“Oh! no danger of that, Bluff,” Frank remarked, reassuringly; “Mr. Whitaker told me he had himself looked her all over while she was there in his basin; and he gave me to understand that there wasn’t a piece of rotten wood in all her timbers. Fact is, he said she was good for many years yet.”

“That sounds all right, Frank, but the best of boats will take water; and I can pump it up right now,” Bluff insisted.

“Well, suppose you keep at work,” the other continued, obligingly. “I like to have everybody satisfied when I’m sailing a boat. Pump away till you’re tired, if you feel that way. It’s silly to carry a cargo of water, when we’ve got such a lot of better things aboard.”

So Bluff amused himself with the pump as long as he could get any considerable stream to respond to his muscular efforts.

The other three hung about the sweep; and when Frank thought they ought to work out still further from the shore below the city, he found a pair of eager assistants to help him man that guiding oar.

Frank could see the time coming when he might not have such willing hands; and when the task of pushing that sweep would bring out many a grunt and groan from Bluff and Jerry. But everything was new now, and they actually

thought it fun to throw their sturdy young shoulders against the long handle, and bending to the job, urge the boat sideways through the swirling water.

"About when do we think of getting supper?" asked Jerry, after a little time had elapsed, and they could no longer see signs of the city that was situated on the eastern shore of the river.

"Listen to him; would you, Frank?" cried Bluff. "Always wanting to eat, and cut down our stock of rations. Why, it isn't more'n four o'clock yet, and at this time of year it won't get dark till near eight."

"Four hours more!" called out the indignant Jerry; "do you mean we don't get any of that good grub till then? I just won't stand for it, that's what! And I give you fair warning right now, that at five, sharp, I start the fire a-going in that stove. I'm going to get the first meal aboard, because Frank said I might; so don't either one of you open your mouths to say a word."

"Oh! all right," returned Bluff; who had really been managing matters so as to coax Jerry to undertake this part of the drudgery; when he would praise up his cooking in such a way that the other could hardly wait for another meal-time to roll around; "we know there isn't a fellow aboard who can hold a candle to you when it comes to slinging dishes together; that is, if you haven't forgotten, since going to college, all you ever knew in the old days."

"Me forgot how to cook?" ejaculated Jerry, warmly, and falling into the neat little trap in a way that made Frank turn to Will, and wink his eye several times. "Why, I tell you I'm a better hand at it than ever I was. After you've tasted my supper just you tell me the honest truth; that's all."

"I will, Jerry," said Bluff, keeping a straight face, though Frank knew he was chuckling with delight over the success of his little dodge, "and you can depend on it I'll never try to deceive you. If you can beat the meals you used to dish up in the old times, sure you must be a wonder."

"There's smoke around that bend there, Frank; what do you suppose makes it?" Will asked at this interesting moment.

"I suppose some steamboat is coming up the river," replied Frank.

"That's right," added Bluff, who had very good ears. "The breeze is dead against us, but I can hear the whoof of her escape steampipes as she butts up against the stiff current. I reckon we'll all get used to that grunting sound before we wind up this trip."

"I hope she gives us plenty of room," continued Will, a little nervously, as he planted himself where he thought he could get the best view of the oncoming river boat, so that he could snap a picture of the very first craft they met after starting on their long voyage.

Bluff, being more daring by nature, started to laugh at what Will said.

"You're sure the timid one, Will," he remarked, contemptuously, perhaps,

or it might be in a sort of condescending way; “why, the river is big, and there’s plenty of room for a dozen steamboats to pass us by; unless the pilots happen to be taking a snooze at the wheel.”

“There she pokes her nose around the bend!” called out Jerry.

“Seems to me, Frank, that she’s heading right at us, like there was only one little channel in this big river, and we happened to be sailing down the same. Say, don’t you think we ought to get a move on, and pull farther over to the shore?” and Will dropped his camera to the deck, as he laid a hand on the steering oar, which Frank had started to push against once more.

“Jump in, boys, and go at it with all your might!” Frank called out.

Bluff and Jerry began to realize that, after all, a river may be narrow, even if the banks do seem to be far apart; since there can be only fifty or one hundred or two hundred feet in which a steamboat drawing a certain amount of water may with safety proceed.

The boat that was pushing up the river was indeed heading directly for them. Perhaps the pilot was doing something else in his little cage aloft, for just at the minute none of them could see him there. He may have stooped down to light his pipe, having secured the wheel meanwhile.

“Oh! we’re going to be run down right in the start of the trip!” exclaimed Will, whose face had turned white as he saw the steamboat continuing to head in a direct line for the *Pot Luck*.

“Push harder, boys!” cried Frank, shutting his teeth tight together, and throwing his weight against the bending oar with the ferocity that a bucking “tackle” might show in a battle on the gridiron, when the fate of the game depended on his grappling with the fellow who was running with the ball for a decisive touchdown.

Bluff and Jerry saw how serious the situation was, and they bent every energy in their frames toward doing something that would cause the clumsy houseboat to move out of the way of the oncoming craft.

Already, in imagination, they could hear the crash as the bow cut them down; and the next instant they would be struggling in the current, away out from the shore, and likely to be drawn under the stern wheel of the unattached towboat.

Just then the steersman raised up his head in view in the frame that marked the window of the pilot house. They saw him stare at them as though hardly able to believe his eyes. Then he started to frantically whirl the wheel around, as if hoping to yet avert the accident that seemed so sure. The boat began to respond to his demand, but so slowly that it still looked as though only by what would be next door to a miracle could the *Pot Luck* avoid being smashed into kindling wood against the bow of the advancing power craft.

And yet, such was the boy's passion for his hobby, that Will, leaving the sweep, at which he could not find room beside his chums, sprang over to his camera, and took a picture of the nearby towboat, even while expecting to hear the shock of collision the next minute.

CHAPTER V—THE FIRST NIGHT AFLOAT

“Hard a-port!” the pilot of the river boat was calling.

Fortunately, that was just what Frank had started to do. Had his judgment been at all defective in the start, all would have been lost; for there was certainly no time to reverse, and go the other way.

It was quite an exciting time. Will managed to “snap” the three boys straining at that clumsy big steering oar called the “sweep”; with the towboat apparently dead ahead. It would, doubtless, give him an odd little creep every time he looked at the picture; for of the quartette Will was more inclined to be timid than any of his chums.

Of course the river boat had shut off steam, and was no longer pushing hard up against the current. Indeed, her stern wheel even began to churn the water wildly, in the endeavor to back, and thus at least lessen the blow, if one had to follow.

It was the onward rush of the houseboat with the current that proved the most dangerous factor in the matter; for there was no means of staying the progress of the *Pot Luck*.

Closer still they came; and Will even gripped a portion of the gunwale of the floating craft, under the impression that a collision was about due; when all of a sudden some new freak of the current seemed to seize the apparently doomed houseboat, for with a whirl the *Pot Luck* started on a new tack.

They passed so close to the side of the towboat that any one of the boys might, had they so desired, thrust out a hand, and touched the planking.

Frank sighed with relief, to realize that after all their voyage was not fated to be nipped in the bud at the very start.

“Hurrah!” cried Bluff; but his voice was too weak for the sound to be much

louder than a hoarse croak.

The pilot was shaking his fist at them from above as they swept past, and uttering hard words. Little they cared for what he said, since every boyish heart was full of thanksgiving, after the scare. Possibly they were in the wrong, since the channel seemed to be no place for a helpless houseboat likely to be met at any time by an up-river tow that would stretch from side to side.

“Whew! that was a narrow escape, though!” Jerry exclaimed, as he fell back, panting for breath after his labor at the sweep.

“It ought to teach us a lesson while we’re on the upper Mississippi,” Frank remarked, himself willing to rest a bit from his labors.

“You don’t mean, I hope, that we ought to learn to talk back, so as to give these river pilots as good as they send?” ventured Will, now recovering from his attack of the “shakes,” and hoping none of his mates had noticed how pale he had been.

“That would take years of practice, even if a fellow wanted to try it,” replied Frank, with a nervous little laugh. “No, what I meant was this: while the river is as small as it is now, with only a certain channel for big boats to follow, we must keep nearer the shore, and out of the passage. Then we’ll stand no danger of being run down, you see.”

“Oh!” remarked Bluff, with uplifted eyebrows; “that’s the way it stands, eh? And I was dead sure the fault all lay with that sleepy pilot, He must have been taking a nap, not to see us, till it was nearly too late to keep from smashing into us.”

“Well, I hardly believe it was as bad as that,” Frank affirmed. “He had a pipe between his teeth when he poked his head up, and I imagine he must have stooped just to light it, so as to be out of the wind. But I hope it will be a long day before we have another shave as close as that one.”

There were still a couple of hours of daylight left before evening would descend upon them, and they considered it good policy to keep on the move for some time yet. When the sun had set they could look for a promising place at which to tie up, and spend the coming night.

To these boys, accustomed as they were to a small lake, and a stream connected with the same that was hardly more than a creek, the upper Mississippi seemed particularly grand. It was a noble river, with very picturesque shores, and something new attracting their eager attention with almost every passing minute.

Later on in the voyage, when they were navigating the lower stretches of the mighty river, its vastness might appal them, but could never excite their admiration as this early part of the cruise did.

There were not many vessels afloat at this stage. Navigation does not begin

to show such bustle above Cairo as below the junction city, where the flood of the Ohio is the first considerable body of water to join forces with the Mississippi.

Still, to these boys from the interior, there was much to see; and one or the other seemed to be calling out perpetually, drawing attention to certain features of the landscape on either bank, the river itself, or some craft that appeared in view.

True to his word, Jerry, at a certain hour, vanished within the cabin; and presently smoke ascending from the pipe that projected above the flat roof announced that the first stage of supper had been taken.

By slow degrees Frank was working the boat in toward the shore on which it had been decided to pass the night. This being their first experience aboard such a craft, he believed that they had better take no risks of losing a good chance for anchoring to a friendly tree.

True, there did seem to be an anchor aboard, to be used in an emergency; but Frank had learned from Mr. Whittaker that the best way for tying up for the night was to find some means of using the stout cable. And he had also been warned to beware of getting into a shallow creek; since the river has a mean way of sometimes dropping half a foot during a single night; and in consequence they might find the houseboat stranded until another rise came along, which, in summer time, might not be for several weeks.

Perhaps the delightful aroma that began to drift out of the partly open cabin door helped to urge Frank to hasten. At any rate, in less than half an hour after Jerry disappeared, the clumsy boat was pushed in close to the overhanging shore, and nimble Bluff clambered up the bank, to whip the cable-end twice around an accommodating tree that happened to be growing just where it would prove of greatest use to the young river cruisers.

After that there was really little to do. Bluff got out a couple of fish lines and proceeded to cast them from the stern, having secured a piece of meat from the cook with which to bait them.

Before they went to bed he had hauled in quite a good-sized channel catfish, an ugly, dark-skinned creature, with keen pointed spikes along his spine, which Frank warned them must be avoided unless they wished to have a poisoned hand. Yet uninviting as the fish looked, the boys all pronounced it good eating when, in the morning, they had it for breakfast.

Night settled down about them as Jerry announced that supper was ready. The illumination of the interior of the cabin was not all that they could wish, and more than one complaint was heard as they sat around the table, which when not in use could be dropped so that it lay along the wall.

"I think I saw a big lamp somewhere about," Frank declared; "and tomorrow I'll see what I can do with it. Yes, there's where it used to hang, right

over the table. If it can be made to work it ought to give us plenty of light. Bring out the two lanterns we made sure to fetch along, Bluff; with their help we might get on for one night."

Indeed, they were all so happy that it would take many shortcomings of this type to disturb them to any great extent.

It had really been a whole year now since the Outdoor Chums had enjoyed an outing together, because of being away at college. Old memories thronged their minds as they sat there, enjoying that first meal, and the talk was connected with many events of the past.

"I haven't had such a feed all the time I've been away from home," declared Bluff. "And, Jerry, honest now, I really begin to believe that you *have* improved in your cooking more'n a little."

Jerry fell into the trap in a way that made Frank smile behind his hand.

"A little!" he echoed, warmly; "why, I'm going to surprise the lot of you pretty soon. You wait and see. I used to be a greenhorn, and do things just in the old rough and ready camp way; but now I've studied the scientific methods of a *chef*. And I've got a whole lot of messes I'm going to ring on you fellows sooner or later."

"If they're as good as what you gave us to-night, you can't begin too soon," remarked Bluff, keeping his face straight; though Frank saw him send a sly wink in his direction once or twice.

All of the boys were tired, and anxious to try their bunks. These were ranged along one side of the cabin wall, two and two, "Pullman style," as Bluff called it.

They had brought their own blankets along, because it was not known whether the boat was supplied. Plenty were found aboard in a box; but they smelled so strongly of camphor that the boys preferred to use their own.

Frank was the last one to crawl in. He had taken a turn on deck to see that all was well, and no peril hanging over them from a break in the cable. This uneasiness of the first night afloat would soon wear away, of course; when the boys might be able to take things as they came without worrying about anything.

Frank felt very comfortable in his bunk, and soon snuggled down to sleep. He lay there for half an hour or more, however, the situation was so novel to him; but finally it must have passed away.

Some time later he awoke, and in the darkness was for the moment unable to place himself. He could hear the other boys breathing hard, and also the gurgle of the river as it swirled past the blunt end of the beamy houseboat.

Then Frank received a sudden shock. Plainly he heard someone try the door of the cabin from without, as though a prowler had dropped on the deck of the *Pot Luck*, and was endeavoring to find an entrance; bent on stealing some

of the goods which the young voyagers had loaded up with, when making their start on the long cruise down the Mississippi.

CHAPTER VI—WHAT FRANK FOUND ON DECK

Frank sat up part way, leaning on his elbow, as he listened for a repetition of the strange sound. His heart was beating at an unusual rate, but his mind was as clear as a bell.

Just then he remembered placing his shotgun within reach of his extended arm, if he but chose to lean out of the lower bunk. And he also congratulated himself that the choice of sleeping quarters for the voyage had favored him with one of the two bunks close to the floor of the cabin.

Yes, he certainly could hear someone, or something, tampering with the door. He knew that they had tied up in a rather lonely spot; but it was hard to imagine any wild animal coming aboard to investigate this clumsy craft.

And no wild animals, at least none found outside the countries of apes and monkeys, were able to try the handle of a door, actually turning it several times.

“What is it, Frank?” breathed a faint whisper close to his ears; and he became conscious of the fact that Will had also heard the sound, and was listening in his lower berth, his heart doubtless almost standing still with sudden anxiety.

For answer Frank slipped gently out of his bed. His outstretched hand came in contact with his gun, simply because he knew just where he had placed the weapon. It was a double-barreled shotgun, a hammerless, that had been given to Frank at his last birthday by his three chums, and which as yet he had not had the pleasure of using much.

He knew that Will must have guessed what he was doing, for he caught the intake of breath that signified renewed alarm.

Frank, however, did not creep toward the door, and fling it suddenly open, as no doubt his chum anticipated he would do. He had not the slightest idea of shooting at any intruder, his sole intention being to give the other a good scare, that would be apt to make him think twice before returning again to the moored houseboat.

There were four windows to the cabin, small affairs, each covered with the heavy wire that is used in stables, and places where, air being needed, it is also advisable to keep out intruders. But Frank happened to know that one of these had been only partly covered in this manner, and that there was plenty of room whereby he could thrust the barrels of his gun out, in order to shoot.

This he did without any further delay.

The boom of the shotgun sounded loud in the confined space of the house-boat cabin.

"Whoop!" yelled Bluff, as he came tumbling down from his elevated berth, doubtless under the impression that an earthquake had dropped in upon them for a visit.

Jerry followed suit instantly. Meanwhile, Frank was feeling for his little electric torch, which he had kept within reach of his hand, in case he wanted to see the time during the night, an alarm clock being one of the fixtures of the *Pot Luck* equipment.

"What under the sun happened?" gasped Jerry; and just then Frank snapped on the bright ray of light, when they immediately saw that he was holding his gun in the other hand.

"Get some clothes on, fellows!" said Frank, quietly; yet smiling to see the blank expression on the faces of the pair who had been aroused as if by the discharge of a cannon.

"What did you shoot, Frank?" demanded Bluff, as, in obedience to the words of one who was looked up to as the leader of the set, he began to draw on a pair of trousers, with the others following suit.

"Nothing," replied Frank.

"But say, you didn't do that just to give us a scare; that wouldn't be like you, Frank," ventured Jerry. "If it were Bluff here, I'd think that was the case, because he's always trying some joke or other. Tell us, Frank, what's up?"

"We heard some wild animal trying to get in here, and Frank shot it through one of the windows!" Will declared, solemnly; for that was just what he believed had happened.

"Did you, Frank; and how could you see to do it, with the night so dark outside?" Jerry demanded.

"Will heard the sound," Frank explained, "but it was no animal at all, only some person trying to get in."

"Tell me that; will you!" burst out Bluff. "Trying to rob us the very first night out! Lucky there's a bolt on the door, as well as a padlock outside; and that we thought to shoot it home. But, Frank, did you hit him; and do you think the poor critter is lying out there now, badly hurt?"

"Don't be foolish, Bluff!" exclaimed Frank, indignantly. "You know me

better than to think I'd aim at a human being, when there was no need of it. I just banged away up in the air to give him a scare. And I rather think it filled the bill all right."

"Let's go out and see," suggested the impetuous Bluff, starting for the door.

"Hold on a minute, till everybody is ready," cautioned Frank; "better get your shoes on, too, boys; because it's cold on deck at this time of night."

Presently all pronounced themselves as ready to stroll outside, and see what was awaiting them. From the varied assortment of dangerous weapons which the chums brandished, one might think they anticipated finding the deck fairly swarming with river pirates; and that a serious mix-up was in store. Will carried the hatchet; Bluff his pump-gun, about which the others were always railing; Jerry had a rifle; while, as we know, Frank still kept his reliable double-barreled present handy.

"Shall I open the door now?" demanded the impatient and daring Bluff.

"Yes, and be careful how you use that gun of yours," warned Frank, who knew the hasty ways of the other of old.

So Bluff flung the door wide open, and they poured forth. He carried a lighted lantern in addition to his gun; and Frank still had that useful little electric hand-torch in commission, so that there promised to be plenty of light provided, by means of which the whole deck, from stem to stern, could be illuminated.

Bluff experienced a sense of bitter disappointment, for nothing jumped at him as he had really hoped might be the case. Instead, all seemed peaceful and quiet out there under the summer stars. The river whined and gurgled as it continued to run against an obstruction in the way of the broad houseboat; little wavelets lapped the shore close by; but there was no other sound save the far-away wheeze of a towboat's exhaust, as it bucked the current of the swift-flowing river, with possibly a raft of loaded barges in charge.

"Why, there's not a thing here, Frank," exclaimed Bluff, looking around him, and blinking like an owl at the light of his own lantern.

Frank had not expected to discover anybody still crouching there on the deck. He believed that sudden roar of his gun would be enough to send the trespasser flying, whoever he might be.

"I was pretty sure we wouldn't find him here," he remarked, casting his eyes around at the same time.

"Say, it couldn't be that some animal gnawing, a rat maybe, fooled you bad, I suppose, Frank?" suggested the doubting Jerry.

"How about that, Will?" asked the one addressed, turning to his chum.

"Oh! I heard it as plain as anything," Will hastened to declare, vehemently; "and just as Frank said, it must have been somebody trying to open the door. First I thought of panthers and alligators and all those things; but now I just know it

must have been a man, because he turned the knob of the door, and even shook it a little as if he might be angry because it was fast."

"Listen to the nerve of that!" exclaimed Bluff. "Thinkin' we expected to keep open house on this trip. Tried the door, did he? Wanted to come in and join the Outdoor Chums! Perhaps if we'd left that door unfastened we'd have waked up in the morning to find a tramp sleeping on the floor of the cabin."

"What is it, Frank?" asked the nervous Will, upon seeing the other start forward.

For answer Frank stooped down, and seemed to pick some object from the deck, just where the gunwale of the boat cast a little shadow.

"This doesn't belong to anybody here, I reckon?" he remarked, holding aloft the object he had found.

"A hat, and an old slouch one at that!" exclaimed Will.

"I pass!" remarked Bluff, immediately.

"Give me the go-by, Frank; never saw it before now!" called out Jerry, after he had taken one good look at the head covering, which differed in every way from such hats as the boys carried along with them.

"And," Frank went on to say, "as it certainly wasn't here when we went to bed, we can set it down as pretty sure the fellow who crept aboard the *Pot Luck* while we were asleep dropped it, when he had to cut and run so lively after my shot."

"That goes," observed Jerry, with conviction in his voice; for he evidently was in agreement with all that Frank said.

"Looks to me like a tramp's hat," remarked Will, as he bent closer to examine. "But see here, Frank, there's some marks inside; aren't there?"

"Letters, too," echoed Jerry, crowding closer.

Frank held up the hat so that the light from his torch would cover the inside; and there, sure enough, the boys discovered three letters fastened to the crown of the old felt head covering.

They stared at them as if hardly able to believe their eyes, and there was a good reason for this, since the letters were:

M. T. S.

"My goodness!" ejaculated Will, he being the first to recover his breath; and what he said seemed to voice the sentiments of his chums, for they were all of one mind there; "M. T. S. it says, fellows; and don't you see those letters stand for Marcus Stackpole, the very man Uncle Felix warned us never to let come aboard of his houseboat! And here he's tried to break in the very first night we're on the river! Don't it beat everything though, what it all means?"

CHAPTER VII—ANOTHER CARELESS PILOT

When the four chums went back into the cabin their faces were a little grave. It was not only Will who was wondering now what the nature of the difference between old Uncle Felix and this strange Marcus Stackpole could be, that made the owner of the houseboat seem to detest the other so much, and he on his part appear so much in earnest to get aboard the *Pot Luck*.

“Locked the door again; did you, Frank?” Jerry asked, as they sat down for a little talk in the cabin, with the lantern placed on the table.

“You can make up your mind he did,” replied Will; “and I tried it in the bargain, to make sure it was fast. You see, we don’t know what sort of a fellow this Stackpole might turn out to be. Uncle is afraid of him somehow. And it seems to me he must have something on board the old boat that this Marcus, somehow, wants pretty bad, if he’s willing to take such chances to get it.”

