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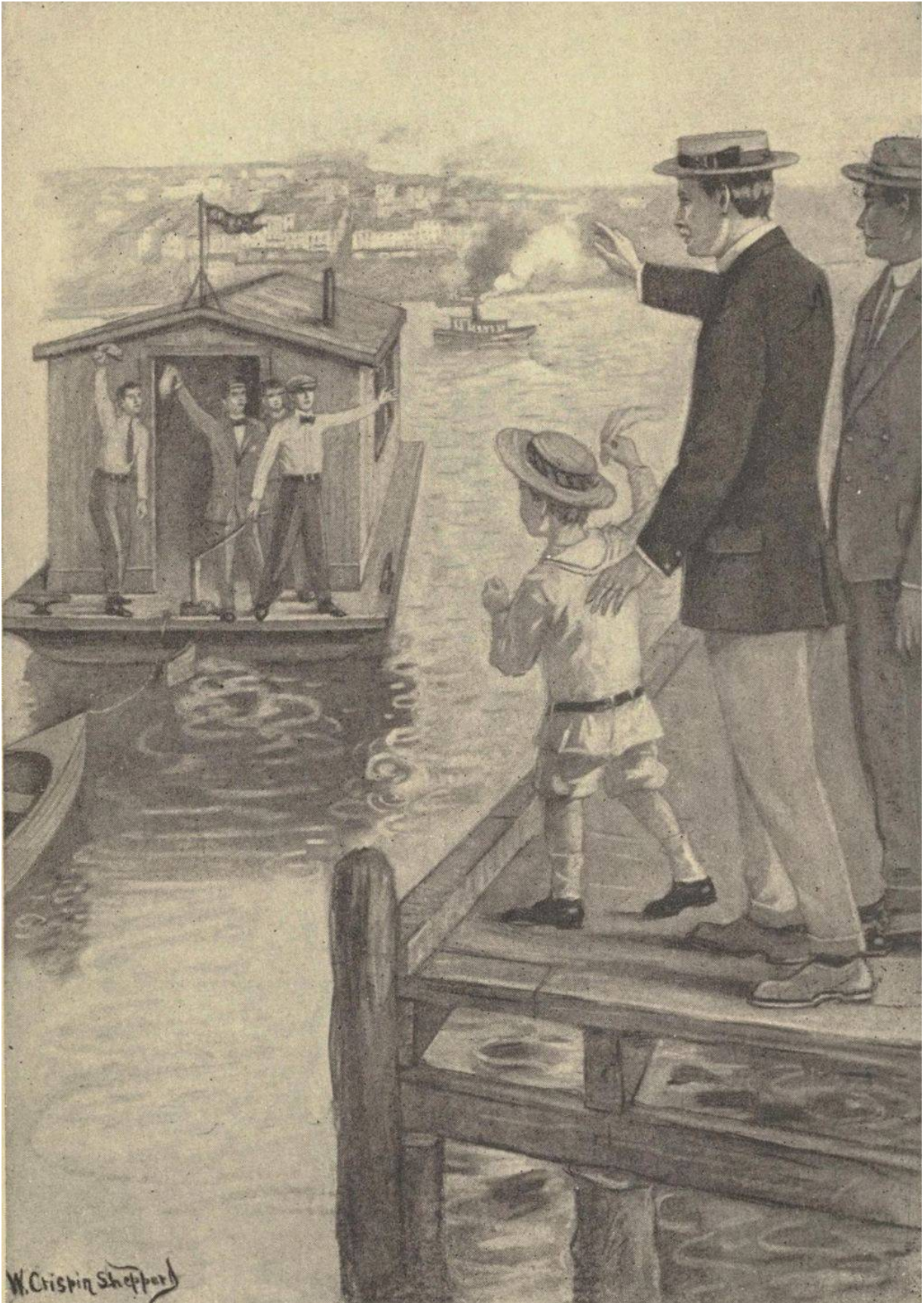
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CLUB\'S HOUSE-BOAT ***

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W. Cristin Sheppard

THE VOYAGE WAS BEGUN

The Rambler Club's House-boat

BY W. CRISPIN SHEPPARD

AUTHOR OF

"THE RAMBLER CLUB AFLOAT"

"THE RAMBLER CLUB'S WINTER CAMP"

"THE RAMBLER CLUB IN THE MOUNTAINS"