“There you are!” exclaimed Jerry, quickly; “the more you think about it, the stronger you’ll believe my idea is, that there must be some sort of a treasure hid about here, and this Marcus wants to get his hands on the same. Laugh at me again, now, will you, when I’m sounding the walls, and peeking into corners? I’m going to keep it up till I find out I’m on the wrong tack; then I’ll go about.”

But all of them soon grew sleepy again, and Frank suggested that they turn in.

“I don’t believe he’ll come back to-night, anyhow,” he remarked, as he began to get himself ready for bed again. “That sudden shot so close to his ears must have frightened Marcus some. Perhaps he even thought I was trying to fill him full of Number Sevens at short range.”

“Oh! wouldn’t I have liked to see him skipping up the bank, though,” sighed Will, who seemed to miss so many splendid views, from one cause or another.

“Well, maybe another time you’ll get that chance,” said Jerry, consolingly, as he got into his upper berth; having placed his repeating shotgun on a couple of large nails which seemed to have been driven into the wall conveniently near,

as if for this very purpose.

Presently Frank “doused the glim,” by blowing out the lantern; and once more darkness and silence reigned in the cabin of the *Pot Luck*.

Nor was there any further disturbance that night. With the coming of daylight through the small windows facing the east Frank was astir; and, hearing him moving, first one, and then another of his chums began to yawn and stretch.

“Everything all right, Frank?” asked Will, crawling from his bunk.

“Seems like it,” was the reply.

“What do we want to do first?” asked Bluff, sliding down from above.

“Well, for my part, I feel like taking a morning dip,” Frank answered.

“That sounds good to me, too!” called out Jerry, poking his head out after the manner of a cautious old tortoise.

Inside of ten minutes the whole four were splashing in the river close to the bank. The water was cool and invigorating, and, being lusty boys, they certainly seemed to enjoy it.

Frank saw to it that no one stayed in too long; and after getting aboard they rubbed down with towels brought for this very purpose. Then every one declared himself as hungry as a bear, and preparations for breakfast were in order.

As Jerry had constituted himself chief cook for the trip, to be relieved at intervals by one of the others, Bluff volunteered to lay in a supply of firewood for the little stove.

“Give me the axe, and I’ll go ashore to cut up a log,” he remarked.

Frank was secretly amused to see that the fire-eater also carried his gun ashore with him. Evidently he had a little suspicion that the bothersome man might be still hovering around the vicinity, and would have to be “shooed off” by a threatening display of hardware, in the shape of a gun that could shoot six times without being removed from the shoulder.

Presently the steady strokes of the axe told that Bluff was exercising his muscles to good advantage, and that they could count on at least two days’ supply of firewood as a result of his labors.

The breakfast was “prime,” everybody admitted; and Jerry was advised to keep a line or two out for stray catfish every time they tied up for a stop. There were buffalo fish to be caught, Mr. Whittaker had assured them, that, while a little coarse, would be found good eating; and all of them happened to be rather fond of fish as a diet, which was a good thing, under the circumstances.

“It isn’t such a hard job to get a start on the old boat, anyhow,” remarked Jerry, as with poles they pushed away from the bank, until the slow current near the shore began to catch them in its grip, and they found the *Pot Luck* moving.

Once they had attained the proper distance from shore, really there was little to do all day long, but keep an eye on things, and make sure the boat did

not turn sideways to the stream.

By keeping away from the channel they avoided all danger from such boats as passed up or down the river.

During the morning Will, who had been looking steadily back over the course they had come, called the attention of the others to something which he seemed to think merited their notice.

"That dinky little power-boat yonder keeps hovering just so far behind us," he said, uneasily.

"Well, the fellows aboard have a right to go and come just as they please," Frank remarked, though he gave the object in question a long look, and then went into the cabin for the field glasses.

"Sometimes he comes as close as he is now," Will went on to say; "and then he seems to stop still, till you can hardly see him in the dim distance, when he'll start up again. I think sometimes they're fishing, and anchor in favorite places. Then again I seem to think that perhaps he may be aboard."

"By that you mean our visitor of last night, Marcus Stackpole, I reckon?" Jerry asked.

"What do you see, Frank; any fellow without his head-covering on?" Bluff inquired, at the same time.

"There seem to be several men aboard, but I don't see them fishing," Frank replied. "The fact is, one of them just pointed down the river; but whether he was calling the attention of the others to this boat, or something else, I can't say."

He took another look through the field glasses, and immediately laughed.

"Well, one of them has something in his hands now that looks like the glasses I'm handling," he said. "Yes, and there he goes, leveling it at us!"

"That settles it!" exclaimed Jerry. "They're interested in this boat, and, ten to one, the fellow we had aboard last night came from that same launch. Well, if that doesn't knock the high persimmon down, though! We thought this M. S. was a common, every-day tramp; and here it turns out that he owns a private power yacht, and can go cruising on his own hook, just where he likes."

"Tell you what, boys," remarked Will; "chances are, he's some sort of rascal, perhaps a real river pirate; and that squatty little power-boat is being used for robbery on the big water highway!"

"Well, the boat looks dingy and dark, like all buccaneer craft are, they say, you know," Will went on, quite undismayed by this reception of his startling theory.

Frank himself was more than puzzled. He could not seem to get an inkling as to what the truth might be.

The little launch far away up the river did seem to be acting very strangely. And those aboard were certainly curious with regard to the *Pot Luck*, for they

had their glasses trained on the houseboat at different times. Then, apparently, the power-boat was anchored again, for the boys began drawing further and further away from it, until the haze of distance seemed to entirely obliterate the suspicious craft from their observation.

“Why don’t they come right along, and pass us by?” asked Will.

“That’s a part of the game, it seems,” ventured Jerry; “just to hang around, and wait for another chance to creep aboard this jolly old rover. But make up your minds, fellows, we’ll be ready to give ’em a warm reception.”

“Yes,” broke in Bluff, “and if I only had a chance to fire at long range, I’d be tempted to let ’em feel how hot shot can get, when fired from a real gun!” and he gave Jerry an odd look as he said this.

The boys decided that since the day was rather warm they would do with a cold “snack” at noon, leaving the getting of dinner until evening arrived, with its cooling airs.

Bluff was perched high up in the bow, and engaged in eating his second ham sandwich, while he observed a steamboat turning a bend far below, and made some humorous remarks concerning river pilots in general.

Jerry leaned against the sweep, and was supposed to be watching to see that the boat did not swerve too much while moving steadily along in the current. Frank and Will were inside, cutting a fresh supply of bread, with which to make their second helping, the boiled ham coming in very handy for the purpose; and some cold coffee left over from the early morning meal answering for a drink.

Frank had just risen to his feet, and was taking the first bite out of his sandwich when he heard a screech from without, and felt a sudden shock.

Will gave a shout, and let the knife with which he was carving the ham, fall on the table.

“They’re boarding us, Frank!” he called out, as they both darted for the door, passing through together, and appearing on the deck; where they found Jerry making all sorts of strenuous efforts to swing the boat around, as she seemed to be broadside to the current.

As Frank looked around, the first alarming thing he noticed was that Jerry seemed to be utterly alone on deck; and yet a minute before he had surely heard the voice of Bluff calling out to the one at the sweep.

Bluff had certainly disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII—FACE TO FACE

AT LAST

“What happened?” cried Frank, unable to understand why the boat acted so queerly, and seemed trying to head up-stream again.

“Must be a snag has hold of her, and is trying to turn her around!” grunted the straining Jerry; thereby acknowledging that he had not kept as good a lookout ahead as a careful pilot should, or he would certainly have known where a snag lay hidden, by the swirl of water about it.

“Where’s Bluff?” cried Will.

“Oh! reckon he went over to see what sort of a snag it was!” replied Jerry.

Then Frank remembered that the last thing he had seen of Bluff he was perched on the bulwark of the boat, with his back down the river, and enjoying his second relay of lunch.

“He’s been knocked overboard by the sudden stop of the boat!” he exclaimed, making a rush for the bow.

As he looked over, he discovered the object of his anxiety holding on to the stem of the craft with desperate zeal. Doubtless, as he was sent flying, losing his balance, Bluff had had the good sense to let his sandwich go, and seize the first projection he could find, to prevent his being carried under the bulky craft, if she continued on down-stream.

“I’m here, right-side up with care, Frank!” he spluttered; “and I don’t like it any too well, either. So please reach me your helping hand, and give a pull.”

Frank called to Will to hurry over and help, for he realized that Bluff, with all his clothes thoroughly soaked, would be too much of a load for one.

So together they drew him up, none the worse for his ducking, save that he must change his clothes.

“Worst thing about it,” declared Bluff, good-naturedly, when the others were standing around, grinning at his forlorn appearance, “is that I lost that nice wedge of ham. Somebody make me up another sandwich; won’t you, while I get out of these soggy duds, and into some dry ones?”

“But the first thing we ought to do is to swing the boat free from that snag,” remarked Frank, “I don’t fancy being held up here like this. It must be a grounded log, with one end pointing up-stream; and we’re stuck on that like a pivot, by the way the boat swings around, first this way, then that.”

He took an observation, and found out just where the point of the snag seemed to be pressing into the bottom planks of the houseboat.

“By good luck it’s over on one side,” Frank remarked, after a while; “and if

we all throw our weight over to starboard, perhaps the boat may list enough to let her slip off. Come along, and try it, anyhow. If that fails, we may have to start something else moving."

But it did not fail, fortunately. Just as Frank had said, the nose of the submerged log happened to be against the slippery bottom of the houseboat near the edge, and a very small list started the craft to sliding. They heard a grating noise, and then the boat once more came to an even keel, starting to glide along with the current.

Of course it was easy enough, after that, to work her head around, so that it again pointed down the river.

"I'll keep a better lookout after this, Frank," Jerry asserted, knowing that the fault was principally his, since he had been left in charge as pilot of the expedition.

Will had meanwhile obligingly made up another "snack" for the swimmer; and Bluff ate it with the utmost unconcern, just as though falling overboard from a snagged houseboat were an every-day occurrence in his experience.

During the afternoon they sighted the first real shantyboat seen on the cruise. A savage dog aboard barked at them as long as they were passing; for the boat happened to be tied up to the shore at the time. A rough-looking man was filing a saw, and Frank gave it as his opinion that he followed this trade; dropping down the river, a mile or so at a time, as business permitted, and possibly following the profession of sewing-machine agent as well.

Late that afternoon it began to look blustery, and Frank was more or less concerned as to where they might find a suitable place at which to tie up for the coming night.

They had passed several good spots, but it was too early to stop drifting for the day; and now that they wanted a shelter, and a stout post for the cable, both seemed absent.

"Looks like something ahead there, Frank," announced Jerry, who still stuck to the heavy sweep, as though he wanted to make amends for his carelessness earlier in the day.

"Yes, you're right," the other answered; "and unless my eyes tell me wrong, seems as if there might be several boats collected there. I can see a shantyboat; there are some small row-boats, and another big craft moored to the shore that must be a rich man's pleasure craft."

"Ought we take chances by joining them?" asked cautious Will.

Frank swept a look around at the darkening sky ahead.

"The way things look," he observed, reluctantly, "I'm afraid we'll have to chance it for once, though we were warned to keep away from other boats all we could. But there is some bad weather coming, and perhaps these fellows know it, and have put in here to avoid being caught below in the open."

"Then shall I swing her in toward the shore now?" asked Jerry.

"I'll give you a helping hand," volunteered Frank, who knew the sensitive nature of his chum, and understood how, in all probability, Jerry must have been repenting of his carelessness all the afternoon.

Between them they easily managed to get the cumbersome houseboat into the cove where the others lay snugly. It was a good harbor, at any rate, in case of a blow; and Frank would have been greatly pleased did the *Pot Luck* lie there all alone.

"Say, that's a fine affair there," remarked Bluff, as he stood at the side, and looked toward the large craft that snuggled against the shore, being held by strong cables both above and below; "and some rich fellow's pleasure boat, too, because she can go up or down the river, having a gasolene engine. I'd like to see what she might be like inside. There's a young fellow standing watching us, Frank; would you mind if I stepped over, and struck up an acquaintance with him?"

"Sure not, Bluff; and I'll go you one better by keeping you company."

"Fine," remarked Bluff; "just wait a minute, and I'll join you. I want to get my gun."

"Hold on," laughed Frank; "what do you think you're going to run up against here? Ten to one these people are all honest chaps. Why, I can see a sign right now, on one of the shantyboats, and it tells us that the man aboard is a locksmith."

"That's just it," spoke up Bluff, as he dived into the cabin, and came out again bearing his repeater; "don't you see that he's got what's meant to be a picture of a gun on his sign? That means he mends them; and I've a notion my pump-gun needs a little attention."

"Same old story, eh?" remarked Frank; "I remember that long ago it used to be getting out of order every little while, and made you lots of trouble."

"Oh! it's nothing to speak of," Bluff declared, always ready to stand up in defense of his arms; "but while I had the chance I thought it would be a good thing to have a repair man take a look at it. When you want a gun you want it bad; and it ought to be always ready for use."

"Glad to hear you say that, Bluff," Frank admitted; because as a rule his chum was inclined to be careless in his ways.

Leaving Jerry starting preparations for the supper, with Will to assist in case of need, the other two stepped ashore, and sauntered toward the clump of boats.

Frank noticed that the young fellow watched them coming with something of interest; but then, that would only be natural under such circumstances. He also made certain that the other was a complete stranger, and therefore could not

be one of Oswald Fredericks' college cronies.

"Howdy, strangers?" remarked the other, as they came up; "I suppose, now, that you're off on a little trip, the same as I am, with my helper here?" and he pointed to a husky-looking fellow who was wiping some machinery.

This fact seemed to allay any slight suspicion the lads may have entertained in the beginning, so they stopped to chat with the two. Instead of hurrying on in the direction of the boat where the gun repairer had his headquarters, Bluff hovered around. To tell the truth, he was greatly struck with the elaborate appearance of the boat, which had the name of *Lounger* painted on her bow; and he was hoping the owner would invite them both inside to see how she was fitted up.

This was just what did happen presently, as they continued to talk. Frank might have thought it wise to decline the invitation, giving as an excuse the plea that the hour was growing late; but the impetuous Bluff was not going to be cheated out of a treat so easily.

"Sure we'll step in, and look around, since you're so kind as to invite us," he declared, before Frank could say a word. "Some fine day, when my ship comes home, I may be wanting to build a boat like this to knock about in; and I'd like to know how you've arranged things inside. Come along, Frank; plenty of time."

Of course Frank could not well hold back after that, so he followed at the heels of the others.

"Please step in, both of you!" said the owner of the fine pleasure houseboat, and as he said this, he opened the cabin door, allowing the eager Bluff to enter; and then gently pushing Frank after him, closed the door behind him.

"Wait, I've got electrics here, and I'll push the button. This is what you might call a modern, up-to-date boat, and you'll get the surprise of your life right now."

They surely did; for as the light suddenly sprang up they saw sitting about the luxuriously-furnished cabin three other fellows, in whom they easily recognized Oswald Fredericks and his college chums, Raymond Ellis and Duke Fletcher!

It was certainly a tableau, as the rivals stared at each other.

CHAPTER IX—THE GAME OF BLUFF

"Why, hello! Langdon, just dropped in to see me, eh? Rather nice of you, too, considering how little we got together in college!"

Fredericks, as he said this, made a movement with his hand toward the young fellow who had ushered Frank and Bluff into the cabin of the big and commodious power houseboat; and immediately the grind of a key in the lock told that he had seen to it that the way of escape was cut off.

They were four to two, a rather top-heavy arrangement, Frank thought, as he backed a little, so as to keep any of the fellows from getting behind him.

Outwardly he seemed fairly calm, though his eyes were flashing with the spirit of defiance that moved his soul.

"You know as well as anything, Fredericks," he said, coldly, "that if I'd had any idea this was your boat, nothing could have tempted me to come in here, or bother you at all. But your friend told us it was his boat, and that he was traveling all alone, except for the man who was mending the engine out there."

"Oh! well, Benedict only did what I asked him to do, when I saw that it was your crazy old tub coming in to tie up here," replied the other, with a careless shrug of his shoulders. "Looked as if fortune wanted to just play the whole thing right into my hands; for I was hoping this very afternoon you'd happen along, as things began to seem dull."

"Well, what are we to believe about this; is it a sort of trap, and do you expect to jump on us, now you've got us in here?" asked Frank.

Apparently the other was surprised to see him take it so coolly. Perhaps he had even hoped to hear Frank Langdon beg to be let off without any trouble.

"Well, you see, the chance to even up old scores is a fine one, since we're two to your one," the other remarked, bitterly.

"So far as I know, there are no scores to settle," said Frank. "I never knowingly wronged you, or tried to interfere with your business when in college. In fact, on several occasions, I've even left a group of fellows when you came along, because I didn't want to have any trouble."

"Yes, and that's one of the things I've got against you, Langdon," declared Oswald, with a scowl. "It looked as if you felt a contempt for me, and couldn't even bear to be seen in my company. Some of the fellows said as much, and told me I was foolish to stand for it."

"But you surely knew yourself that it was never intended that way, Fredericks. I wanted to be left alone to go my own way, and I knew that some fellows had made up their minds to bring us to blows. Now, fighting isn't at all to my taste, though I'm sorry to say I've had to do my share of it in my day. Just forget that there's such a fellow as Frank Langdon alive, and I'm sure you'll never know otherwise for all of me."

"He's squealing, Ossie!" exclaimed Duke Fletcher.

“Yes,” broke in the second college chum, Raymond Ellis, “because we’ve got him penned up here, where we can give him what he ought to have gotten long ago, he sets up a whine that he looks on fighting as a moral sin, and doesn’t want to indulge in it.”

Frank laughed in the face of this chap.

“Depend on it, Ellis,” he said, with cutting coldness, “that if ever I am forced into fighting in a crowd where you figure, I’ve got something to give you that’s been hanging fire a long time; in fact, ever since you knocked down that half-witted Bailey boy, and bruised his face because he said something you didn’t just like. When I heard of it I said to myself that some fine day, if the chance comes, I’m going to pay that debt back. If you think that time has come now, all right. Bluff, you oughtn’t to be in this game, because you’ve never done anything to irritate his lordship. They may let you out, perhaps.”

“Let me out!” roared the impulsive Bluff; “and leave you here alone with the whole bunch of cowards? I’d like to see them do it, that’s all! And what’s more, right now I want to give solemn warning that the first move any fellow makes toward laying so much as the tip of his finger on you, Frank, bang goes this gun!”

Bluff looked the part to the life. He was mad clear through, and the way he swung that menacing weapon of his, first toward Oswald, who ducked, and then covering one of the others, who turned as white as a sheet, told the story.

Frank, who knew that the gun was quite destitute of a single charge, since Bluff had been even then on the way to have it mended, could hardly keep from laughing outright. But then, how were those fellows to know anything like that?

“Here, hold on with that blunderbuss!” exclaimed Oswald; and small wonder that there was a suspicious quiver to his voice, for Bluff certainly looked equal to doing all he threatened so wildly.

“It was all a joke, see!” cried Ellis; and then as the gun swung again so that it began to point toward him, unable to stand the strain any longer, he dropped on his hands and knees, and crawled under the table.

Frank knew that nothing was to be feared any longer.

“I’ll trouble you to unlock that door,” he said, wheeling on the astonished young man from St. Paul, who had been witnessing these things, without having a word to say, the smile dying out of his face.

“Oh! sure, just as you say,” mumbled the other, hastening to comply; “queer how some people don’t seem able to take a joke at all.”

“Yes, it looks like that, perhaps,” returned Frank, severely; “but only for my chum here happening to bring his gun along, we might be having a parrot and monkey time of it right now. Step to one side, or I might rub up against you in passing. Come on, Bluff, you did it for them that time, sure enough.”

With that Frank stepped outside, and Bluff quickly followed. Hardly had the latter gotten free from the cabin than he turned, and "broke" his gun, to show the disgusted conspirators it was quite empty, and that they had been hoodwinked by his quick wit.

Still, none of them seemed to feel like rushing out after the retreating pair. Frank, accompanied by his chum, walked to the shantyboat where the sign of the locksmith hung. After a look at the pump-gun, the man said he could fix it in ten minutes, so that it would work all right. Accordingly the two boys sat down to wait until the job was completed.

It was getting quite dusky when they were ready to leave; and Bluff, after a look outside, seeing that it would be necessary for them to pass the pleasure boat of Fredericks again, bought half a dozen loaded shells from the man.

"Now," said Bluff, after he had injected one of these into the firing chamber, "I feel safe in passing that boat. If they make any sort of a move against us, I'll let fly a load in the air first to warn 'em that the repeater isn't on the shelf any longer, but ready to do business at the same old stand."

"Well, be careful what you do, that's all," warned Frank, determined to keep in close touch with his hot-headed comrade, so that in an emergency he could snatch the gun away, if Bluff seemed disposed to use it the wrong way.

But they were not molested at all. The big young chap who had been tinkering with the engine, grinned as they passed by, and Frank thought he nodded to them in a sort of friendly way, as though to say he understood what had happened, and considered it a good joke on his employer.

"Engine broke down?" asked Bluff, in a friendly manner, as he passed.

"Just what she has," replied the other; "and if we send back to St. Paul for a casting we may be stuck right here several days."

"Hope it is a whole month," muttered Bluff, as he trotted along at the heels of his leader; and Frank, for that matter, echoed the wish, since it would save them from more or less anxiety.

When they got aboard the *Pot Luck* it was to find that supper was well under way, and that the two who ran the house were quite ignorant of what had been going on.

And as Bluff, in his impatient style, started to exclaim how he only wished that Oswald had run up against Frank's fist, both Will and Jerry jumped to their feet, demanding that they hear the story.

Their indignation was justifiable when told of the trap Fredericks and his set had laid for Frank. And Bluff was only too proud when he heard Frank admit that if it had not been for his having his "terrible weapon" along at the time, the chances were that when they two came back to the boat, they would be bearing some of the marks of a fiercely contested battle on their faces.

“And I want to serve notice here and now,” continued Bluff, as he affectionately patted his pump-gun, and held it up to the gaze of the others; “that after this there’s going to be no sort of sport made of this noble weapon. Today it saved Frank and myself a mauling. When they saw what it was, they cringed like a pack of cowards. Why, would you believe it? that Ellis just crawled under the table! Shows the kind of fellow he is. And, boys, the gun was empty and out of commission all the while, remember.”

“Hurrah! bully for Bluff. He’s got the right name!” shouted Jerry, in his enthusiasm, pretending to wave the hat he was not wearing at the time.

“Promise me to never more sneer at a pump-gun, as long as I carry this prize cannon along!” continued Bluff, seriously, but with a sparkle in his eye.

“We solemnly promise!” said Will, holding up his right hand.

“I’ll try and control my indignation whenever I can, Bluff,” said Jerry. “But all the same I’m thinking it was the fellow behind the gun, and not that weapon itself, that deserves the praise. What’s the matter, Will; you look as if you felt bad because you didn’t have a hand in it, too?”

“Oh! it’s the hardest luck ever,” said the other, in deep disgust. “Just to think what a noble picture that would have made, with our chum holding the crowd at bay with his gun; Frank ready to sail in and help; and Ellis crawling under the table! I’m the most unfortunate fellow you ever heard tell of, to miss such glorious chances. I wish you’d only tell me when you think there’s anything going to happen, so I could jump in, and immortalize you all. But some fine day I’ll be along when one of these things happens; see if I don’t!”

CHAPTER X—A CALL FOR HELP

“I tell you what, Frank, that was a great scheme of yours, to think of buying this little skiff for a dinghy, or tender!” remarked Bluff, three days later, as he paddled ashore with the end of the cable they expected to fasten to a tree, as the night was not far away.

“Well, I knew all along that every decent houseboat ought to have a small skiff dangling along,” Frank answered, as he leaned over the side, and watched the other hitch the painter to the bow of the large, roomy craft, which continued

to point down-stream; for, when fastening up for the night, as stem and stern were so much alike, they never bothered bringing the boat around, as that meant additional work in the morning upon starting.

“And I expect to enjoy a heap of fishing from that same little affair,” remarked Jerry, “when we get further along down the big river.”

“Now, heave ho! everybody, and we’ll have her snug alongside the bank in a jiffy!” Frank called out, taking hold of the cable, while the others used the several stout poles that had been secured for the purpose of pushing. “There she is, right side up with care! Now, let’s hope we’ll be better off than last night, when we got the cross current wash of the Wisconsin River.”

“Well, those rowdies from Prairie du Chien didn’t find us after all, thanks to Frank here, who expected they’d be looking, and got us to push across that fierce current, till we hit on a splendid cove,” Will observed.

“I saw that the river was rising,” Frank observed, “and that’s the only time it’s really safe for a houseboat to enter one of those little bays. No danger then of being caught on a sandbar, and left high and dry by morning. Now, how about our supper to-night, boys? What’s going to be the bill of fare?”

“Tell me first, Frank, how far below Dubuque are we now?” asked Will, nervously.

“Oh! several miles; and you needn’t think we’ll be bothered to-night,” the other replied, with a reassuring laugh.

“We seem to have left Oswald in the lurch, too, which is a good thing, according to my notion; though I’ve been hoping some fine day that stuck-up dude would run up against Frank, when the old score must be fought out, and he’d get what’s been long due him.”

“Not forgetting our friend, Marcus,” added Jerry. “He made one little try for the hidden treasure, and Frank scared him half to death by firing his gun out of the window, so he never came back again. Guess he wasn’t as bold a customer as he made us believe. And I’m still hunting all over the boat for a tidy little nook, where Uncle Felix might have hid that bunch of valuables; though up to date I must say I haven’t had even the first smell of the treasure-trove.”

“How many days have we been coming this far, Frank?” persisted Will.

“Really four, though this will be our fifth night out,” replied the manager of the expedition; for as usual that position had been saddled on Frank’s shoulders, all of his chums having the utmost confidence that he could fill the place better than any one of them.

“One good thing,” Bluff went on to say, “is the fact that every night now that moon is going to improve, and grow larger. Why, before we know it, we’ll be having beautiful moonlight nights, when a fellow’ll just hate to turn in.”

“But let’s go back again to the mainstay, which is just plain grub. What are

we going to eat to-night?" Frank remarked.

And so for a few minutes that ever-interesting, and never-dull topic, was discussed from all sides, everyone having a suggestion to make. In the end, as usually happened, it was voted to leave the matter with Jerry. He knew how to treat them well, Bluff declared with a proper amount of smoothness that quite won the heart of the aspiring cook, and made him resolve to merit the praise that was so lavishly bestowed on him.

Of course the supper was voted a grand success. Jerry was indeed showing considerable skill in getting up very appetizing dishes, and took pride in changing what he called the "menu" so often, that the boys always had delightful recollections of "that last mess we had yesterday, or it might be the day before," which they hoped he would repeat before long.

"Seems like a mighty lonely place right here," Will had remarked, after supper was over, and they sat around on deck, Jerry busy with his fish lines; Bluff stretched on a blanket he had brought out; and Frank rubbing up his recollection of the events of the last two days, since he had fallen behind in his writing of the daily log, and meant to catch up when they lighted the big lamp, going in to sit around the table.

"Well, that's not a fault, as I can see," Bluff declared; "now, last night you complained of too much company around, when that boatload of toughs from the city rowed past, looking for our hidden houseboat. Better be by ourselves, even if the wolves do howl, and the panthers scream."

"Oh! say, you don't think for a minute now that there are any of those fierce creatures around us right now?" Will faltered. "He's just trying to see how big a yarn he can work off on me; isn't he, Frank?"

"Just what he is," laughed the other; "because I don't fancy that there is a wolf or a panther within fifty miles of this place. So make your mind easy, Will; and if you choose to take a turn up and down the deck before going to bed, you can do it without dreaming any wild animal could drop from the branches of that tree above us."

"Listen to Jerry grunting there," remarked Will, disdainfully, "just like he expects me to believe that sort of thing could be a panther! Don't forget that I've heard a panther before this, and he doesn't squeal like a hog caught under the fence."

"But it wasn't me at all!" declared Jerry, looking up from working his line.

"And as sure as anything, it did come from the shore somewhere above!" Bluff said, as he scrambled to a sitting position.

"Listen, everybody!" remarked Frank, in a quiet voice.

They could plainly hear the swish of bushes giving way before some advancing body.

"Whatever it is, that light Jerry is using, to fix his bait on properly, has told of our being here," Frank went on to say.

"Shall I puff her out, then?" asked Jerry.

"No use now, because the mischief's done," Frank continued.

"There goes Bluff inside the cabin," Will spoke up; "and I just wager he's after his gun. Well, I'm glad of it; for Frank might be mistaken about the panther part of the business."

"Listen again!" Frank ordered, and every one fell silent.

The rustling among the bushes increased until it seemed to be almost above them, after which it stopped.

"Ahoy! aboard the boat! Don't shoot at me; I'm a friend, and in a bad fix!" came a voice.

The boys looked at each other blankly. Every one of them possessed a sympathetic heart, and the very thought of a fellow human in trouble appealed to them.

"Frank, are you going to invite him aboard?" whispered Will.

"Don't forget what Uncle Felix wrote about having strangers stay on the houseboat," Jerry went on to add; not because he felt any fear, but because of that hidden treasure which he fully believed lay somewhere aboard.

Frank picked up the lantern, as though speedily making up his mind.

"We can go ashore ourselves, fellows," he said, "and see what's wrong. Bluff, would you mind coming with me; and Will, bring the lantern, please."

"Don't think I'm going to be left out," cried Jerry, as he let his baited hook drop into the water, where the current carried it down-stream, as he wanted.

And so the four chums made their way ashore. This was not hard to do, since the houseboat was warped close to the bank; and indeed, it only required a single jump to bring them to firm ground.

The light of the lantern showed them a single figure, and that of an old man. He did not seem any too robust, and his face was seemingly pinched with pain, and possibly hunger.

"Who are you, and what brings you here?" asked Frank, hardly knowing whether he liked the appearance of the other or not, and secretly resolved that unless it were positively necessary he would not take him aboard the boat.

"My name is Luther Snow," said the other, in a trembling voice. "I was on my way to New Orleans on a packet, when some thief stole my pocketbook, with every cent in the world I had, and my passage ticket as well. So the captain put me ashore, and I've had hardly a bite to eat for twenty-four hours. I must get down there soon, or lose all chance of ever seeing my daughter, who sails for Australia, and I'm in a bad fix, boys, I tell you."

Jerry made a bolt back to the boat, and Frank did not need to be told what

he was going for. A man half starved, while they had plenty to eat in the larder, went against the grain of the generous boy.

“Wait a minute, Jerry!” called out Frank; “we’ll build a fire ashore, and cook something for him right here;” and turning to the man he continued in a lower tone, as though he thought some sort of explanation might be necessary: “you see, we don’t happen to own this houseboat; and one of the rules set down for us by the gentleman who does, was that, under no circumstances, unless it seemed absolutely necessary to save a life, were we to keep a stranger aboard over-night. But we can make you fairly comfortable here, and give you some breakfast in the morning; perhaps chip in, and help you out some in the money line. So just sit down, while we get busy, and make the fire first.”

That was as generous a proposition as could possibly be expected from any traveler along the great river highway; and the man should have felt pleased when he heard what Frank said; but the sharp eyes of the boys, watching his face, caught a plain flash of disappointment there, as though he had fully anticipated being invited to at least spend the night aboard.

Frank was the last fellow to wish to think ill of anybody, and so he said nothing about what he might suspect; only he resolved to carry out the scheme he had in mind, and make the unfortunate traveler comfortable—but on shore.

CHAPTER XI—A THREATENED COLLISION

It was a good deal to expect a boy to cook two suppers on the same evening; but Jerry in the warmth of his heart seemed only too glad to be of assistance to a poor man in trouble.

Luther Snow seemed to be a rather quiet sort of man. He seldom spoke unless he was addressed; and it was only through persistent questioning that they finally learned something of his story.

He declared that he had no relatives in the world save the married daughter, now in New Orleans; and that as she expected to make her home at the other side of the world, he had determined to sell all he had, and spend some little time with her before she sailed.

“And now it looks as if I’d never be able to reach there in time,” he mournfully remarked, in conclusion; “because I haven’t a single dollar in the world; and even if I wrote to her, she’s not able to send me the money. So I’ll just have to go back to my trade, and earn enough day by day; if I can find work.”

“What might be your trade?” asked Frank, as though just barely interested.

“Why, I’m a carpenter, you see,” the old man replied, quickly enough; but while of course Frank did not say a word as though he doubted the truth of this assertion, he secretly made up his mind that at least the other could not have been doing much work of recent years; for he noticed that his hands were entirely free from signs of manual labor, since they appeared to be as soft as those of a lady, though the nails were ill enough kept.

Frank kept much of this to himself. He studied the old man, however, and wondered if after all he could be as hungry as he said; for he certainly did have a very poor appetite for a half-starved person, since he made way with only a small portion of the food Jerry got together.

They had several extra blankets aboard, the property of Uncle Felix. Two of these Frank fetched ashore, and laid with his own hands, making as comfortable a bed as anybody might want.

“Nothing will come around, as long as the fire burns; and here’s plenty of wood to keep it going, if you happen to wake up any time in the night. Besides, we keep watch aboard the boat, and any uninvited guest is apt to be met with a shot. I hope you don’t walk in your sleep, Mr. Snow?”

Frank said this for a purpose. The old man started, and looked at him queerly; after which he hastened to say:

“I never knew of myself doing such a thing in my life. But please don’t bother about me more than you can help. You see, I’m used to being alone; and I’ve done a fair amount of camping in my day, too.”

Frank had already guessed that from certain little signs. For instance, the other had arranged his blankets so that the night wind would strike his feet rather than his head; and also that the fire would be some little distance from his lower extremities; for an experienced camper-out, especially when it is cold, will make sure to keep his feet warm, first of all.

And so, finally, they left him there, rolled up snugly in his blankets.

The night passed quietly enough. With the cabin door fast secured, of course the boys knew that no one could find entrance; and though they may have aroused once or twice all around through the night, no one heard a suspicious sound.

At dawn the boys were early in the river. Frank, however, did not think he cared to take his customary dip; and Jerry winked an eye at him, as much as to say he understood why. Truth to tell, Frank was determined not to leave

any opening for the stranger to slip aboard, if he wanted to do so. Then again, he felt ashamed of suspecting Luther Snow, who seemed loath to part with his new-found friends.

They gave him a good breakfast, and Frank took up a collection of several dollars from the boys, which sum he pressed into the hand of the old man as they prepared to leave him.

Perhaps there was a tear in Luther Snow's eye; certainly there was a wistful look on his face as the houseboat started away from the shore, leaving him waving his hand after them from the bank.

"That money ought to take him part of the way on his journey," remarked Jerry, as the intervening trees quite hid their late guest from them.

"And then he can work in some big city," said Will. "A carpenter gets good wages every place; and it won't take him long to save enough to go on further. Why, in a month he ought to be down to New Orleans, long before we expect to show up."

"He certainly did want to go along with us all right, Frank," Bluff observed. "Why, every time he looked at our old junk he'd shake his head, and heave a sigh. Reckon he just thought what a fine snap it'd be if he could get aboard, and be carried all the way down to the place he wants to reach, without spending a red cent for grub, or traveling expenses."

"And only for what Uncle Felix said in his letter," spoke up Jerry, "I'd voted to let the old fellow go along with us. But we did him some good, anyway. That cash ought to carry him a hundred or two miles along the river on a boat, deck passage."

"If he doesn't have the hard luck to lose that, too," remarked Frank, drily. "Some people have a weakness that way, you know, boys."

There was some touch of mystery in his way of saying this, and the others looked at him, as though hoping Frank would "open up and explain," as Bluff put it; but he changed the subject, and left them wondering.

"Don't suppose there's a chance in a hundred that we'll ever hear anything from Luther Snow again?" Will observed, later on. "He said he would write to us at New Orleans, and you gave him your uncle's address, which he jotted down in his little notebook," Frank remarked; but he somehow failed to mention the fact that he had observed with surprise how strange it was to see a man who followed the trade of carpenter happen to possess such a delicate little volume in his pocket, when one would rather expect to see a well-thumbed five-cent book under the circumstances.

The day became rather sultry, and Frank remarked, after they had eaten a little cold lunch, that he would not be much surprised if they ran into a storm before a great while.

"Just what I was thinking," Will added. "Do you know, I'm getting to be quite an old salt by now, and can just feel the weather in my bones. And for some time I've had an aching toe; that means rain, mark that, fellows."

"I saw you taking a snapshot of our friend, Luther, on the sly this morning," remarked Frank. "When you develop that, print me a copy, Will. You know I always like to study faces, and somehow his seemed to me to be a particularly strong one."

"All the same he hasn't made a success of his life, if what he told us is true," Jerry put in, "for it was a hard luck story all through." "Frank's seen something he wants to examine closer," Bluff suggested later on, "for he dived into the cabin, in a hurry; and here he comes out again with the field glasses."

They all watched Frank adjust the binoculars to his range of vision, and sweep a half circuit around the river, finally focussing upon some object upstream that must have caught his attention.

"I thought so," he remarked presently; "here, take a look, Bluff, and say what you see."

The other eagerly seized upon the glasses and had hardly leveled them than he uttered an exclamation.

"You're right, Frank, it's that *Lounger*, as sure as shooting!" he cried.

"Let me see!" exclaimed Jerry, eagerly.

"She's coming down the river like a bird, with her engine working again," Bluff went on to say; "so they must have got the broken part mended, or a new piece sent on from St. Paul."

"I'm afraid our troubles are going to begin again," sighed Will; "and I was just saying this very morning what a jolly good and restful time we were having."

"Say, they're whooping it up at a great rate, all right!" ejaculated Jerry, when he had a chance to look; "either he's in a big hurry, or else he wants to carry out some scheme to hurt us, if he can—perhaps run us down!"

"Let him try that, if he dares!" growled Bluff, staring hard at the now rapidly approaching power houseboat, bearing down upon them under the combined influence of a gasolene engine and the current.

"Would he try that sort of risky business, Frank, do you think?" asked Will. "It seems to me he'd take big chances of getting his own boat injured."

"Oh! perhaps some glass would be shattered," Bluff took it upon himself to say, "but you see the *Lounger* is so much heavier than our boat, and, coming down so fast, she'd be apt to knock a hole in us, if that Ossie managed right. And as sure as anything, Frank, they keep on straight for us, notice."

"I'm watching," said Frank, who gripped the big sweep, a determined look on his face; while Bluff dodged into the cabin again, bringing out his "machine-gun," which he seemed to think must be a cure-all for every ill that threatened.

“Don’t shoot, Bluff!” said Frank, “no matter what happens.”

“Oh! I don’t mean to,” replied the other; though he made very extravagant gestures, so as to show those on the other boat that he was “ready for business at the old stand,” as he expressed it.

The boys stood there, watching with increasing uneasiness; for just as Bluff had asserted, the big power-boat was swooping straight down for them. On board several youths seemed to be running this way and that, calling out all sorts of excited things, just as though they had lost control; though Oswald himself could be seen in the pilothouse, swinging the wheel back and forth in an uncertain way, as though hardly knowing whether to take the chances of a collision or not.

Another sixty seconds, and nothing could save the two heavy craft from coming together with crashing force, perhaps with serious consequences. Frank watched, and made ready to swing the big sweep at the slightest indication of a change of direction on the part of the other houseboat, that would afford a loophole of escape from the dire consequences of Oswald Fredericks’ folly.

CHAPTER XII—A RED GLOW IN THE SKY

Crash!

Only for a sudden change of heart on the part of Oswald Fredericks the coming together of the two boats would have been of a much more serious character. At the last moment, almost, he had apparently changed his mind, and tried to whirl the wheel rapidly in one direction. Frank, seeing that the other was now endeavoring to avoid a collision, tried to assist by every means in his power.

And the others, springing to his help, caused the sweep to plough the water at the stern in such a manner that the *Pot Luck* must have altered her course considerably.

The other boat came with a slanting blow. As the young fellow who ran the engine had had the good sense to shut off power previous to their coming together, there was no great amount of damage done. One window aboard the *Pot Luck* and several on the *Lounger* went to pieces, the jingle of broken glass adding to the confusion.

“Whoop!” yelled Jerry, as he came near falling overboard, when the boat staggered from the force of the slanting blow.

“Are we sinking?” cried Will, who was flat on his back, his legs thrashing the air in a helpless fashion.

Frank hung to the sweep; while Bluff, having his gun to look after, and anticipating something of a knock, had settled upon the deck beforehand, like a wise boy, so that he saved himself a nasty tumble.

“Why didn’t you get out of the way?” called Oswald, from the pilothouse of the other boat, now floating alongside. “Didn’t you see the machinery had jammed, and we couldn’t control her?”

Frank knew that this was entirely false, for he had seen them head in from a point further out on the river, as if deliberately meaning to strike the *Pot Luck*.

He hurried over to the corner that had been struck, and took as good an observation as was possible, just then. No particular damage seemed to have been done, the heavy and sound timbers of the smaller boat serving to save her. Outside of that one broken window, which could be easily repaired, and perhaps a couple of dishes knocked to the floor inside the cabin, there were no bad results following this mean trick of the enemy.

Frank did not even take the trouble to make a reply; but Bluff could not keep still under such aggravating circumstances.

“That was a mean trick, Ossie Fredericks!” he called out, shaking his fist toward the boy he addressed, and who was leaning from the pilothouse of the *Lounger*, holding a handkerchief to his nose, as though he might have struck it violently against some object when the shock came. “You did that on purpose; needn’t try to say you didn’t! I wish your boat had a big hole punched in her bow; because it’d just serve you right. Now keep away, or I’ll be so mad there’s no telling what’ll happen.”

“Oh! just hold your horses, Masters!” called the other; “don’t you see we’re doing our best to draw away from you? Hi! start up the engine again, Terry Crogan. These fellows are beginning to threaten me with guns!”

Presently the sound of the gas engine belonging to the *Lounger*, starting to send out sharp, explosive sounds, told that the big youth who had been hired in St. Paul to run the machinery and do the hard work of the cruise was attending to business. Then the power-boat started away, and headed out toward the middle of the river once more.

A row of faces over the rail told that Oswald’s other chums, Duke Fletcher, Raymond Ellis, and the third fellow from St. Paul, whom Bluff and Frank had met at the time the trap was set for them in the cabin of the boat, were watching to see whether the *Pot Luck* showed any signs of foundering.

But although, no doubt, they hoped for the worst, nothing of the kind was

likely to occur, since small damage had been done. Jerry sounded the well, and reported little bilge water in the hold. A trap on the forward deck allowed of anyone going below, where, in case of necessity, certain articles might be stowed; and Bluff took it upon himself to drop into the hold, carrying Frank's electric torch. He found no evidence of damage, so that even Will felt reassured on that score.

Of course the four chums were highly indignant concerning the boldness and recklessness of their rivals in seeking to do them such an injury, at the risk of sharing the destruction.

"If they had struck us, with their engine going full tilt!" declared Jerry; "and before Ossie began to get cold feet, and edge away, why, ten to one, both boats by this time would be either sunk, or leaking like sieves, and bound to go under."

"Then we'd have had to throw a few things, like our guns, into the dinghy, and jump overboard ourselves," remarked Bluff.

"Yes," agreed Will, "that's the way at a fire, they say; throw the pictures out of the window, and carry a mattress carefully downstairs."

"Well, we wouldn't want the guns to get soaked, or lost; would we?" demanded the proud owner of the new-fangled six-shot firearm; "wouldn't matter so much with us, because we could swim; and if we saved our clothes we'd have a dry outfit to put on later. But I wonder what next that Ossie Fredericks will try? Isn't he the limit, though, Frank?"

"Well, I don't exactly know," replied the other. "I've tried to study that fellow for a whole year. Sometimes I think he's got a halfway streak of decency in him, and that it's only because he keeps such bad company that he chokes it right along."

"Huh! mighty funny way of showing decency," grunted Jerry; "to try and smash our boat, when we didn't bother them any. But I know that Ellis lad is a bad egg, and wouldn't be surprised if Fletcher's just as tough a nut. They know Ossie's got a fistful of money, always, and they just hang around, telling him what a great boy he is, and how mean Frank Langdon talks about him. Oh! rats! Don't I know that crowd, though?"

Will was once more in the sulks, lamenting the fact that he hadn't thought to run into the cabin, and bring out his rapid-action camera, so that he might have taken a snapshot of the power-boat heading straight for the *Pot Luck*.

"It would have been all the evidence we needed in court, if ever we sued to collect damages," he declared, sadly; "and to think how I so seldom see these chances till it's all over but the shouting."

The other boat was rapidly leaving them, and every one of the four chums hoped they might never see the *Lounger* again—during that cruise, at least. It

seemed that they must meet with some sort of trouble every time the two boats came close together, all through the bad tempers and ugly dispositions of those on board the *Lounger*.

An hour later, and they could barely make her out miles away; and only with the aid of the glasses could they recognize the craft. So they determined to put Ossie Fredericks and his cronies out of their minds, for the time being at least. There were other things much more pleasant demanding their constant attention on every hand; boats that passed, or which they overtook, moored to the bank; change of scenery that gave them more or less pleasure, and with Bluff and Jerry consulting as to what the evening meal should consist of.

"I move we camp ashore to-night, if there seems to be a decent chance," proposed Bluff, as they began to look for a good spot to tie up to, with the sun hanging low in a bed of yellow clouds that Frank did not fancy any too much.

"We might have a camp fire, and do our cooking there," he said in reply; "but if you cast your eyes over yonder, you'll see why we ought to sleep aboard to-night."

"It does look as if we'd get something before morning," Jerry admitted.

"Think my foot don't know?" remarked Will, with a grin and a nod.

When they had found a good place to fasten the cable to a tree alongside the bank, this programme was carried out. Frank soon learned they were close to what appeared to be a road that followed the river; but it seemed to be rather what Will called a "sequestered" spot, so he thought they could take chances.

He showed his chums once more how a good cooking fire was built, and, after supper was done, Bluff was allowed to build a large camp fire, around which they meant to sit for several hours, until their eyes warned them that it was time to go aboard and crawl into the bunks.

"Seeing that fire we made for Luther Snow just put me in the notion of having one for ourselves," Bluff remarked, as he toasted his shins there beside the blaze he had created, with the aid of several logs, found near the spot.

"Wonder what's become of the old fellow; and if we'll ever see him again?" Will said, in a meditative manner.

Frank did not choose to tell anything he thought, but listened with an amused smile as his comrades discussed the chances the man had of making his intended destination before his only daughter sailed for the other side of the world.

The hour began to grow late, and once or twice Will started to yawn. Frank was just about to propose that they go aboard, after putting out the camp fire, as he had learned to always do on breaking camp, when Jerry called his attention to a strange ruddy hue in the sky.

"Can that be the storm coming?" asked Will, as they all gazed.

“If it is, she’s going to be a scorcher!” remarked Jerry.

“You forget that the storm is over to the southwest, boys, and this red light lies in the east, or southeast rather. I think it must be a house afire,” Frank at that moment remarked.

The idea of a poor family being burned out appealed to the boys strongly; and when Bluff boldly proposed that they lock the door of the cabin securely, and see if they could arrive on the scene in time to be of any assistance, somehow even timid Will and conservative Frank fell in with the idea at once.

The result of the vote being unanimous in favor of going, they hastened to shut the windows, and fasten the padlock on the door. Bluff insisted on carrying his precious gun, though admitting that it must look odd to see a boy hurrying to help a family that was being burned out, and carrying a shotgun along.

“But you never can tell what will happen,” said Bluff, stoutly; and so Frank, remembering that other occasion only too well when the presence of that same gun had prevented a fierce hammering from Fredericks and his crowd, wisely held his peace.

CHAPTER XIII—AFTER THE STORM

“Listen! is that somebody shouting?” cried Frank, after they had run along the road in a southerly direction for half a mile.

“Sounds like it to me,” ventured Will, between pants for breath.

“Now, on my part,” declared Bluff, “I thought it must be the screech of a locomotive; because, you know, there’s a railroad line on both sides of the river right along up here.”

“But there it is again,” Frank insisted; “and you can make out yelling now.”

“Yes, and it comes out of there, away back from the river. See here, Frank,” observed Jerry, “we just can’t plunge into the woods, and make for that fire; can we?”

“Now, my opinion is, there might be some other cross-road below here, and the fire is on that,” said Frank; “we’ll go a piece further, anyhow, and find out.”

The others were quite willing to do anything Frank proposed, and so they

again started to run at quite a good pace.

It turned out just as he said; for about half a mile further down they suddenly came on a road that left the river highway, and turned abruptly into the hills. Besides, they could now see the fire itself, which, as usual, did not seem to be so very far away; though Frank knew how deceptive distances were apt to prove under such conditions.

Turning into this smaller road, they kept on running. Now and then Frank would drop into a walk, for he knew that Will must be tiring, though the other would never have admitted the fact if he dropped in his tracks with fatigue.

"Further than we thought, fellows!" gasped Bluff, who had to carry a heavy gun, and by now he almost wished he had left it on the boat.

"But now we've come this far we'd better keep on; eh, Frank?" suggested Jerry.

On that score the chums seemed to be agreed. Like all boys, they disliked very much to give up anything they had started to accomplish. All that hard running would go for nothing; and they were naturally curious to learn what sort of a fire it could be.

"A barn, I reckon," Jerry had said.

"Perhaps it's only a chicken coop," Will had in his turn mentioned.

"Now, I'd think it more likely a pig pen," observed the weary Bluff, as he changed his gun from one hand to the other for the twentieth time, refusing to let Frank relieve him of it.

"Jerry is right, according to my way of thinking," Frank said. "The chances are that's what it is. Perhaps it looked at one time as if the fire would jump to the farmer's barn, too, and that was what all that shouting meant."

They finally drew closer to the scene, though Frank feared they had gone twice as far as seemed wise, under the circumstances.

It was fully an hour after they had left the houseboat before they reached the place; and then it was to find the fire about out; with a dozen men, and as many women and children, gathered in clusters, talking it all over with the man who had lost his barns, and what new crop of hay he had just been putting in them, together with several cows that could not be rescued in time.

The boys hung around for a little while talking with some of the farm hands. Frank asked a few questions about various things, and even found that he could secure a small amount of information concerning the river below that point, since some of these young fellows had lived near it all their lives, and even taken boats of produce to Rock Island below.

An hour later, and Frank proposed that they start back to the boat. While the boys were engaged in listening to all that was being said concerning the fire, the sky had clouded over, and it was now quite dark. Indeed, the growl of thunder

could be heard down the river, and some of the farmers were even then hurrying off.

One fellow, who happened to live not a great way from the location of the houseboat, as described by Frank, said he would keep company with the boys, in whose trip down the big water he seemed to be deeply interested. And while they thought little of that fact at the time, it afterwards turned out worth a great deal to them.

Louder came that noise from behind them, the storm having swung across the river apparently, so that it was now heading almost from the south direct. Will doubtless wished deep down in his heart that he was snug inside the cabin of the houseboat about that time, when the gale would have small terrors for any of them. But he did not say a word along those lines, only ran at the heels of the others, doing the very best he could.

"She's going to catch us, boys!" remarked the young farmer, who had given them his name as Seth Groggins.

"Could we find any sort of shelter?" asked Bluff—and then, as if fearing that his motive might be misconstrued, he hastened to add: "not that I care a cent whether I get wet or not; but I'd hate to have my gun soaked. Steel rusts so easy, you know."

"Might get under a big tree that lies a little way ahead," remarked Seth; "only I've heard it isn't the best thing to do in a thunderstorm."

"No, I'd rather stand many duckings than take chances that way," Frank declared, positively; for he had known of fatal cases following the action of men in a harvest field seeking shelter under a tree during an electrical storm.

"Well, here she is; but as you say so, we'll give her the go-by," the farmer called out over his shoulder, as he ran on past the big tree, standing close to the road. "If we could only make the old lime kiln I reckons as how the lot of us'd be able to find some sorter shelter thar. It's jest a leeetle way further on, boys. Hit it up agin; kin ye?"

Even Will seemed to take another brace, for the din of the storm behind was surely enough to make any fellow try his level best to get out of its reach. What with the roar of the wind, the sound of falling trees, the terrible crash of the thunder accompanying each vivid flash of lightning, and the roar of the deluge of rain that followed, no one need be ashamed for wanting to find a place of refuge.

The rain began to come, and the boys would soon have been drenched to the skin only, as luck would have it, they reached the deserted lime kiln just then, and were able to hastily crawl under a low shed.

Although this threatened to carry away bodily with the fierce gusts of wind, approaching the force of a tornado at times, it seemed to have been sturdily built in the first place; and was also somewhat sheltered by the kiln, so that it managed

to withstand the gale.

And thankful that they had found even so poor a shelter, the boys crouched there, waiting for the fury of the storm to subside, when they might go on their way to the moored houseboat, not more than half a mile off, Frank believed.

"Wow! listen to that; would you?" cried Bluff, as a crash followed a blinding flash of lightning, although the rain had now stopped.

"That hit something, sure!" quavered Will, who had no fancy for such a terrible display of electrical force.

"Say, I wouldn't be surprised if that big tree got it thet 'ere time!" declared the farmer. "Kim right from thet ways; an' she lies thar. An', by hokey, I thort I ketcht a crash o' branches as the ole lightnin' stripped her bare, like it does, sometimes."

Frank was of the same opinion; and felt deeply grateful in his heart that they had been wise enough to give that shelter the go-by when it offered. If it was really the big tree that had been struck, what would have been their fate had they foolishly taken refuge under its wide-spreading limbs?

As Frank had truly said: far better a wet jacket any time, than to take chances under a tree that seems to especially invite the attention of the lightning, either by its being alone in a field, or standing higher than its fellows.

A short time later, and they once more started along the flooded road. All of them were wet, but made light of it, in view of the fact that they had managed to get off so lightly. And this was the first occasion Frank found for feeling glad the young Illinois farmer had accompanied them; since otherwise they would not have known about the shed at the old lime kiln.

The storm had gone raging up the river, and far in the distance they could still hear the dull roar of the thunder peals, and see the flash of each successive bolt of lightning, as it either passed from one cloud to another, or else sought the earth in a zigzag downward plunge that was most terrifying.

"I guess we ought to call ourselves lucky for once," Jerry was saying, as they left the river road, and headed through the patch of timber, just beyond which all of them knew the boat had been left, securely fastened.

The young farmer kept along with them. He had told Frank that he would like to see for himself just how they were fixed; and had promised in the morning to fetch them a supply of fresh eggs, some newly-made butter, and milk from his Jersey cows.

"An' ev'ry night you jest tie up alongside the bank, you say?" he remarked, as he kept at the side of Jerry, with regard to whom he seemed to have taken an especial fancy, for some reason or other.

"Why, yes, that's the easiest way of doing with a houseboat, which, after all, is pretty much the same as one of your shantyboats, used to carry potatoes

and truck down to market," Frank had taken it upon himself to answer.

"Now, here's just where we had our camp fire," Bluff, who was in advance, remarked. "It got squdged by that downpour of rain, all right, I should say. And here you see, we tied the—Frank, Frank, *she's gone!*" he suddenly ended with an excited yell, as he saw the well-known spot where the *Pot Luck* had been moored, vacant, and not the first sign of their floating home.

Will clung to Frank in the first shock of his dismay; while Jerry echoed the loud cries of the first discoverer of this new calamity that seemed to have overtaken them.

CHAPTER XIV—THE RUNAWAY HOUSEBOAT

They all stared as if they could hardly believe their eyes. The moon had set about the time the storm started; but since the sky was already clearing, the stars gave a certain amount of light. And especially on the river it was possible to see for some distance.

Frank was almost as dumbfounded as his chums when this alarming fact burst upon them. Without the houseboat, their cruise down the Mississippi must come to an end.

"They must have been hiding somewhere near by," lamented Will, "and saw the whole bunch of us scooting down the road; so that the chance they just wanted came along."

"Say, Frank, he thinks it must have been Ossie Fredericks!" exclaimed Jerry; "but I say it was that Marcus Stackpole. He wanted to get that treasure Uncle Felix hid away on board so neat that even I never could find it. But Marcus, he's bound to get it, even if he has to take the old boat, and tear her to flinders. Oh! what a bunch of gumps we were to leave her that way, to run to a fire."

The countryman was listening to all they said, and trying to grasp the situation. Frank saw him step over to the tree to which they had fastened the cable of the boat so securely, as they thought.

"This whar you tied her up, boys?" asked the young farmer.

"To that tree, yes," Frank replied. "What have you found—a piece of the

rope left there?"

"Jest what I hev," came the reply, as the other took out a match, and prepared to strike it.

"Sliced it off as neat as you please; didn't they?" demanded Bluff, angrily.

"Wall, not as I kin see," replied the farmer, bending closer to look, as the match flamed up. "This hyar rope, she's gone and busted clear off!"

"No knife used, then, you mean?" asked Frank, jumping at conclusions.

"Nixy a knife," came the answer, in a positive tone.

"Then that settles it," Frank went on, turning to his comrades. "Our cable turned out a bad one, boys; and in the storm, when the wind struck the side of the cabin, the rope snapped off short!"

"Wow! what do you think of that, now?" cried Jerry.

"Then it wasn't Ossie and his crowd; nor yet Marcus Stackpole, that did the little job for us?" observed Bluff, bottling some of his wrath for another occasion.

"We can lay it all to the storm," Frank went on to say, as he too examined the frayed end of the piece of cable still hanging from the trunk of the tree; and which it was plain to be seen had never been severed by a sharp instrument.

"But that's just about as bad," Will plaintively struck up just then. "Perhaps our fine boat has been knocked to pieces before now; or even if she hasn't, then she must be booming along in the middle of the river, turning around and around as she floats. Why, Frank, this happened half an hour ago, and by now where do you think the *Pot Luck* can be?"

"If she hasn't been snagged and sunk in the storm," replied Frank, "or upset by the hurricane wind, why, by now she may be floating peacefully along, all by herself, say about two miles, perhaps three, below here."

"Think of that! And I was expecting to sleep aboard to-night!" Will exclaimed.

"I hope you may yet, if there's any way by which we can overtake a run-away houseboat," Frank said, as he tried to think.

Was there any means of obtaining a team of horses, and by following the country road, getting ahead of the houseboat that had gone adrift in the storm? The countryman ought to know, for he had been born and raised in that section of the State, and must be familiar with the lay of the land.

So Frank turned to Seth Groggins.

"You understand what has happened to us; don't you, Seth?" he asked.

"Reckon I does; the pesky boat's gone an' played you all a mean trick."

"Now, perhaps you might help us overtake our boat, Seth."

"You jest tell me how, then, an' see me jump," answered the farmer, quickly, and with a friendly ring in his voice that pleased Frank very much.

"Have you got any fast horses at your place?" he asked next.

“That’s what I hev, as good a pair as kin be found ‘raound these hyar parts. An’ I sees wot you mean to try, Frank. Think it kin be did?”

“How far does this road follow the river?” Frank asked.

“Oh! many a mile,” came the answer. “She runs alongside the Mississippi for mebbe four miles, then takes a straightaway course two miles ‘cross a neck o’ land, savin’ somethin’ like five miles, and strikes the winding water agin beyond.”

“Just let me figure on that,” Frank went on, calmly, for he knew nothing could be gained by getting excited like Bluff and the others seemed to be. “Six miles from here by the road, and then we strike the river again. Now, how far do you suppose that boat would have to drift with the current before it struck that same point?”

“They do say that five miles kin be saved by cuttin’ acrost that neck. I reckon as haow it’d be all o’ three anyway,” the farmer declared, positively.

“We ought to be able to go twice as fast as the boat, I should think,” Frank continued, “and counting the saving, I believe we would have plenty of time to get to your place and be off, if you agreed. We’re willing to pay you five dollars for your trouble.”

“Five dollars nothing!” exclaimed the young farmer. “What d’ye think I am, when, if it hadn’t been for you, like’s not I’d been crazy enough to hev camped, under thet same big tree, and jest think whar I’d be naow? Done it afore, more’n a few times. Reckon that ere lightnin’ was a layin’ for me, an’ she’d got me to-night sure. But come along, boys; my place ain’t far off.”

He led the way to the road, and up it at a fast run; the four chums following after him as best they could.

Inside of ten minutes they arrived at a wayside farmhouse; and without waiting to answer the calls of the old lady on the porch, who wanted to know all about the fire, country fashion, Seth led his new friends straight out to a big stable and barn.

The way that expert young countryman got out his horses, and hitched them to a light road wagon, made Frank ready to give him the palm for fast work. Why, in almost no time the ends of the lines were tossed over the seat.

“Jump in, boys, and we’ll be off, jest as soon as I shut the stable doors. You see, I never leave ’em open. Robbins lost his hull outfit one night, and I ain’t a-goin’ to take any chances with mine.”

Another minute, and they were making for the open gates, which Seth had seen to at the time they entered his grounds. The last the boys saw of the old lady she was standing there, where the light of a lamp issued from an open door, and looking after her boy, as though she wondered if he had taken leave of his senses.

“Tell her all erbout it, arter I gets back to hum,” Seth very sensibly remarked,

as he used the whip, to send his horses galloping down the river road. "She allers arks so many questions, you see, I jest natchly couldn't hold up to satisfy her right now, when minutes are a-goin' to count. Giddup, Bob! Hi! thar, Fanny, show us what you kin do!"

Both horses were already making great speed. Frank and Will sat beside the driver on the seat, while the others found as comfortable places as they could on the bottom of the light wagon.

The road was not everything that could be wished for, and in consequence, when they came to a little depression, or a "thank-you-mum," which was intended to deflect running water, and save a washout, both Jerry and Bluff found it difficult to keep anything like an upright position. The latter especially, being still burdened with his gun, could only use one hand with which to hold on to the side of the wagon; and as a consequence he was bounding all over the bed of the vehicle, until Frank, noticing what hard lines had fallen to poor Bluff, took the gun away, which allowed him to have the use of both hands.

Mile after mile they put behind them in this fashion.

"Oh! I hope we will make it, Frank," Will would say every little while; and at such times the other thought it his duty to cheer the doubting chum up by declaring that he felt sure they would, as they were making such splendid time.

"But even if we do see the poor old Noah's Ark away out in the middle of the river, floating along, however in the wide world can we get to her?" Will asked.

"No use crossing a bridge till we come to it," Frank told him. "When we understand the situation we'll have some plan ready to meet it. Here's where we leave the river; isn't it, Seth?" as the driver urged his team over a little plank bridge at a point where the road turned abruptly to the left.

"Yep, that's the ticket," replied the other. "Two mile now, and then we strike her agin. Go 'lang thar, Fanny; gaddup, Bob, ye lazybones!"

But this was only "talk," as Bluff expressed it, for both horses were doing the best they knew how, and making splendid time. After a while, Frank knew from the signs that they must once more be approaching the river. He could hardly still his own excited heart, so very much depended on the events of the next half hour.

Finally they burst into view of the swiftly flowing Mississippi again. Out over its broad bosom every eye went, seeking for some sign of the floating house-boat.

"Doan't see nuthin' o' her, mister!" announced Seth, in a disappointed tone; "but then, I reckons as haow she ain't hed time yet to float this far. Inside harf a hour we kin spect to see the runaway, if it stays as light as it is naow."

Frank had not been looking in the same quarter as the others, who seemed

to have taken it for granted that the houseboat, when she appeared, would be found far out on the flood.

He cast his eye closer to the shore that stretched away toward the north, until it became dim and uncertain in the starlight; for the heavens were now clear from horizon to horizon, and the air wonderfully pure after the thunder squall of the earlier evening.

"I think I see her coming up yonder, boys!" said Frank, as he pointed a trembling finger, to assist his chums locate the dark moving blur that had just caught his eye a little distance above the spot where they sat in the wagon.

CHAPTER XV—ON BOARD THE POT LUCK AGAIN

"Frank, you're right!" exclaimed the delighted Will.

"It's the *Pot Luck*, as sure as you're born!" cried Bluff.

"But she'll just sail past us, fellows, and give us the merry ha! ha! How are we going to coax her to come in here?" Jerry asked, anxiously.

Frank was already pulling off his shoes, and making ready as if to take a swim.

"Leave that to me, boys," he said, hastily, but with something in his voice that told his chums he would not be denied. "I'll get aboard without much trouble. Here, take my clothes, and follow along the road in the wagon. Once on deck I'll open the cabin with the key I'll hold between my teeth when in the water. Then you can see the lantern I'll light."

"Will you throw the anchor over, Frank?" asked Bluff, wishing it had fallen to him to do this little affair; for Bluff was always willing to undertake any sort of hazardous task, either for fun or to accommodate a chum.

"I hope to work the big sweep first, and see if I can get her in to the shore alone," came the reply, as Frank made ready to plunge into the rushing river at the proper moment.

"And if you can't manage it, you'll heave the anchor over, and come for us in the little skiff?" asked Will.

"Sure I will, after I get some dry clothes on; because by that time I'll be

feeling pretty cold. Here goes, fellows!" and Frank stepped into the dark waters of the Mississippi as unconcernedly as though he might be just meaning to enjoy a bath.

"Good luck!" shouted out Bluff; while the others added their blessing in various ways, each according to his own mind.

The floating houseboat was now nearby, and coming on at a fair speed, though, of course, the current was not nearly so swift close to the shore as further out toward the middle of the stream.

Eagerly the three chums and Seth watched to see if they could tell when the bold swimmer reached the drifting craft. They could not exactly make him out; but in the starlight there was some sort of disturbance on the water, which they believed must mark his progress.

Then the runaway houseboat passed them, about sixty or eighty feet away; and Will's heart seemed almost in his throat with suspense as he strained his eyes to catch the welcome sight of Frank clambering aboard once more, to assume command.

"Hoop-la! there he goes!" suddenly shouted Bluff, whose vision proved the keenest after all.

Plainly now they all saw something white climbing up the side of the houseboat, and rolling over on the deck. Immediately afterward the big sweep was seen to begin to swing, and move through the water.

"Frank's doing it!" cried the delighted Will, who had almost perfect confidence in the ability of Frank Langdon to accomplish any task that human ingenuity could perform.

"Into the wagon again, boys, and let's follow him!" called Jerry, turning to make a rush toward the nearby road; and the others were at his heels, stumbling along "any old way," as Bluff said, in order to reach the waiting horses as soon as possible.

Here and there the road came so close to the bank that they could look out; and with so many eager eyes on the alert it was not long before the floating houseboat was discovered again.

"She's some closer, boys, as sure as anything; isn't that so, Bluff—Jerry?" demanded Will.

"Frank's doing it, all right," answered the latter; "but it must be an awful job, handling that big sweep all by himself. And I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he gave it up soon."

"Yes," added Bluff, "it'd be a heap sight easier just to kick the anchor overboard and come to bring us off in the skiff, one at a time."

"Say, you guessed it the fust shot, mister," said the farmer just then; and all of them heard a big splash out on the river.

"She's stopped, fellows!" shrieked Will. "Isn't Frank the dandy one though for getting there. Now, give him a little time to hunt up some more clothes, and he'll be after us."

Will was as delighted over the changed aspect of things as a little boy with his first pair of long trousers, Bluff told him. But, indeed, all of them were pleased, even more than they would admit, because of the improved prospect before them.

The minutes dragged along. They finally saw a movement aboard the houseboat, and then the skiff, which had been hauled out on deck and secured for the night before they took that wild run in the direction of the fire, was dropped overboard.

"That's good!" said Will, when they understood this fact; "because, you see, I was just a little bothered about that skiff. If it had been blown overboard and lost in the storm, what would we do then, boys?"

"Just what Frank did," sang out Jerry, gaily; "swim for the boat; only in our case we'd have to make bundles of our clothes, and fasten 'em to the top of our heads to keep 'em dry. But here he comes, rowing after us."

Frank soon landed, and his chums insisted in shaking hands with him as though he had been off on a perilous duty, instead of taking a little dip, Frank declared.

"Will, you go first," said Jerry, generously.

"The boat will hold two, besides the rower, so you come along, too, Jerry; I'll be back for Bluff; and if Seth will tie his horses and come aboard, we'll be glad to have him," Frank called out.

"Jest what Seth's goin' to do, fellers," remarked the young farmer; who had taken quite an interest in these wide-awake boys from the North, and was very glad of any chance to see how they lived aboard the houseboat, which took his fancy very much.

So the ferry did double duty, and the entire party finally reached the deck of the anchored *Pot Luck*. Jerry and Will had managed to light the big lamp and the second lantern while Frank was absent on his second trip, so that the interior of the cabin looked particularly cheery to the boys, after their recent experience.

Jerry was also now busily engaged in starting a fire in the little rusty stove; for as they had managed to get somewhat wet during the storm, it would do them no harm to experience the genial heat that soon began to emanate from the stove.

The countryman was soon asking scores of questions, which the boys answered to the best of their ability. He wanted to know everything, and was seen many times to shake his head, and sigh heavily; as though he would have given much for the privilege of an outing after this style.

As the boys felt that they were deeply indebted to Seth, they insisted on his accepting the five dollars promised by Frank, though he seemed ashamed to take

pay for what little he had done, and protested that it had given him the greatest pleasure he had known for a long time.

“Buy something for the old lady, then,” said Frank, as he pushed the bill into Seth’s vest pocket.

“Or some young lady, if there happens to be one, Seth!” said Jerry, giving the countryman a friendly poke in the ribs.

“Well, if you just make me take it, boys, I reckon I must,” Seth remarked, seeing that they would not take no for an answer; “and I’m a-goin’ to write you arter you get back home, to tell you jest what I *did* buy with that five dollars, and what she thort of it. ’Cause, you see, I must hear haow you fetched up, away daown in Orleans; and what happened to you on the way.”

“And we’ll make sure that you do, Seth,” Frank assured him; for he had taken quite a fancy to the strapping young farmer, who seemed an honest fellow, and a hard worker as well. “I’ve got your post office address on the rural free delivery route, and you’ll hear from me more than once while we drift down South. But here’s Jerry gone and made a nice pot of hot coffee; stop long enough to have a cup with us; won’t you, Seth?”

“Doan’t keer if I do,” replied the other, briskly, once more seating himself. “She smells right fine, I tell you, fellers. I’ll never forgit this naow. Allers did hev a sneakin’ ijee I’d like to take a trip on a shantyboat daown to Orleans, an’ I jest envies you the chanct.”

“Well, suppose you fix it up, and take your honeymoon trip that way, Seth,” proposed Jerry, mischievously; but to the surprise of them all Seth slapped a big hand on his knee and exploded with a delighted cry.

“Say, that’s the very ijee; funny I never did think o’ it myself,” he declared. “I’ll talk it over with Mirandy to-morry night, sure. In the fall we hev potatoes to sell, and I kin load up a boat, and kerry ’em daown South to sell. That’s a bully ijee, Jerry. I’ll do it, sure as shootin’!”

They were all sorry to see Seth go over the side, Jerry volunteering to ferry the young farmer ashore. Short as their acquaintance with him had been, the honest fellow had seemed to take a great fancy to all the voyagers; and they knew they would always remember him with pleasure.

And so, after all, no real damage had resulted from the exciting events of that night. The run to the fire; the terrible storm that overtook them on their return; the discovery of the absence of the houseboat; and the wild chase, ending in Frank’s swimming out, and boarding the drifting craft—all these things would form the subject for many a camp fire talk in the future.

But the chances were that none of the boys would remember that one crash of lightning that seemed to dazzle their eyes, and the awful crash of thunder actually accompanying it, without feeling thankful deep down in their hearts

that Frank had been wise enough to forbid the halt under the seemingly friendly branches of the big tree; because Seth afterwards wrote them that it had indeed been shattered to pieces by the electric bolt, and some of the splintered parts scattered over a distance of sixty feet.

So a period of peace followed the tumult of fire and gale; and if the tired boys woke up at all during the balance of that eventful night, it was only to feel that all was well; for the gurgle of the river against the end of the staunch houseboat and the sigh of the night wind were the only sounds that came to their ears.

CHAPTER XVI—THE UNWELCOME PASSENGER

“There’s somebody calling from the shore, and waving his hand!” Will said, as he poked his head in at the cabin door several days later, and speaking to Frank, who was writing at the table, as the afternoon dragged along.

They had made fair progress during this time, and managed to pass the mouth of the Des Moines river, so that with Keokuk behind them they were now looking across to the shores of the State of Missouri, which was encouraging, at least.

Frank hurried outside upon hearing what his comrade said. More than a few times before this they had been hailed from the bank; but it was always some fun-loving boy, or a tramp who wanted them to take him aboard, so that they paid little attention to the calls.

“Looks like there’s something familiar about that fellow!” Bluff was saying, as the others joined him at the sweep.

“And as sure as you live, he called out Frank’s name just then!” ejaculated Jerry.

“Tell you what, boys, it’s that Luther Snow again, as plain as the nose on my face!” cried Bluff.

Frank had discovered this strange fact for himself; and once more the old feeling of suspicion flashed into his mind. Who was this Luther Snow; and why should he come upon them again, when they thought he had gone for good?

The day was well spent, and even then Jerry and Bluff had been trying to select a landing spot.

"Shall we pull in, Frank?" asked the former; "seems like a good camping place just this side of that point; and the water's deep, too, I reckon."

"And the old man seems to want to see us mighty bad," Bluff added.

"He's limping like he'd been hurt," added the sympathetic Will.

Frank hardly knew what to do. If the other were really in deep trouble they would never forgive themselves if they deserted him; because just here the locality seemed lonely, with not a house in sight.

"All right, set her in to the shore," he said, making up his mind without any unnecessary mental discussion; for he believed that four stout and healthy lads ought to be equal to one decrepit old man, no matter how cunning he might prove; and after all they did not know a single thing against the truth of the sad story Luther Snow had told them.

They had tied up, and were busily engaged in the various tasks that had been apportioned to each as his daily program, when Luther came along. Just as Will had remarked, he was limping badly, and looked most wretched. Frank thought that if this was put on instead of being real, then old Luther deserved credit for his extraordinary ability as an actor.

He seemed greatly overjoyed at meeting them again, and between groans went around shaking hands with each one.

"How do you happen to be here, Mr. Snow, and looking so miserable?" Frank asked, after the old man had been made comfortable by Will and Bluff; while Jerry actually hastened his preparations for supper, because he saw that the wretched carpenter was weak from fasting.

"I went just as far as my money would carry me, and then the captain of the packet put me off at a little wood landing above," came the reply. "Then I started to walk down to the next town, hoping to get some sort of work there; but I was weak from hunger; and I managed to slip, and sprain my ankle, so I was about ready to give it all up, and die right there, when I discovered your boat. It was like the coming of an angel to me, my friends, for you have been so kind to a wretched old man."

Will secretly dabbed at his eyes; and even Bluff winked several times, as if he felt keenly for a desolate old man, left alone in the world, and suffering. Only Frank, usually one of the first to lend a helping hand to anyone in distress, did not speak up, and assure Luther that he could still count on them to help him. Frank was watching him when he had the chance, trying to read the other; for he still hardly knew what to believe.

During the progress of the supper, which they had aboard the *Pot Luck*, Luther was very quiet. He even seemed sick, in truth, and Frank knew he would

not have the heart to put him ashore. If they carried an old and weak man some distance on his journey, that could hardly interfere with the directions given by the owner of the houseboat; who, Will had admitted, was something of a queer character himself, and hardly to be taken seriously.

And so, after a consultation among themselves out on the deck, while Luther dozed in his chair in the cabin, the boys decided to give him a lift part of the way down to New Orleans. When they grew tired of having him along, they could make up a purse perhaps, and gather sufficient funds to buy him a railroad ticket, say from Memphis to his intended destination.

When they came in later he looked up eagerly, as though he must have guessed that they had been talking over what should be done about him. And so Frank considered it good policy to let him know the decision they had reached.

"We're going to carry you part way down the river, Mr. Snow," he remarked; "and when we put you ashore, perhaps at Memphis, we'll try and scare up enough money in the bunch to see you through by railroad to New Orleans. That's the best we can do; and even then we're stretching the orders of the party who owns the boat, and who was mighty particular that we harbor no strangers aboard on the trip, for some reason or other, which we do not understand."

Frank thought he caught a peculiar twinkle of the shrewd eyes, as he said this; but immediately Luther Snow showed evidence of considerable feeling as he insisted on shaking hands with each one of the chums in order.

"You are a noble lot of boys," he said, his voice trembling with real emotion; "and it was a lucky day for me when I met with you. I'll never forget you; never!"

And so the *Pot Luck* received another addition to the passenger list. Luther Snow seemed disposed to take his share of the work, and at times insisted on being allowed to do certain tasks.

"Don't make me feel so much ashamed of being a trespasser on your bounty, lads," he would remark, as he forced Jerry to let him cook a meal a few days after he joined them.

And to the astonishment of the boys he gave them a fine spread, changing their menu in a way that was pleasing. Jerry himself was the first to declare that it was splendid, for there was not a bit of jealousy in his disposition.

Luther seemed pleased to think that he could make himself useful in some way; because he realized that the boys would much rather be alone by themselves on this voyage down the great river.

They had passed the mouth of the Missouri, and the addition of so much water caused the widening of the Mississippi, so that the opposite shore seemed a great distance away.

Nothing out of the way had happened all this time, though weeks had now passed since the four chums first started on their Southern journey. The moon

had waxed and waned, and there was again a young crescent in the western sky when the sun had sunk behind the far distant Missouri shore.

Frank had not made much progress toward solving the puzzle of Luther Snow. The other boys believed in him fully; and so Frank kept his suspicions to himself. He fancied that Luther knew he was watching him, from many signs; but try as he might he could not catch the other off his guard, if it were really so that the old man was playing a part.

It had been settled among the boys at the start that under no conditions were they at any time to leave their passenger alone aboard the houseboat; and Jerry even insisted that as much as possible, someone be in the cabin when he was. For, of course, Jerry still believed that there must be a wonderful treasure aboard the *Pot Luck*, hidden under some loose board, or in a cranny that as yet he had not been able to find, though he would never give up looking.

And when the boy was amusing himself in sounding the walls, and dipping into all the little nooks he could find, Frank saw that the old man's eyes would follow him, as though he might be secretly amused. But never once did Luther Snow ask the reason of this search on Jerry's part. Perhaps he understood, from various allusions passing between the boys, that Jerry was in search of a secret hiding place; but as it was none of his business he had the good sense to keep still.

They were now drawing close to Cairo, situated at the junction of the Ohio with the Mississippi. And their stock of provisions being rather low, the houseboat was tied up at the lower end of the city, while Frank and Bluff went ashore to make purchases, and have them sent down.

Having done this duty, and been assured that the stuff would be delivered at once, the boys went on to the post office, and to do several other little errands. Thus they arrived in the vicinity of the place where the boat had been left several hours before, and with evening only a short time off.

"What does all that yelling mean, do you suppose, Frank?" Bluff asked, stopping to listen.

"Well, we heard that the roustabouts and stevedores were on a strike here, you remember," his companion replied; "and so, perhaps they're having a little fun with some of the strike-breakers, who, they say, have been brought across from Missouri to take their places."

"Whew! that means a fight, with stones flying, and some broken heads," Bluff remarked. "I've always wanted to see what a riot looked like."

"You come right along with me," observed Frank, as he hooked his arm in that of his impulsive chum. "It's not our funeral, yet; but it might be, if you thought to stand around when a riot is going on. Here they come now, and we'll have to run for the boat yet. They seem to be chasing some men, too!"

“Say, Frank, look at that boy running with the crowd!” cried Bluff, excitedly. “There, he’s down now, and I guess a stone must have hit him, No, he’s on his feet again, and making this way as fast as he can sprint, with the mob howling after him. Doesn’t he remind you of Ossie Fredericks; but, of course, it couldn’t be him! Yes, as sure as I’m talking, I do believe it is; and he’s going to get his medicine from that crazy crowd of longshoremen, if something don’t happen to save him!”

CHAPTER XVII—THE FUGITIVES OF THE LEVEE

Frank seldom acted from impulse. Still, he had a habit of thinking quickly in an emergency, and seldom wasted time.

“We must try and save him, Bluff!” he exclaimed, as he watched the approaching boy, who was staggering at times, and seemed to be very much frightened.

How the son of the St Paul millionaire chanced to get mixed up in a street riot, was the deepest kind of a mystery; but there was certainly no time for trying to solve it now.

“Sure we ought to, Frank!” came the ready response from impulsive Bluff.

True, he had every reason possible for disliking Oswald; but the dreadful condition of the other appealed to Bluff, who was even willing to take chances himself, in order to be of assistance to a fellow human being in trouble.

“This way, Ossie!” shouted Frank, seeing that the bewildered boy was about to turn aside, and try to escape by flanking the crowd; which must have only resulted in another shower of stones, and further injury to him.

Hearing his name spoken, the boy turned in their direction. Hope had apparently once more taken root in his soul. In that minute when in distress, he forgot all the reason he thought he had for hating Frank Langdon, and only looked toward him as a boy from the same college, who was offering him assistance.

He staggered a little as he reached them.

“Oh! get me away from here, fellows!” he fairly gasped, as he held out his trembling hands toward them.

The rioters were hurrying in their direction, some of them shouting all sorts of threats; and stones even began to patter around the spot. In other quarters separate fights were in progress, where little bunches of the strike-breakers had been brought to bay, and were trying to defend themselves.

Such confusion and howling the boys believed they had never heard before; nor would they ever care to again.

Frank had already made up his mind just what should be done, so that he wasted no time after the desperate boy reached them. Hooking a hand through one of Ossie's arms he bade Bluff to do the same on the other side. And in this fashion did the three hurry as fast as they could along the open levee.

"Where are you going?" asked Bluff, always wanting to know.

"To the houseboat!" replied Frank, glancing back over his shoulder, and wondering whether they could make it before some of the rioters caught up with them.

Oswald heard what was said, and made no comment. Doubtless in his condition of terror any port in a storm might be his motto. Only a short time before he had thought of the *Pot Luck* only when plotting how to injure the houseboat of his rival; but now a refuge aboard that same craft was to be considered the finest thing possible.

"A little faster, if you can make it, Ossie," Frank said, presently, when he began to fear that they would yet be overtaken, and perhaps beaten badly by the unthinking, yelling rioters.

"Do you think they'll get us?" gasped the other.

"I guess we'll make it all right; but if you could start up a little spurt it'd be a good thing," replied Frank, encouragingly.

Fear is a splendid spur, and Ossie really did manage to quicken his pace, though he had to grit his teeth, and make the most desperate efforts in order to accomplish it.

"Bully! there she is!" cried Bluff, excitedly; and although Bluff had so recently expressed the desire to look at a riot, doubtless by now he was fully satisfied with his experience, and would welcome the shelter of the houseboat almost as gladly as Oswald himself.

They could see the three who had been left on board, watching their approach; and Frank made all sorts of wild motions with his arms, trying to tell them to get the hawser loose, so as to be ready to let go the instant the fugitives of the levee arrived, pushing the houseboat out upon the swift current.

Jerry seemed bewildered, and it was Will, after all, who grasped the true meaning of Frank's shouts and gestures, for he hurried away to the new rope, where it was fastened ashore, while Jerry snatched up a push pole, and stood ready for work.

Thicker came the stones; and several times the fleeing boys narrowly escaped being struck; which was fortunate indeed, since more or less injury would surely have followed such a disaster.

When they finally reached the boat, the leading spirits among their unreasoning pursuers, both black and white, were not more than a hundred feet away, and still running strong.

“Push off!” gasped Frank, himself seizing hold of a pole, and starting to throw all of his strength into the labor.

Even old Luther lent a hand; and in this crisis the unwelcome passenger proved at least that he was no coward, Frank noticed, for he exposed himself as well as any of the others, until finally Frank thrust him inside the cabin.

The boat was now moving down the river, but altogether too close to the shore to wholly escape the rain of missiles that came pelting after, thrown by the angry mob, under the belief that those aboard were somehow concerned in the bringing of strike-breakers across the river to take their places.

It kept the boys busy dodging the stones, even though four-fifths of these dropped into the river. There was a constant pattering and banging as others struck the cabin and deck of the boat. One smashed through a window, and the crowd yelled hoarsely with delight at this evidence of good marksmanship.

Frank, however, believed they would soon be free from this fusillade. He saw that the levee came to an end just below, and consequently the crowd could no longer pursue the boat with profit. Besides, there were so many other scenes of excitement taking place all around, that by degrees the strikers were dropping off. The floating houseboat was really beyond their reach now; and they concluded that it would be more fun to attack a group of men who would fight back, than bombard a few boys who simply wanted to get away from the city.

So the last stone was thrown, and as the *Pot Luck* sailed out upon the broad reach below the city, where the two mighty rivers have their confluence, Frank and his chums could get their breath again, and survey the damages.

Two windows in the cabin had been broken, and there were a score of rocks and pieces of iron lying on the deck; besides numerous dents in the woodwork; but on the whole, they might feel they had escaped in pretty fair luck.

Ossie was recovering his breath, and also his courage. He seemed to feel queerly about having been rescued from danger by the very boys whom he had been trying to injure for so long.

Frank thought the opportunity for healing the breach between them was a good one, and after they had managed to push the houseboat in toward the shore, below the mouth of the Ohio, a hard task that took much time, he approached his rival, with a pleasant smile on his face.

“That was a pretty ugly experience, Ossie,” he remarked. “How did it hap-

pen you got caught in that mob, and were taken for a strike-breaker?"

"Why, you see, we had anchored down below here, when I remembered that I ought to have done an important errand for my father in Cairo," the other explained. "As our engine was out of commission again, I hired a man to row me up to the city. He took more than half the morning to do it, too, and was to bring me back again in the afternoon. I heard about the rioting, and thought I'd like to see something of it on my way down to the river to find my boatman. Then, almost before I knew what was happening, it broke out all around me, and I was caught up in a pack of blacks retreating before an attack of another mob. I tried to get away, but you saw what happened. Whew! I wouldn't like to repeat that experience. And look, there's the *Lounger* right now! Could you hold up, and put me aboard?"

Frank was quite willing. They had one passenger aboard now, which was more than the law, as laid down by Uncle Felix, allowed; and they certainly did not care for another.

He believed that if Oswald had listened to his better nature he would have wiped the slate clean then and there, after finding himself indebted so heavily to his supposed rival; and become friends from that hour with the crew of the *Pot Luck*.

But there were his three chums lining the side of the *Lounger*, and evidently in a great state of mind to see Ossie coming back aboard the other houseboat, which certainly showed signs of hard usage.

The anchor was allowed to drop overboard, and Frank himself took the captain of the *Lounger* across the few fathoms of water separating the two houseboats. Oswald was greeted by a noisy outcry as he climbed up on deck. The three who stood there, fearing that there was some danger that the bad feeling of the past would be crossed out, scowled at the crew of the *Pot Luck*, and even gave utterance to more or less contemptuous remarks concerning the rival craft.

No doubt these things had their influence upon Oswald. He looked at Frank after he had climbed aboard his own boat, and seemed almost about to stretch out his hand, to thank him for all he had done; but the old spirit was still uppermost.

"So-long, Langdon. Do as much for you some day, perhaps. But, of course you had to save your own bacon in the bargain; for as soon as you ran they believed you were strike-breakers as much as they did me. All the same, it was rather decent of you; and perhaps you may not be the bad lot I've considered you."

Frank only smiled, and made no reply, as he paddled back to his own boat. But he knew that his chums were boiling with indignation, for as they once more resumed their passage down-stream Bluff burst out with:

"Well, of all the mean, ornery skunks I ever met up with, that Ossie Fred-

ericks takes the cake. He hasn't even common decency enough to offer to shake hands, and thank the fellows who stood all that stone pelting just to drag him in out of the wet. Shucks! I wish now, Frank, we'd just let him take his medicine. He'd be getting all he deserved, and no more, the ungrateful cur!"

"You never can tell," said Frank, calmly. "Perhaps, when he gets to thinking it over, he may see a light; but we only did our duty. Bluff; and that's got to be our reward."

CHAPTER XVIII—WHAT JERRY'S STICK BROUGHT DOWN

More days passed, and the houseboat was making steady progress down the Mississippi, with as happy a party of lads aboard as could be found anywhere. Indeed, each day seemed to bring new delights along with it; and so lighthearted were the chums that every little while Bluff would break out in some college song, to be joined in the chorus by several other hearty voices.

They fished many times, and took toll of the waters they passed over; though sometimes the hooks came in empty, and they had to change the order arranged for dinner that evening. Once Bluff, who had gone ashore with his favorite gun over his shoulders, was heard to shoot several times; and the others were more or less concerned as to what manner of spoils he might have run across; for really at this time of year the law did not allow of hunting, save for woodcock, and very few other edible kinds of game.

When he came in shortly afterwards it was to fling down a magnificent specimen of the red-tailed hawk.

"Why, would you believe it," asserted Bluff, stoutly, "the measly thing just went for me like hot cakes, and I never did a thing to rile her up. I had to use my gun first of all, to club her away; and then, as she darted down at me, I just thought it was a mighty poor game that two couldn't play at; so I began to shoot. Took several times to make her be good. Looky here, where she scratched me in the cheek when she tried to carry me off at first."

The others never did know the true inwardness of that story. Frank guessed that Bluff, deeming a big, saucy hawk fair game, had blazed away and wounded her; and that he got his scratched cheek when he came to close quarters with the bird.

But to the victor belong the spoils; and in reality Frank believed the hawk was likely to do more damage to farmers' chickens and the small song birds, than it might good by destroying mice and such vermin that play such havoc with the growing crops. And for many days did that handsome hawk hang there, nailed on the cabin wall of the houseboat.

Frank continued to study Luther Snow. He was slowly making up his mind that they must get rid of him before arriving anywhere near New Orleans. He had mentioned Vicksburg once or twice as the point where they would purchase him a ticket on the railroad, so he could get to his destination quickly; but secretly Frank had arranged with his chums that Memphis should be the point of departure.

"Between us," remarked Jerry, on one occasion, as they were talking it over together, while Luther was inside the cabin, asleep on the cot they had made up for his occupancy; "I really don't think the old chap wants to leave us at all, but would rather stay aboard till we get to Orleans."

"Sure he would," remarked Will, with a nod and a grin; "he'd be a silly not to, when he's certain of three square meals a day, and such meals," and he smacked his lips in a way that must have made the cook feel proud that his talent was appreciated so much.

"Yes, I happen to know he wants to stick by us," remarked Bluff.

"Tell us how, then," said Frank, quickly, his eye on the door of the cabin.

"Well, more'n a few times, when we got to talkin', Luther, he'd turn to the subject of the great expense he'd been to us; and then he'd always say he hoped we'd change our minds, and not put him ashore at Vicksburg, because he was so contented aboard here, and wished he could just finish the voyage with us. Besides, he said we might need his help later on, as a doctor; and you know he did fix me up the finest way ever when I fell on that axe, and cut my leg so bad a week ago. Reckon no regular sawbones could have done the job better."

"He says he studied for a doctor's sheepskin away back, and was always sorry he didn't keep right along," Will put in.

"How about that, Frank; do we keep him or assist him on his way by rail?" Bluff asked; but Frank would not commit himself, because he believed that in some way the old man might hear of it, and play "sick" when they drew near Memphis, so that they could not have the heart to put him ashore.

He was himself coming to some sort of conclusion in the matter, and it first of all seemed to be founded on a certain fact, which by now Frank had made

certain of. Luther Snow was *not* the real name of their passenger. Frank had made a startling discovery one day recently, and it put an end to his bewilderment at least. It happened that, chancing to notice some handkerchiefs the old man had stowed in his various pockets, and which he was washing out, after a crude fashion that would have made a woman laugh, Frank saw that in every case a name had been carefully erased with indelible ink.

Then again there began to be other little things about the old man that told the observing lad he surely had never been a carpenter. Frank purposely asked him to build some boxes out of several smooth boards purchased for the purpose; and the result was a botched job that any second-class carpenter would have blushed to own. Even Bluff screwed up his eyebrows when he saw them, and privately declared that he did not wonder old Luther was out of a job so often, if that was a sample of the best he could do along the line of his trade.

To Frank there was a deeper significance in this failure to make good on the part of their passenger. No wonder his hands were so free from calloused places, for Frank now felt positive that Luther had never been a carpenter in all his life.

If that part was made up, then probably the entire tale was only a "fairy story," told for a purpose. That purpose was to get aboard the houseboat, for some reason or other. Well, he had been aboard for some weeks now, and nothing had happened, only he seemed to like it so well he wanted to remain with the boys until they reached New Orleans.

There was something about this desire on his part that impressed Frank. If, as he now actually began to believe, Luther Snow was really the Marcus Stackpole of whom Uncle Felix had particularly warned them, why had he not picked up the hidden treasure Jerry was always talking about, and disappeared long ago?

Frank somehow began to believe that, after all, there was no secret *cache* aboard the boat which might contain valuables in the shape of papers or jewels. Jerry liked to think there was, but really they had not a peg on which to hang such an idea; except that queer Uncle Felix seemed to want to keep strangers off the boat, and particularly a man he seemed to dislike very much, one Marcus Stackpole.

Frank was even now busying himself with trying to lay some little trap by means of which he might learn the truth.

"I'll take him unawares some time," he was saying to himself, as he stood on deck that afternoon, after they had tied up, with the sunlight around him, and looked out from under the shady branches of the tree to which the boat was fast; "and spring that name on him—call him Mr. Stackpole. If he can look me in the eye, and never show a sign, I'll have to think I'm mistaken; but all the same, off this boat he goes at Memphis, if I have to get an ambulance, and send him to the

hospital.”

Bluff was seated, as he often might be seen, on the rail of the boat; while Will pottered over the tangled fish lines, for Jerry had taken a notion to put a new roll of film in the little camera, and was even then rubbing it up. Luther Snow, a blanket about his shoulders, sat near by, watching it all in a pleased sort of way.

“Time was when I could stand anything, boys,” remarked the old man as he gathered this covering closer to his body; “and I reckon I’ve been through considerable all over the wide world, for a man who never had a cent that he didn’t earn himself. But I’m getting a little old now, you see. I begin to feel rheumatism in my bones, and sometimes I begin to believe that my days as a rover are nearly over.”

Frank always listened when he started to speak of experiences in his checkered past. It often aroused the curiosity of the boy to understand how a man who, as he confessed himself, was only a common carpenter (and a mighty poor one at that, Frank would say to himself), had been able to get around in all the queer corners of the world that Luther Snow had.

He seemed to know many foreign cities by heart, and spoke of certain things in a way that only one familiar with them could do. Well, there could be no doubt of one thing, and this was that Luther occupied the rôle of a mystery to Frank, a puzzle he could not wholly solve.

If, then, he proved to be Marcus Stackpole, the very man against whom they had been especially warned, what did he want?

Frank kept repeating that to himself time and again as he lounged there and in the light of the declining sun watched his chums; then turned his eyes in the direction of the man who had the blanket about his shoulders, and who seemed so satisfied to be with them on board Uncle Felix’s houseboat.

It was Jerry who startled them all suddenly by calling out:

“Hey! there’s a gray squirrel right over your head, Bluff! Watch me give the little beggar a scare, will you?”

He reached over, and picked up one of a number of sticks of wood which had been brought on board at their last stop, being intended to serve as fuel for the little cook stove, after they had been chipped in half, perhaps.

This was a short and heavy one Jerry had selected. Rising to his feet, he gave it one whirl around his head, and then let fly. Jerry had always been reckoned something of a thrower. He often played in the pitcher’s box before he went away from home, and was even now a promising fielder on the sub nine at college.

So Frank would not have been very much surprised had he succeeded in knocking the squirrel in question off his perch. But he was very much astonished at the most remarkable consequences of Jerry’s shot.

There was an angry scream, such as only an enraged cat could make; and something large and hairy, with extended legs, came floundering down upon the deck of the houseboat directly in front of Bluff. Indeed, in its passage, the wildcat, for it turned out to be nothing else, made a vicious stab for Bluff; and that excited as well as alarmed individual was so taken aback, that quite naturally he lost his grip on the railing of the boat, and fell over into the river.

This was getting to be a settled habit with Bluff, for he seemed capable of going overboard on the slightest excuse, just as though he rather liked taking a plunge into the cool waters of the Mississippi.

And the angry cat sprawled there on the deck, yowling and snarling, as if daring anyone to dispute his right to be monarch of all he surveyed.

CHAPTER XIX—A BOBCAT ON BOARD

“Help!” gasped Jerry, who seemed to be in some sort of a pickle, having managed to get his legs crossed in such a way, as he sat there pottering with Will’s camera, that in the excitement of the moment he was unable to either rise, or roll out of the danger zone.

As sometimes happens in a case like this, it turned out to be the one least expected to play the part of hero. Nobody dreamed that Will—quiet, sensitive Will, the artist of the expedition, and a boy given more to dreaming than doing strenuous things—would jump into the breach as he did.

In fact, he was never able to explain it himself, save that somehow he seemed to imagine those clubs on the deck were just made for belaboring a tiger-cat over the head with; and from the fact that Bluff had gone over into the river, with Jerry calling wildly for help, it must be up to him to *do* something.

Why, he snatched up one of the heavy sticks as though he had been anticipating just such a sudden call, and had his plan of campaign already laid out.

“Take care, Will; don’t let him get in at you with those sharp claws!” cried the startled Frank, as he too tried to possess himself of a suitable cudgel, if there chanced to be another worth having in the bunch.

He could not find what he wanted on the spur of the moment—one was too

slender to promise any results; while another seemed much too short with which to attack a vicious wildcat.

Will did not appear to expect any help in his fight. The way he kept at it was a revelation to those who watched him, for all the while Frank sought his stick, he kept one eye on the battle, determined to jump in, if necessary, club or no club.

Whack! came the cudgel Will yielded against the side of the bobcat, knocking the savage beast sprawling on the deck; though like his kind the cat could not be kept down, but was on its feet instantly, more angry than ever.

“Whoop! hit him again for his mother!”

It was surely Bluff who gave utterance to that shout. Evidently he had not cared to stay there in the river, while so much that was exciting seemed to be occurring aboard the houseboat; and taking advantage of some objects upon which he was able to seize, Bluff had clambered up far enough to thrust his head over the side, in time to witness that splendid “home run hit” made by timid Will.

Well, they would hardly be likely to ever call him that again, after seeing how vigorously he went after the now demoralized wildcat, getting in blows whenever an opening occurred, and meanwhile poking at the beast threateningly.

It crouched there, snarling as only such a beast can, with its ears drawn back, and its green eyes seeming to emit sparks. Once it sprang full at the boy, and Mr. Snow uttered a cry of alarm; he made his way into the cabin, and now held Bluff’s repeating gun in his hands, with the air of a hunter accustomed to such tools; but there seemed small chance to get a fair shot, the boy and the cat were so close to each other.

But Will proved as quick as a flash in his movements. He met this leap of his feline foe just as cleverly as a champion ball player might a swift one, straight over the plate. There was a loud concussion; and then they had a view of a squirming, hairy figure just passing over the rail above Bluff, four legs working overtime in the effort to get a grip with those keen-pointed and poisonous claws.

Luther Snow thrust the gun into the hands of Frank, who had been in the act of trying to meet the figure of the cat at the instant the animal made his spring.

“It’s your right to wind him up, Frank!” the man said; and seemed as cool as any one accustomed to scenes of peril all his life could be.

So Frank stepped to the rail, and seeing the baffled bobcat just about climbing the bank, he wound up his existence with one shot.

“Wow! is it all over?” demanded Bluff, who, when the cat came sailing toward him a second time, had simply let go, and dropped with another splash into the river; because, as he afterwards said, he was already as wet as he could get; and knew he would be safe down there from those threatening claws.

Will was as pale as a ghost, and breathing hard from his exertions, when Frank rushed over to seize his hand and squeeze it.

“Good boy, Will!” he exclaimed. “We’re proud of you this day, believe that. Why, what you didn’t do to that poor beast could be put into a thimble. I’ll never, never forget it, as long as I live!”

“Maybe you won’t have to,” remarked Jerry, who, it seemed, had finally managed to get on his feet again, and now stood there; holding the camera in his hands, a grin of delight on his face.

“What do you mean, Jerry?” asked Frank.

But Will saw the little black box, and being himself always just wild to snap off everything he could run across that promised to make a good picture, he seemed to jump to the right conclusion.

“Did you do it, Jerry?” he demanded, eagerly.

“I rattled her right lively; and if I didn’t make a big mistake, you ought to get some good pictures out of the lot,” replied Jerry, handing Will’s property over.

“Well,” remarked the wet figure that came crawling over the rail just then, “if you only managed to press the button when that crazy cat was sailing into Will, and our chum gave him that blow on the nose, you’ve got something we’ll all be proud to see.”

“That was when I pushed the button the last time, I reckon,” Jerry declared; “but honest to goodness, I was that excited I wouldn’t like to say right now that I got anything but the tip of pussy’s tail.”

“Oh! I hope it won’t be so bad as that,” said Will; “not that I want to figure in a picture, because I’d ten times rather it was one of the rest; but I’ve always wanted to get a snapshot of a bobcat on the jump.”

“He was on the jump, all right!” affirmed Bluff. “I thought he’d drop on my head, and jab my eyes out, so I ducked. I like cats all right, in their proper places; which I take it is in the laps of old maids. I haven’t lost any cat, and wasn’t looking for one. But, Frank, since I’m wet already, let me go in and get your game before he drifts away.”

“Don’t call it *my* game,” remarked Frank, positively; “that honor belongs to Will here. And if we can cure the skin, he’s going to have a little rug made out of it to remember this occasion by.”

“Hear! hear!” cried Jerry; while Bluff, who shed moisture with every step he took, waded out to where the dead animal was floating on the water in a little swirl just below the tied-up houseboat.

“Well, I’m going to develop that film to-night, you hear,” said Will; “because I just can’t wait to see what Jerry did. I hope he got more of the cat than his tail. It ain’t much of a tail at that, either, seems to me. But look at these claws, and his sharp teeth. Ugh! I don’t believe I’d have had the nerve to tackle him, if I’d

seen them first.”

“Yes, you would!” declared Bluff, confidently. “Always thought you was timid-like, William, because you never blew your horn about what you’d do; but sure, I’ve changed my mind; and now I reckon you’ve got more real spunk than anyone in the whole bunch.”

“Just what I meant to say, Bluff,” remarked Frank.

“And my sentiments to a hair,” Jerry added.

“I’ve seen some instances of bravery in my time, but few that could equal the way he attacked that angry wildcat, and sent it over the rail,” Luther Snow said, with sincerity in his voice.

“But, Will, I hope the beast didn’t scratch you anywhere,” Frank went on; “for you know it’s sometimes a dangerous thing to be wounded by the claws of any wild beast that lives on animal food. Lots of hunters have died from blood poisoning, even when they thought the scratches hardly worth washing, they were so small.”

“He never touched me, Frank, that I know of; and I can’t see a sign of a scratch anywhere on my hands,” Will replied, proudly.

“And there don’t seem to be any on your neck or face,” Jerry declared, after an examination. “But, Frank, if there had been, would you have used that purple stuff you carry in that little bottle, tightly corked, and labeled ‘poison’?”

“Just what it’s for,” came the reply, “and it disinfects any sort of wound that seems suspicious. The only trouble is, that it leaves a dark stain on the flesh for some days. It’s permanganate of potash, and any druggist will put it up if he’s told what it’s for. But when one’s life may pay the forfeit, what does a little pain, or stain, amount to?”

“You are quite right, my boy,” remarked Luther Snow. “I’ve carried a small phial of that same stuff thousands of miles, over African trails, and through the better part of India. And if I’ve used it once, I suppose I have fifty times; for myself or some gun bearer who was clawed by a lion or tiger.”

Again did Frank have that deep conviction that there was something strange about this Luther Snow, as he called himself. How a poor carpenter, who had never had a dollar he did not earn himself, could spend years in hunting just for pleasure, all over Asia and Africa, bothered him. But some day he expected to know what the key could be to this riddle.

That night the talk was all about past experiences that had come the way of the four Outdoor Chums. One story brought up another, and through it all Luther Snow sat there, listening as though spellbound. If he had been somewhat of a traveler and a hunter, as an old man; surely these boys deserved more or less credit for what they had been through, considering their years.

Frank felt drawn toward the man in spite of himself. There were times

when he believed that if this mystery that hung over Luther Snow could only be lifted he might look on him with friendly eyes.

But he never wavered in the least with regard to that resolution he had taken, which was to the effect that when they reached the city on the bluff, Memphis, he would play a little lone hand he was arranging, and see to it that Luther was left behind; with plenty of money in his pocket, placed there secretly, to cover all further expenses down to the city he wished to reach, according to his story—New Orleans.

CHAPTER XX—THE FLOATING TREE

“How did they turn out, Will?”

It was Jerry who asked this question. They had all left the cabin, and given it over to the photographer for an hour, so that he could make use of it for a dark room, in which to develop his films. And the opening of the door, with his appearance on deck, was a sign that his operations had been brought to a conclusion.

“Simply immense!” exclaimed the other, in a triumphant tone. “Jerry, when it comes to snapping things that are in perpetual motion, you certainly take the cake.”

“You mean I got a little more than the stub tail of the cat?” inquired Jerry.

“You got the whole business down to a dot!” cried Will. “It’s going to be the greatest picture ever; and will give our collection some class, let me tell you. The only thing that makes me feel bad is that I didn’t have the honor of taking it. Everybody’ll say Jerry ought to have been elected official photographer of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club, instead of me.”

“Oh! rats!” scoffed Jerry; “when we’ve got fifty splendid pictures that you snapped under the funniest conditions ever, some of them worth being entered for a prize. But I’m coming in, and take a squint at those negatives, if you’ll let me, Will.”

“Sure; they’ve been in the hypo bath, and are fixed, all right. I’ve got ‘em dripping in the wash right now. Come along, everybody, and see a panorama.

The whole thing, from the start, up to where our unwelcome visitor took a notion to go overboard. It's like a story, continued from one number to the next. When you've looked at all the pictures you've got it just as if you'd read it between covers."

"All but me going over backward?" laughed Bluff.

"Wait and see," Will replied, as he led the way into the cabin; "I think Jerry was just going to snap you at the time the cat dropped; for you're in the beginning just as big as life, with your hands thrown up, as you keel over backwards; and the cat sprawling on the deck, its back arched. Oh! you can't squirm out of this game, Bluff! I tell you it's the finest thing that ever came down the pike."

"We must open all the windows, and air the cabin before we think of turning in," remarked practical Frank, snuffing the rank kerosene odor in the atmosphere, caused by Will's close confinement with his smoky dark-lantern.

All of them were delighted with the negatives that Will held up against a light, so that they could see. Being familiar with photographic work, they understood the lights and shadows; and could see that, considering the peculiar conditions under which Jerry had pressed the button time and again, the remarkable series of thrilling pictures were strongly featured. And through them all, saving possibly the first, Will took the leading part; after the wildcat, of course, which occupied the centre of the stage.

Once more they sat outside talking, while the cabin aired.

"Seems to me we've been having a lot of rain lately, for the good old summer time," Bluff remarked.

"I should say so," Jerry went on. "Why, we can see logs passing us every five minutes that we look out, after we tie up. And I reckon some of the tributaries of the Mississippi must be at the flood stage. Wouldn't surprise me any to discover chicken coops floating past."

"Don't I wish we could, with the chickens perched on the ridge-pole!" chuckled Bluff. "Chicken is one of my weak points. I feel lost when I don't get a feed of fowl once a week, anyway."

"Frank, what was that you seemed to be staring at just when it got dusk?" Will asked. "I saw you looking, and then go to the end of the boat with your hand over your eyes to see better."

"Oh! that was a passing boat," Bluff spoke up; "I noticed the light in the cabin myself, but was too busy to bother."

"I've more than half an idea we've seen that boat before," remarked Frank, quietly.

"You don't say!" exclaimed Bluff. "Now, I reckon you mean our friend, Ossie Fredericks; don't you, Frank?"

"Just what I do," returned the other. "Of course it was too gloomy for me to

make sure, and the boat was some distance out; but I could partly see the shape of the cabin, and it seemed to correspond with that on the *Lounger*. Then it was running with power, for we all must have heard the sound of the engine exhaust."

"Looks like that crowd meant to take as long a voyage as we've got ahead of us; and we're apt to run across 'em in New Orleans, when we get there," Will remarked.

"Well, we don't own the river, and can't tell 'em to go back home, because their company isn't wanted," said Jerry.

"I hope we see nothing more of them, because Oswald is bound to get even with Frank for something or other," was what Will observed; for he was by nature the most peaceable of all the Outdoor Chums, and disliked a row.

"Yes, get even with him for saving his life," grunted Bluff. "If ever you catch me taking chances with a howling mob of roustabouts, or any other thing, just to save a fellow like Ossie Fredericks the beating he ought to have, why you'll know it—that's what!"

But Frank, although he made no remark, knew this was not so. He understood Bluff better than the other did himself. In fact, he often said that the bark of Bluff was worse than his bite; and he felt positive that if the occasion arose again, whereby his chum could save even Ossie Fredericks from being injured, Bluff would put himself out to do it.

In the morning they saw that what had been said about the driftwood was certainly true; for out on the swelling river even uprooted trees were floating, having been undermined up one of the many tributaries of the Mississippi.

"Look sharp, fellows," said Bluff, "and if you see a lone chicken coop coming along, let me know. It's me into the little dinghy then, and away to the rescue. I'd sure hate to see any fowls drown."

"And to save them from it, you'd cut their heads off; eh, Bluff?" laughed Frank, as he passed in to help Jerry with the breakfast.

All through that day they kept passing trees that were afloat, and which, somehow, did not seem able to make as good progress on the current of the river as did the houseboat.

Bluff was frequently using the field glasses to spy out that expected hen-coop which he stoutly declared would be along shortly; but as they had corned-beef hash for supper that night, with some baking powder biscuits, which Jerry baked, it can be set down as positive that no fowls arrived by flood-express, or otherwise.

Even the fishing seemed to be useless while the river was at such a "booming" stage, and Jerry hardly knew what to do with himself evenings, for that had become his favorite pursuit of late.

Again they had had a heavy downpour during the afternoon. Of course the

roof of the cabin kept them from being bothered while the rain continued, and they could laugh at such happenings. But Frank kept pretty close to the shore, lest they lose sight of it when the mist hung over the river, and find themselves too far out.

Even the boats bound up-river seemed to be having troubles of their own in dodging the floating trees and logs; for they did much whistling as long as they remained within ear-shot of the boy-voyagers.

About five in the afternoon, Frank concluded that they had better be on the lookout for a place to tie up.

"I know it's earlier than usual," he said, noticing that the others seemed somewhat surprised at his declaration; "but you notice how the banks are crumbling all along here. We'll be lucky enough to find a tree to-night that will answer for our hawser. You notice that we don't call it a cable any more, since we bought that big heavy rope to take the place of the one that played us such a mean trick by breaking, in that storm, and letting the boat go adrift. Hawser sounds so much more like business, too."

"How about that place down below, Frank?" asked Jerry, pointing. "Looks like a good tree close to the edge of the bank, all right. Shall we work her in?"

"I suppose so," replied Frank; and yet as they approached the spot he was seen to shake his head seriously.

"Won't do, I'm afraid, boys," he observed.

"But, Frank, that tree would hold a church; it's a big chap, and not rotten either, so far as I can see," Bluff remarked.

"And look at its roots sticking out, would you?" Jerry added; "why, Frank, even some of them would hold the boat, if we didn't want to climb the bank."

"There's danger of a cave-in, boys," Frank went on to say. "One must have gone right above here, this very afternoon; and if ever it does come, why, you can see that giant tree must topple over into the river. They always fall that way."

"Wow! excuse me!" cried Bluff, as he craned his neck to look up at the towering top of the big tree. "Why, if that ever came down on our *Pot Luck*, there wouldn't be a grease spot left of her."

"How about the crew?" demanded Will. "I move we go on, fellows. Better find a tree that's further away; or else just throw our old mud-hook overboard, and come to an anchor for one night."

Just below they discovered a safe bay, where the water was deep, and a convenient tree back from the shore offered a chance to secure the hawser. Here they hastened to enter, and tie up.

"No danger in this place; is there, Frank?" asked Will, a little apprehensively.

"Not at all," came the reply, in a tone that quieted all Will's fears; for he had

the most unbounded faith in his chum.

They were just getting up from supper when they heard a tremendous racket close by. There was a crash, and a splash, as though a whole section of the river bank had caved in.

“The big tree!” exclaimed Will, turning white.

“I wonder, now,” remarked Jerry, rather in doubt; while Bluff declared he meant to go ashore, and find out if it could really be so.

He came back later, lantern in hand, and reported that the tree, to which they had thought to tie up, had entirely disappeared, having been undermined by the rising flood, so that it toppled over into the river, and was carried off. Where it had once proudly stood, there now remained only a gap in the river bank. And once again did three of the chums have reason to be thankful for Frank Langdon’s thoughtfulness. What their fate might have been had they carried out their first intention, was not pleasant to contemplate.

During the night another heavy shower fell, and for an hour the rain pattered upon the roof of the houseboat. Frank declared, in the morning, that this sort of weather in the summer was a rare thing; for, as a rule, the rivers are at flood in the early spring, and decline through the hot months.

“See any chickens roosting on a floating coop, Bluff?” asked Jerry, at one time during the morning, as he noticed the other handling the glasses nervously.

“Frank, oh! Frank, look here!” called Bluff, without paying any attention to the joking words of the other; and as Frank came hurrying out of the cabin Bluff went on to say: “take a look, and see what you make of that tree down there, that we’re catching up with. Seems to me there’s people in the branches!”

Instantly there was excitement aboard the houseboat. Frank peered through the glasses, and immediately confirmed the words of the discoverer; and as the others, in turn, took a look, they added their opinions.

“A man, a woman, and, seems to me, two children, are perched among the branches of the tree,” Frank continued, soon afterwards, as he looked again; “and as the thing seems to be moving very slowly we’re catching up, all right.”

“But how in the wide world d’ye suppose they ever got there?” demanded Will.

“Their house may have been carried off; and, finding that it was sinking, they climbed into that treetop when they had the chance. Now, I recollect I *did* hear a call just before morning. I listened, and made up my mind it was only a wild bird, perhaps a night-heron hunting its food along the flooded bank. But it must have been one of those children crying in fear!”

“Well, we’ve sure got to get that family aboard, and take them to the next town. Why, perhaps those children are half starved for something to eat right now!” Jerry remarked, warmly, for he knew what that must feel like.

"They see us," Frank said, a little later, when they had approached much closer to the floating tree, in the branches of which the fugitives of the flood clung. "The man is shouting something, and sure enough, he seems to be pointing at the other end of the log, as if—great Cæsar!"

"What is it, Frank?" asked Will, anxiously; "is the tree sinking?"

"Something seems to be crouched there on the butt end of the floating tree," was what Frank went on to say; "there, it moved then, and crawled up a yard or so nearer the people in the top. Boys, get a gun out; for I believe it's a panther!"

CHAPTER XXI—THE NEW OWNER OF THE HOUSEBOAT

"A panther!" echoed Bluff, springing alongside Frank, where he could see better.

"Well, what do you think of that?" cried Jerry; while old Luther came hurrying out of the cabin.

"Oh! Frank, get your rifle, quick!" put in Will, nervously. "Bluff's pump-gun isn't such a bad weapon, after all; but with such a beast a rifle ought to be the right thing."

Frank seemed to have the same idea, for he hastened into the cabin; and when he immediately returned carrying the repeating gun that had served him on many occasions in the past, Will appeared to think that it was all over but the shouting, such was the confidence he felt in his chum.

"How is it now?" asked Frank, as he came up.

"Why, the tree is heading this way; that is, I mean we seem to be bearing straight down on it," Jerry replied; and considering the excitement that all of the chums were laboring under just then, it was not strange that he found himself mixed up slightly in his description of the way things were going.

"If we keep on gaining we'll come mighty near running the tree down," Bluff added. "And then you'll get a chance to give the panther his passage ticket."

"But the tree acts queer," Will declared. "Every now and then it just swings, and turns around. Now you see it, and now you don't. Sometimes the branches are heading in our direction, and again it's the butt; with the ugly cat lying there waiting till he gets good and hungry, when he expects to make a meal from one

of that poor family.”

“Huh!” grunted Bluff, “I rather think that critter is keeping an eye on us. Chances are he just feels it in his bones that we’d be bound to break up his dinner party, somehow; eh, Frank?”

“He’s moving,” replied the one addressed; “and seems to be creeping toward the people right now!”

“Sure!” declared Jerry; “you can hear them hollering to beat the band; but they make so much noise I don’t seem to be able to understand anything they say.”

“They’re trying to tell us what the panther is doing; and begging us to shoot him as quick as we can,” Frank said, with a serious look on his face.

“Which same you’re only too willing to do, I reckon?” remarked Bluff.

“But the trouble is, I don’t seem able to fire from here without taking some chances of hitting one of the people,” Frank went on, betraying what was worrying him so much. “A bullet can strike the hard limb of a tree, and be deflected in all sorts of queer ways, you know.”

“Frank, you are right, there,” said old Luther Snow, admiringly.

“But we must do something to help them, Frank!” ejaculated Will, himself ready to undertake the work of rescue if his companions failed to think up a remedy for the trouble.

“That’s right!” cried Bluff; and immediately he disappeared in the cabin; which the others knew meant that he was after the pump-gun, upon which he seemed to place so much dependence, though it hardly seemed the right kind of weapon when facing a panther.

“I was thinking,” Frank went on, as if making up his mind; “that if I dropped into our little dinghy, I might paddle around to the other side of the tree, and get a crack at the beast.”

“You’re just right you could, Frank!” admitted Jerry; and even Will, although not used to much in this line, nodded his head.

Then he vanished, as though an idea had struck him; and Frank understood. Will, too, had gone to arm himself, not with a gun, but his snapshot camera, which he meant to use in taking several pictures of the strange scene, with the floating tree, the family hanging in the branches; and perhaps a glimpse of the savage beast crouching there.

Will and Bluff appeared at almost the same time, and it was to find Frank hastening to drop into the little skiff which they dignified by the better sounding name of dinghy or “dinky.” Frank had already placed his rifle aboard, with the muzzle turned away from him, as every careful hunter always makes sure of doing.

“Set me loose, Jerry,” he remarked.

They had almost overtaken the big tree, in the branches of which this strange little comedy, that threatened to become a tragedy at any minute, was taking place.

"Can you see him from up there, boys?" called out Frank, as, paddle in hand, he started the boat down the current, and in a direction that would allow him to get below the tree.

"There! I got a fine shot at him then!" cried Will; who, being an artist, was always on the lookout for a pose, and a picture that would do him credit when exposed to the gaze of his friends at home.

"But he dodged right afterwards," added Jerry; "and I don't see him now, Frank."

"Say, he's climbing up among the branches, I do believe!" called Bluff, who was again on the lookout, gun in hand.

The people in the tree were shouting at a great rate, the man trying to urge Frank to hurry and shoot, the woman and children shrieking in their terror, as they saw the treacherous, sleek beast constantly drawing nearer.

But Frank on his part did not really believe that the panther meant to attack the fugitives of the flood. With the instinct of his kind the beast, no doubt, understood that all he had to fear lay in the direction of these newcomers.

The wary panther had already observed Frank's gun, and seemed to know that his best policy, just now, was to try and keep some object between himself and the lad.

For several minutes Frank used the paddle diligently, in the endeavor to gain such a position that he could get a good view of the panther. Twice he laid the paddle hastily down and snatched up his gun; but there must have been something about his movement that warned the beast of his danger; for on both occasions the big cat quickly changed his position; and when Frank was ready to fire, he could not do so.

Then again the people got within his range as the floating tree took a sudden notion to turn slowly around. The current carried him faster than the unwieldy forest monarch, so that in order to keep within a certain distance of the trunk, Frank was presently forced to take to the paddle again.

This was discouraging; but he expected that, sooner or later, he would get the opportunity he craved, and be able to shoot the dangerous customer.

All at once he noticed that the tree was turning again. It was close to the houseboat now; indeed, a small gap of only a dozen feet or so seemed to separate the two floating objects; and Frank knew that there was danger of Bluff being tempted to use his shotgun, if he saw the opening.

A sudden yell from all the other chums told Frank that something had happened; and what it was he instantly guessed when he saw how the three boys

scattered. Two of them, Bluff and Will, seemed to be making for the open cabin door; but Jerry was in some sort of trap, for the crouching form of the panther, lashing its sides with its long tail, as though fully aroused, stood between him and safety.

The animal seemed in the very act of leaping on Jerry, and seeing this, and that he could not get in a shot because of the many small branches that intervened, Frank shouted to his chum, warningly:

“Look out, Jerry, he’s going to jump! Over the side into the water with you! He won’t follow you there! Hurry! make a spring for it, Jerry!”

Apparently Jerry understood that this was his best plan. There was really no time for thinking, or choosing, with that furious beast ready to launch his long, slender body through the air.

Jerry made the plunge.

Frank knew there was nothing more to fear from that quarter. Jerry was a good swimmer, and could easily make the tree close by; in the branches of which he was quickly perched, dripping wet, but still full of pluck.

The situation had changed in a wonderful manner. Jerry was in the tree, and the panther apparently owned the houseboat; for Bluff, old Luther, and Will had retreated to the cabin, the door of which they had shut and barred behind them, and from the windows they were shouting to Frank, trying to tell him where the panther was just then.

Frank could hardly keep from laughing, in spite of the gravity of the situation, for it had a comical side as well as a serious one. He knew that it was now up to him to get that animal, one way or another; and as he did not exactly care to board the houseboat while the panther was hiding behind the cabin, some way must be discovered for enticing the invader to show himself.

All Frank wanted was just one glimpse of the gray coat of the enemy, and if at the time he had his gun ready, he knew he could get his work in. But how might this be done?

Evidently the animal had been hunted before, for he seemed determined to keep some obstacle between himself and the rifle. And although Bluff had the reputation of being rather a daring sort of fellow, even he could not be expected to issue forth, and act as a sort of “toll” for Frank, luring the panther to show himself.

Some other plan must be adopted; and in this, no doubt the chums inside the cabin could assist. They were on the ground; while Jerry, lodged in the tree, and being without a single weapon, could not be expected to do anything but offer advice.

Back and forth Frank paddled, keeping a close watch on the cabin; but evidently the wary animal knew his location; for it kept out of sight. Jerry shouted

that it was in plain view from his side, once when Frank was around on the other quarter, and loudly bemoaned the fact that he had no gun.

The tree and houseboat were really in collision at this time, and floating down the current together. Frank was afraid to go around to the other side again, lest the beast take a sudden notion to once more plunge among the branches of the tree where the poor fugitives were hanging, watching this strange battle, with a boy's wits matched against the cunning of the smartest beast that roams the American forest.

When this had gone on for some little time, Frank began to get provoked. Surely there must be some way of getting the beast to show itself; and in this emergency Frank turned to his knowledge of woodcraft to help him out.

CHAPTER XXII—WHO WAS BOSS

“Ahoy! there, Bluff!”

Frank put both hands to his mouth, using them in lieu of a speaking trumpet; for really the children were making so much racket close by, that it was a difficult thing to be heard.

“What is it, Frank?” shouted a voice from one of the cabin windows on that quarter of the boat.

“You must scare the cat around to this side, so I can get a crack at him!” continued Frank.

“Sure! I understand that; but how can I do it?” demanded the willing Bluff; and had Frank suggested that he creep out, and make faces around the corner of the cabin at the panther, the reckless fellow would probably have agreed; for he placed the greatest dependence possible on his chum's ability to shoot straight.

But, of course, Frank had not the slightest intention of placing the life of a chum in peril, when there were other means at hand for inducing the panther to whip around the cabin.

“Got your gun handy, Bluff?” continued the boy in the dinghy.

“Right here; and only waiting for a chance to give him every charge it holds, Frank,” came the ready reply.

“Well, hold on till I get just where I want to be,” continued the other. “Then, when you hear me give a whoop, bang away several times out of the windows on the *other side* of the cabin. And the rest of you in there, yell for all you’re worth. That ought to fetch him.”

Frank knew that an animal can only grasp one idea at a time. In its sudden alarm the panther would undoubtedly forget all about its cause for vigilance with regard to the human being in the boat, and the chances were strongly in favor of its rushing around to the side of the cabin that was free from the new disturbance.

So Frank, using his paddle once more, manipulated the little boat until he had placed it just where he wished, and in a position for a clear shot, should his artful plan succeed.

Then, as he grasped his ready rifle, he gave the promised whoop.

The family in the treetop must have discovered that the crisis had arrived in their fortunes, for even the two children temporarily stopped shrieking; and were eagerly watching the boy in the little boat.

Immediately a tremendous racket broke out on the other side of the houseboat. A gun was discharged several times. There was also loud yells from three voices, even old Luther joining in with vigor.

Frank swung his gun up to his shoulder, and his eye glanced along the shining barrel. He could give a pretty accurate guess as to the exact spot where the panther must show up; and he was covering that place.

Just as he expected, the alarmed beast, forgetting its former design of keeping away from the enemy in the cockleshell of a boat that danced on the heaving water of the Mississippi, came leaping around the corner of the cabin. Possibly it had taken a sudden notion to return once more to its former perch among the lower limbs of the floating tree; since the houseboat did not seem to be such a desirable location after all, with all those noises so close by.

Frank did not wait to find out. He had no idea of troubling the panther by asking its intentions. The opportunity for which he had been waiting so long was now within his grasp; and as quickly as he could properly aim at the beast his finger only too eagerly pressed the trigger.

There was a single report, not at all like the crash of Bluff’s heavy shotgun. Immediately a shout broke forth from within the cabin, showing that no sooner had those in hiding carried out their part of the proceedings, than they jumped over to the other windows to see what would happen.

“You got him that time, Frank!” Bluff was heard to whoop.

“Oh! and this wire mesh prevented me from snapping him decently; I’m sure it won’t be even a halfway good picture!” echoed Will.

“Bully boy!” shouted Jerry, from the branches of the tree.

Frank was satisfied, for he saw the beast kicking his last on the deck of the

houseboat which he had boarded, and taken full possession of, in such a bold and unheard-of manner.

Then, a couple of seconds later, the door of the cabin burst open, to allow Bluff to rush upon the deck, carrying his weapon; and evidently only wishing that some power would give the cat the balance of its nine lives, so that it might regain its feet, and make it necessary for him to pour in a volley at close quarters.

But even as he arrived upon the scene it seemed to become still.

"It's dead, Frank!" cried Bluff, in what seemed to be a disappointed voice.

"Glad to hear it," returned the other, as he dropped his gun, and took to the paddle once more; for he knew that they must get the wretched fugitives of the flood out of the treetop before it separated from the houseboat.

"Hand down the woman first, and then the children," he said to the man, when he arrived at a place that seemed convenient for the transfer; "I'll put them aboard the houseboat, and then come back for you."

By using great care, he managed to get them in the small dinghy, and paddled over to the larger craft. Those on board assisted them on deck, after which Frank, after handing up his rifle, to be rid of it, went back for the man and Jerry.

When they too had been safely transferred, Frank insisted that they separate the tree from the *Pot Luck*, so that they could move along faster. Will was busy with his camera about this time, determined to get as much of the affair on the records as possible.

Once the boat floated free from the slower moving tree, Frank set Jerry to work getting something to eat for the hungry fugitives, who had been made as comfortable as some blankets in the cabin could accomplish. The children had brightened up with the improved look of things. They watched Jerry working at the stove, and a smile of anticipation came over their childish faces as they had a scent of cooking bacon and boiling coffee.

Meanwhile Frank and Bluff and Luther Snow were examining the dead panther.

"Bigger than any we ever saw before; isn't it, Frank?" asked Bluff, as he turned the beast over, to see where the fatal bullet had entered behind the foreleg, just as Frank had intended when he fired.

"I never saw a larger, if you want my opinion, lads," remarked Luther Snow; "and I certainly have shot a round dozen of the animals in my time."

"We must try and keep the pelt, Frank," observed Will. "It will make a great addition to our collection; and as a mat, with the head on, it'd look fine."

Frank, upon asking the man about the misfortune that had befallen him, learned of the terrible nature of the flood that had taken the residents of the country up one of the Mississippi's tributaries by surprise. Their house was washed away during the night; and with the coming of dawn they found themselves

floating down the swollen river, and out upon the great Mississippi.

When later on they discovered, as they clung to the roof of the building, that it was slowly but surely going to pieces, they hastened to climb into the treetop, as it came along, just as though sent by a kind Providence.

Hardly had the exchange been made than their house went to pieces. And then the alarming discovery was made that they were not the only passengers aboard this novel craft; for one of the children shrieked out that a great cat lay along one of the big lower limbs, watching them with yellow eyes.

What that man and his wife suffered during all the time that elapsed before assistance came, with the gradual approach of the houseboat on the scene, can only be imagined, not described. He had no weapon save a pocket knife. This he had held open in his hand, determined to stand between the hungry panther and his dear ones, should the worst happen.

They told Frank that they had lost all of their possessions, save the land itself, by the coming of this cloudburst; but as they had relatives in a town down the river a few more miles, if the boys could put them ashore there, they would be very grateful.

Jerry cooked a double allowance of food, since he felt pity for the unfortunates, and was anxious to see those hungry children eat their fill, for once. They did not look as though they had seen much else than hominy, three times a day, and scant allowances even at that.

Keeping in as close to the shore as seemed wise, Frank, an hour or so later, began to look for signs of the town mentioned. It proved to be not much of a place, but doubtless to the homeless family the wretched houses appeared like palaces.

The boys found that they could run in close to shore, and anchor. Then the skiff came into play again, in ferrying the family to dry land. Frank was glad that they had had a chance to be of help to those in distress. He would have offered to assist the man with a little money, but the other assured him that he was supplied to some extent; and that his father lived there, who would gladly take them all in.

And so, after shaking hands all around, they saw the four late passengers of the floating treetop land; after which the voyage was resumed.

The incident gave the chums plenty to talk about for the balance of the day; and as was natural, it seemed to revive various other affairs in the past, which had come their way. To all of this conversation old Luther seemed to enjoy listening greatly. He would sit there without saying a word, and taking it all in; while a queer little smile would occasionally cross his face, of which the observing Frank could make nothing.

During the day Frank managed to remove the pelt of his prize, and it was

fastened with nails against the cabin wall, in a place where the sun could seldom strike it; for skins must always be dried in the shade. And every time he looked at it, in days to come, doubtless Frank would always see the strange picture of the flooded river; the houseboat interlocked with the floating tree; the family and Jerry perched amidst the branches; and that savage beast owner for the time being of the gallant *Pot Luck*.

CHAPTER XXIII—LEFT IN THE LURCH

“Are you sure he’s asleep in the cabin?”

Frank asked this question in a low tone, some days after the adventure with the panther. He and his three chums were loitering on deck at the time. It was about the middle of the afternoon; and complaining of feeling sleepy, old Luther had vanished within the cabin.

“Yes, I just went in to get something; and he was snoring on his cot,” replied Will; “but what’s up, Frank?”

“He’s got something to tell us about the old man,” remarked Jerry. “I’ve seen him watching Luther when he thought the passenger we’ve had fastened on us wouldn’t be noticing him. Out with it, old fellow.”

“I’ve made up my mind that his name isn’t Luther Snow at all,” Frank remarked, in a whisper.

“Then what might it be, Frank?” asked Bluff, casting a quick glance toward the door of the cabin.

“What would you say to Marcus Stackpole?” queried the other, coolly.

Various exclamations told of the boys’ astonishment.

“How under the sun did you ever jump on to that?” demanded Jerry.

So Frank had to tell them the many reasons he had for believing it to be the positive truth; and as he talked the others began to see light too.

“That would account for the way he just made us take him on,” said Will.

“Yes,” added Bluff, “even when we made him up a purse, he went on down the river, and laid for us again, with a yarn about the skipper of a packet jumping him because his money gave out. Well, we swallowed it all, like a lot of innocents,

for a fact. Frank, honest now, I believe you've hit the truth, and that that little black launch that used to hover around was his boat."

"He must have let 'em know someway that his passage was secured, because I haven't noticed it around for weeks now," remarked Jerry, with a nod of his head.

"But why under the sun do you suppose he wants to be with us on the *Pot Luck*?" demanded Will.

"That's what I can't tell you," Frank replied. "I only know that he acts as if he wants to stick to us all the way to New Orleans; and that Uncle Felix seemed to be afraid he'd do that very same thing. Chances are, we'll never know what it all means until we get there, and ask your uncle to explain."

"Well, do we carry him there?" asked Bluff.

"I should say not, if we know it," was the way Jerry vented his opinion.

"And as my uncle impressed it on me that, above all people, I mustn't take Marcus Stackpole aboard, I think we ought to get rid of him right away," Will declared.

"Yes, that's easy to say, but how're we going to do it?" Jerry broke in with. "The old fellow seems to like it here; yes, and I rather guess he's taken something of a fancy to the bunch of us, too. He sticks worse than a mustard plaster on your back. Talk of Sinbad, and the Old Man of the Sea; Luther could give 'em points on how to stay right there."

"Leave it to Frank," interrupted Will. "He's got a plan, I'm sure; haven't you?"

"Well, here it is in a nutshell," remarked Frank, smiling at the confidence the other chum seemed to have in his ability to meet a situation; "we'll get to Memphis to-morrow, you see. Thinking that we mean to put him ashore only at Vicksburg, below, Luther will have no chance to play sick; so we can work the little racket."

"Are we in it, too, Frank?" asked Bluff.

"Yes, you and Jerry are to go ashore after we tie up, to get some things, besides the mail. An hour later you'll have come back, with your errands done; but remember you're not to come aboard, or show yourselves. Then I'll recollect something I wanted you to do very much. Will, at the time, can be deep in some business connected with his photography, and I can't send him to hunt you up at the store; so I'll ask old Luther to please take the bottle to get filled."

"That's dead easy," muttered Bluff; "he'll fall into the trap; and after he's out of sight Jerry 'nd I'll slip aboard, when we part company with our passenger. Say, I'll be a little sorry, someway, too; for after all, he's not such a bad sort."

"But, Frank, how will he know what our meaning is?" Will inquired.

"I have all that planned out," Frank went on. "I'll give him a note to hand

to Jerry here. When he can't find him, and discovers that we've left him in the lurch, of course he'll think to open it. It will be a few lines written to him, telling that we have found out who he is; and that as Uncle Felix positively ordered us not to carry Marcus Stackpole as a passenger, we have had to send him adrift. I'll enclose a ten-dollar bill in the letter. That would take him to New Orleans if he's really what he claims. That's to ease my conscience in the matter, boys."

"And a good scheme, too!" remarked Bluff.

"It takes Frank to think 'em up; I always said so," Will added.

They did not dare talk along that line any further, for fear the object of their conversation would suddenly come out of the cabin, and seeing them looking so mysterious, scent enough of the truth to keep on his guard the following day, which would interfere very much with Frank's plan.

During the balance of that afternoon and the evening that followed, all the boys tried hard to appear natural whenever Luther was around. He may have thought they looked a little queer at times; but at least they gave him no reason to believe that his secret was known.

It was about ten the next morning that the hawser was made fast to a wharf at the river front of Memphis; which lies on a sort of bluff, high above the Mississippi.

The two chums went ashore, with numerous errands to do, that they declared would take them until noon. Yet in less than one hour later Frank caught the whistle from the cotton piles on the levee, that told him Bluff and Jerry were back, "keeping shady" until he could carry out his part of the little programme.

Will was very busy just then, dabbling in his daylight developing bath, so that anyone could see it was utterly out of the question for him to leave, and go on an errand.

Frank carried out his part of the plan very cleverly. And old Luther, taking the note which Frank had purposely sealed in an envelope, went ashore, and up toward the city. After he had vanished from view two skulking figures came aboard, chuckling with delight over the apparent success of Frank's plan.

"Get the hawser aboard, and let's push off," said Frank, a little concerned lest Luther should come in sight even then, and demand to be taken back.

The boys worked with willing hands, and in a short time the *Pot Luck* was once more afloat, drifting down the wide river, and leaving Memphis and Luther Snow behind.

Still, none of the boys seemed as jubilant as they had anticipated, in getting rid of their incubus. The fact was, that Luther had somehow rather gained a little hold upon their affections, and secretly they were sorry to have him go. Only for that strange clause in the note of Uncle Felix they might have allowed him to remain on board the houseboat until New Orleans was reached, no matter if he

were Marcus Stackpole or not.

Often would they ponder over this strange matter; and it must form the subject of more than a few earnest talks; yet, not having the key to the puzzle, they must always confess themselves baffled. As Frank had truly said, the riddle was not to be solved until they stood face to face with the gentleman who owned the *Pot Luck*, and they had plied him with questions.

Often when some ducky from the bank would call out a sportive remark, intended for those aboard the passing houseboat, the boys would look at each other in a queer way. For the same idea must have flashed into the mind of each one; and this that it might be the wily Marcus Stackpole trying a new game upon them, with the idea of once more getting aboard the *Pot Luck*.

Below Vicksburg they took stock of the time, and found that in all they had been just seven weeks on the voyage. Another one ought to see them safely at their journey's end, if all went well.

Being on a boat that could only drift, there was no chance to attempt any of the numerous "cutoffs" that began to be met with, every day now. And so sticking to the big river, they "boomed" along on the flood from shortly after daylight up to nearly dark, covering scores of miles each day with the swift flow of the current.

The Southern plantation scenes were of great interest to the boys; and Will rapidly diminished the number of his film rolls, snapping laughable pictures of the dusky toilers of the cotton and sugarcane; together with the numerous broods of pickaninnies that gathered around, every time they stopped at a little "wood-station," where certain boats were in the habit of tying up to load pine cordwood for the boiler.

And one night, when the heavens were cloudy, and there seemed a prospect of rain at any minute, they had an unexpected surprise that showed how strangely Fate could manage things.

Frank had tied up a short distance above what looked to be a wood landing, where some sort of boat was secured. They had arrived rather late, and the darkness had gathered so quickly that they were not able to get a good view of this craft, just barely seen through some trees located on a low point.

Not wishing to be bothered by visitors, and have more or less noise around until a late hour of the night, they had chosen this way of avoiding it.

Supper had been prepared, and was long since placed "where it could do the most good," as Bluff declared. And the four chums were sitting around on the deck, enjoying the cool evening breeze; for the day had been a very hot one, which made the prospect of a storm rather promising.

Somehow or other the conditions made them speak of that night when they ran to the fire, and were overtaken by the storm. Imagine the astonishment of

the others when Frank suddenly exclaimed:

“Talking about fires, fellows, seems to me that looks like one right now, down below the point jutting out, and where we saw that boat tied up! Wouldn’t it be a funny thing now if history chose to repeat itself, with the rain coming along, too.”

And looking as he said, the other three lads saw a bright glow beginning to show; while loud cries arose, that seemed to tell of alarm.

CHAPTER XXIV—RIVALS NO LONGER.

The greatest excitement reigned aboard the houseboat, when it was realized that while they were talking about their former experience, here a fire had broken out on board some other boat just below them.

“Shall we go and help put it out, Frank?” asked Bluff, who seemed quite anxious to have an affirmative reply. “Looks like we’re just bound to be called on for any little old job along this river. Fire fighters, get busy!”

“We can’t all go,” said Frank, remembering their former experience; “and as Jerry was complaining of having hurt his foot on that nail a little while ago, why, he will have to stay, and watch the boat. The rest come with me!”

No one thought to question Frank’s authority, because he had long ago been elected as the chief of the club: and his word was law; though, as a rule, he tried to make his comrades feel that they had as much voice in settling ordinary matters as he did.

Bluff and Will jumped ashore after their leader. Jerry grumbled a whole lot, not at Frank’s decision, but the unfortunate freak of Fate that made him suffer from stepping on a nail in his bare feet, just when he wanted to have an equal chance with his chums about going to the help of those in danger of being burnt out.

Frank and his two companions ran as fast as they could. The bank happened to be fairly open, so they quickly reached the point of land that jugged out. Below here there seemed to be some sort of beach, and over this they could make quick time.

Before now they had discovered that, sure enough, a boat was afire, and Bluff called out that it seemed to be some sort of shantyboat, too. Perhaps they imagined they were about to render assistance again to some poor family, such as the one that had been rescued from the floating treetop, at the time of the adventure with the savage panther.

"I don't hear any children hollering, though," panted Bluff, as he kept close to Frank's heels.

"That's so," spoke up Will; "but there's a heap of yelling going on all the same. Listen to 'em; will you, boys."

And just then a single voice, filled with excitement, came easily to their ears:

"It's gaining on us, Ossie, I tell you! There isn't enough of a crowd to keep the flames back. Didn't I say that gasoline stove'd do us some day? and it has. The whole thing's going under!"

"Ossie!" said Will, as they somehow came to a sudden stop.

"Shucks! it's only *that* crowd, after all," remarked Bluff; "let their boat go up in fire and smoke, for all it matters to us, fellows."

"Well," said Frank, who knew the speaker better than Bluff did himself; "you can both go back, if you feel that way; but these fellows are in a bad fix; and even if they don't thank me for lending a hand, I've just *got* to try and help put that fire out, if I want to look at myself in a glass without blushing."

With that he rushed off again. And hearing the patter of two pair of willing feet close behind him, Frank had to chuckle. Of course neither Will nor Bluff could be left out when there was anything exciting going on.

Two minutes later, and they were on the scene. They found a pretty serious situation, with the flames pouring out from one end of the houseboat, that must have cost the millionaire father of Oswald Fredericks some thousands of dollars to outfit.

And the boys, while they seemed to be working desperately in the endeavor to extinguish the fire, did not go about it in the proper way, so that their efforts were about as good as wasted.

Frank took in the situation at a glance. He knew that the wind just then was coming from down the river; and as it was the upper end of the *Lounger* that was afire there was some chance to gain the mastery of the hungry flames.

Seeing a couple of buckets where one of the others had dropped them upon finding the fire getting too hot for him, Frank stooped over them. Rapidly he gave his chums directions how to keep these in constant play. They were to do the dipping into the river, handing the filled buckets up to him; when he would dash the water on the fire in a certain spot, until he had overwhelmed its hold there; and be in a condition to move on a little further.

They worked like beavers. Indeed, once aroused to the work, and determined to win out, Bluff could not have done better service had it been the *Pot Luck* that was in danger of being wiped out.

Again and again did those buckets come into Frank's hands, and the contents sprayed over the spluttering fire. It had met with a new enemy now, and one against which its most desperate efforts seemed to avail little. System had been brought into the game, a concentration of energies upon one spot. Ossie and his comrades had doubtless thrown plenty of water in the time they were laboring; but it had been so widely scattered that its strength was lost.

Pretty soon Frank found that someone was working side by side with him, taking full buckets from other hands, and following his example in casting the water in a particular spot.

It gave him something like a thrill when he realized that this was no other than Ossie Fredericks himself. For the time being the rivals of the Mississippi were working side by side, as though the very best of friends, and animated by a single purpose, which was the saving of the fine power houseboat from destruction.

After that the fire was quickly gotten under control, though Frank would not stop in his labor until the very last spark seemed to have been smothered. As the boat had been fastened with the bow up-stream, all the damage was away from the motor, and would not amount to so serious a thing after all. A hundred dollars might cover the bill for repairs; and doubtless Ossie and his friends could continue their cruise on the morrow, making out the best way possible, with a partly burned cabin, until they pulled up in the Crescent City a short time later.

"All out, Frank?" asked the perspiring Bluff.

"Yes, every spark, so far as I can see," was the reply; "and I guess we'd better be heading back to our own boat as fast as we can, because I felt a drop of rain just then, and we're going to get a deluge pretty quick now."

"Hold on, please, Frank!"

It was Ossie himself who said this. He was coming toward them, his friends following at his heels. Frank had heard them arguing over something, and he imagined that several of the boys were holding back in connection with something that Ossie himself seemed determined to do.

"I'd like to shake hands with you, Langdon," said the millionaire's son, as he approached, holding out his now grimy palm. "When you did me a good turn that other time I acted like a bear, and I've been sick about it ever since. This settles the whole thing. I've been foolish to try and stand out against as fine a fellow as you. The crowd at college that stood up for you knew what they were doing. I'm ashamed of the way I acted, and I'm going to ask your pardon right here."

“Glad to hear you say that you’ve changed your mind about me, Ossie,” said Frank, as he took the extended olive branch in the shape of Fredericks’ hand, and gave it a hearty squeeze. “And I hope that when we go back to college again we’ll be the best of friends. As to the little job we joined you in this night, why, it’s been a snap for us; eh, Bluff?”

So Bluff and Will in turn had to take the hand of Ossie. Then the other called out to his comrades to step up and ratify the new compact of peace. Perhaps neither Raymond Ellis nor Duke Fletcher liked the way things were going; but under the conditions they could not hold back. As for the St. Paul fellow, young Benedict; and the heavy-set chap who played the part of engineer and general assistant, not having any particular reason for hating Frank and his chums, they only too gladly followed suit in shaking hands.

The rain began to come down a little harder, and Frank did not care to stay longer. So, followed by the good luck wishes of Ossie, and a hope that they might meet again in New Orleans, to which city he meant to hasten, now that his boat was badly damaged, the three boys from the *Pot Luck* hurried up the bank again.

They did get wet to some extent before gaining the shelter of the cabin; but to such hardy cruisers that was a small circumstance. Frank would have taken ten times the amount of soaking for the privilege of winning over so persistent a rival as Oswald Fredericks had been during the last year in college, and while upon the Mississippi voyage.

Great was Jerry’s surprise when he heard the story; and his disgust was sad to see when he realized that he had been cheated out of all this fun. As for Will, although he professed to having enjoyed the adventure immensely, still he never referred to it in later days without a regret that he had not been able to snap a few pictures of himself and chums, working like volunteer firemen to save the houseboat of their bitter enemy and rival from destruction.

The *Lounger* was gone at daylight, from which fact Frank judged that Ossie must have been exceedingly anxious to get the boat to some place where it could be repaired quickly, in order that he and his friends might finish their vacation aboard, before the time came to have it hauled all the way back to St. Paul; which only a man rolling in money could afford to have done, Bluff said.

“Well,” remarked Will, when they saw this, after starting forth themselves; “perhaps after all, it’s better that way. Oil and water can’t mix very well; and while Ossie was feeling pretty warm toward us last night, those cronies of his might set his mind against us again. Why, that Ellis has a hand that feels like a snake, or a cold-toad, when you take hold of it. I always despise a fellow like that. Seems to me he’s just made for trickery and cunning.”

Frank thought the same way, but did not express his opinion. Secretly he too was satisfied that they would not have to see more of the others during the

voyage.

And so they went on, enjoying themselves day by day, meeting such troubles and difficulties as might arise from time to time with the same brave spirit that had always been a motto of the Outdoor Chums; and finally finding themselves safely tied up in a boatyard on the river front of the great city of the South, that seems to stand at the gateway of the Mississippi like a sentinel, guarding the entire valley against some threatening foreign enemy.

CHAPTER XXV—THE FINISH OF THE VOYAGE

“Tell them all to come in!”

A hearty voice uttered these words; and passing through a door, the three comrades of the houseboat found themselves in the presence of an elderly gentleman, who sat with a leg bound up, and resting on a chair. He had a thin face; but it was now wreathed with a genial smile, as he held out his hand to Will.

“Hello! Nephew Will Milton; glad you’ve arrived, safe and sound; and so these are your companions I’ve heard so much about, the Outdoor Chums? Well, after all, I’m beginning to believe the stories that have come to me about their prowess, and penetration; because in the first place you four boys have made this long voyage in good shape; look the picture of health; and last of all, you declined to be humbugged by any slippery case like Marcus Stackpole; eh?”

The boys looked at each other, too astonished for words; because Will had never written a single word to his uncle during the entire cruise; how then could he know anything about their unwelcome guest, who seemed determined to stick to the houseboat until it arrived in New Orleans, and whom they had only been able to get rid of through a clever ruse.

“Wonder how I knew about it; eh?” laughed the old gentleman, who had spent many years of his life in seeking sport under every sun, being a born Nimrod, as Will had long ago informed them. “Well, I’ll let you into the secret, boys. I used to get a letter every little while, written on board the houseboat, which I see you aptly named the *Pot Luck*. And *he* wrote them all!”

“But,” exclaimed Will, his eyes wide with surprise, “we don’t understand it,

Uncle Felix. You seemed so bent on not having us let that man aboard at all; and above everything warned us not to allow him to be there when we reached New Orleans; and yet you say he was writing to you all the while?"

"Why, I must have had a dozen letters about your carryings on," continued the old sportsman, still laughing at the puzzled looks on their faces; "and Marcus did you all justice, I'll wager, for he's a good hand at describing things, Marcus is. But all the same, I'm going to have you tell me everything that happened, from the time you started out. I'm deeply interested in the voyage you made; and unless I miss my guess, you're just the stripe of young heroes the accounts said."

"But, Uncle, we can't tell you anything at all until you satisfy our curiosity," declared Will, resolutely.

"I suppose that's only natural," the gentleman remarked, nodding.

"Why, just look at it yourself, Uncle," Will went on, as the spokesman for the four chums, "ever since I got your letter some months back, while still at college, we've been hammering our brains to understand just what it all meant. We had all sorts of ideas about it. One thought this Marcus Stackpole must be some bitter enemy of yours, who wanted to do you an injury."

"And see here," demanded Uncle Felix; "which one was it who was always so positive that I had some valuables secreted somewhere behind the paneled walls of the cabin, and kept on rapping and tapping every chance he got, trying to find the treasure trove?"

Jerry turned red, but he stood up manfully before the quizzical eyes of the old gentleman.

"That was I, sir," he said, boldly. "I thought it was a good guess, after reading that letter you wrote our chum, Will. But I gave that up when we learned that our passenger, Luther Snow, must be the man, Marcus Stackpole. Because I saw then how silly the thing looked. If there had been any valuables hidden, and he knew where to find them, he wouldn't have stuck to us like he did, but skipped out."

"That's correct, I guess, Jerry," commented Mr. Milton. "And now to lift the curtain and let you understand what it was all about. Just a little wager, my boys, between myself and my friend Marcus; who has been my comrade on many a hunt through African wilds."

"A wager!" faltered Bluff, weakly, looking at Frank; who smiled, as though some such idea might have flitted through his mind some time or other, to be dismissed as out of the question.

"Why, yes," continued the owner of the houseboat. "We had heard a great lot of stuff about you four boys. My sister-in-law even took the trouble to send me some clippings concerning a rescue you made of a balloonist from the waters

of the Mexican Gulf. So Marcus and myself got to discussing things, and as I had that houseboat up North, I proposed that I get you four to take a long voyage down the big Mississippi during your vacation, which was near at hand."

"And that was something we'll always thank you for, Uncle!" cried Will; "because we've surely had one of the finest times of our lives."

"Well, to go on," continued Mr. Milton, who it was evident was eager to hear an account of the entire trip from first hands; "one word led to another, I standing up for my nephew and his chums; and Marcus declaring that he'd wager a big sum he could hoodwink the whole lot of you."

"He did, and he didn't!" broke in Will, just then.

"Finally it was settled that the wager should be along these lines," Mr. Milton went on to say; "I was to write the letter I did, and which was partly dictated by Marcus himself. Then later, he was to meet you on the trip, and in some way manage to accompany you, in spite of my request that you take no passengers, and least of all the man called Marcus Stackpole. If he was aboard the boat when you came into New Orleans, with or without your knowledge, I was to lose; but if he found himself unable to get aboard, or stay there to the end after making a lodgment, Marcus was to admit that he was beaten. That's the story in a nutshell."

"Then you must have heard from him, sir," remarked Frank; "how we finally left him behind at Memphis, after penetrating his disguise?"

"Yes, he wrote me about it, and here is his letter. Let me read it to you, for it is really very short; and afterwards you're to spend hours telling me everything that happened from the hour you left St. Paul up to the time you landed here in New Orleans."

"Agreed, Uncle!" cried the delighted Will.

So Uncle Felix, with many chuckles, as though he thoroughly enjoyed the affair, especially the way it terminated, opened a crumpled sheet of paper, and read aloud:

"After all my boasting in previous letters how cleverly I was hoodwinking those wonderfully smart boys of yours, Felix, blessed if they didn't see my lead, and go me one better. Here I am, stranded in Memphis, with ten dollars thrust into my pocket, and a note telling me that they are on to my little game, and bidding me good-by. No use trying to deceive them again, and I own up beaten. They're a fine, manly lot of young chaps, and I've grown to love them as if they were my own boys during the time I've been watching them. Just now I must chase across to Chattanooga to settle a matter that had been suddenly thrust upon me; but if they are still with you in Orleans when I get there, it will be the greatest pleasure

of my life to renew my acquaintance with Frank, Jerry, Bluff, and not forgetting your nephew Will.

“Your old campmate,

“MARCUS STACKPOLE.”

By this time all the boys wore wide grins, just as though they felt like shaking hands with each other, in congratulation over the fact that, after all their narrow escapes, they had in the end caused this friend of Uncle Felix to lose his wager.

And they were still in the strange old city of the lower Mississippi at the time Marcus Stackpole, whom they had known as Luther Snow, arrived. All of them were very glad to meet him again, for, as has been mentioned more than once, the boys realized that there had been something attractive about the passenger who came to them in such a singular way.

Many were the laughs that went around, when the story was retold; especially as Frank related how he set a little trap for Luther, to find out whether he had ever been a carpenter; because his hands looked too free from calloused spots, such as might have been expected upon the palms of one who had to earn his daily bread at carpenter work.

“That’s a good one on you, Marcus,” declared Uncle Felix; “the idea of you choosing that vocation on the spur of the moment, when you are the poorest joiner I ever knew. No wonder a sharp lad, like Frank here, could trip you up. But on the whole, I think you have all enjoyed your vacation immensely; and you’ll go back to college more than willing to work because of the good time you’ve had; eh, boys?”

Upon that they were all agreed, and there was no hesitation about telling Uncle Felix so.

“Perhaps, when your next vacation comes around, we can have something else hatched up that will give you an equal amount of pleasure,” the other continued, for it was evident that he had become very fond of Will and his chums during the week they had been with him.

And the reader may be sure that if fortune is so kind as to allow the Outdoor Chums further chances to enjoy an adventurous trip like those they have known in the past it will give us pleasure to write of the occasion, so that a host of friends may enjoy it with us. Until such time comes, then, we must say good-by.

THE END

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