"THE RAMBLER CLUB ON CIRCLE T RANCH"

"THE RAMBLER CLUB AMONG THE LUMBERJACKS"

"THE RAMBLER CLUB'S GOLD MINE"

"THE RAMBLER CLUB'S AEROPLANE"

Illustrated by the Author



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The Rambler Club's House-boat

Introduction

The earlier adventures of Bob Somers and his friends have been described in "The Rambler Club Afloat," "The Rambler Club's Winter Camp," "The Rambler Club in the Mountains," "The Rambler Club on Circle T Ranch," "The Rambler Club Among the Lumberjacks," "The Rambler Club's Gold Mine," and "The Rambler Club's Aeroplane."

"The Rambler Club's House-boat" deals with the adventures on the Hudson of the Rambler boys and Jack Lyons and his friends.

They have an exciting and enjoyable time on the historic river, and begin to appreciate its varied beauty and charm.

When the "Gray Gull," Jack Lyons, Master, is close to Yonkers Bob Somers is the means of aiding a young man in distress. Formerly he had been the tutor of a boy residing at Nyack; but, for a reason which reflects no discredit upon him, he lost his position.

A friendship springs up all around. The lads on the house-boat meet the Nyack boy, who is enthusiastic over the idea of such a trip, and decides to join.

Misunderstandings arise, and for a while the trip of the "Gray Gull" promises to be the means of causing much trouble. But events so shape themselves that in the end right prevails, and his chance meeting with the boys turns out to be a fortunate thing for the former tutor.

W. CRISPIN SHEPPARD.

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The Rambler Club's House-boat

CHAPTER I

THE "GRAY GULL"

"Well, Bob Somers, I certainly am glad you came on to New York with your father. Dad has been talking so much about you Rambler chaps lately that I've been simply wild to meet the crowd."

"And three of us are here for your inspection, Jack Lyons," laughed Bob. "Dave Brandon"—his hand fell on the shoulder of a stout, good-humored-looking boy standing by his side—"is our poet, artist and historian; and this is Tommy, or, perhaps, I'd better say, Mr. Thomas Clifton."

A very tall, thin boy flushed as Jack Lyons eyed him quizzically and then heartily shook his extended hand.

"If titles go by the length of people I think you'd better add Esquire, too," gurgled Jack.

"For a long time Tommy was the smallest member of our crowd," explained Dave Brandon; "then, suddenly——"

"Nothing could keep him down," supplemented Bob, with a smile.

"And I don't wonder, after the way you boys have been living out in the open," said Jack. "But what's the use of our standing here in the hallway when there are comfortable chairs in my den up-stairs?"

"And I do feel most uncommonly tired," confessed Dave, stifling a yawn, "for, honestly, I didn't sleep a minute more than twelve hours last night."

Jack laughed heartily as he led the way into the drawing-room.

Mr. John Lyons, his father, a widely-known New York lawyer and promoter, resided in a fine mansion on Fifty-seventh Street. Externally, there was nothing about the house to distinguish it in any way from the rest of a long brown-stone row, but the interior was famed for the wealth and beauty of its appointments.

"Thought you might like to take a look in here, fellows," remarked Jack. "Dad goes in a lot for painting and statuary. Some of these things he picked

up while abroad. Everything free for this day only. Step around and see the animals.”

“It’s simply stunning!” cried Bob.

The furnishings were nearly all of the Louis XV period. A beam of sunlight coming in through a half-opened window caressed in its course original chairs and a couch which had once adorned an old French chateau. Rare tapestries hung on the walls, while carved chests and objects of copper and brass revealed their presence by rich, glowing touches of color.

Many pictures by old and modern masters immediately attracted Dave Brandon’s attention.

“Aren’t they wonderful?” he sighed.

“You’ve painted some pictures just as wonderful,” said Tommy.

“That’s the trouble,” laughed Dave, “wonderful—but in a different way. Your father and Mr. Somers seemed to find a lot to talk about, Jack.”

A hum of steady conversation was coming from an adjoining room which Mr. Lyons used as a study.

“That reminds me,” said Jack; “you chaps will have to unbosom yourselves at once. Gold mines, aeroplanes and all sorts of hunting experiences seem to have been in your line. Come right up to my den.”

The room on the top floor which Jack called his very own was about twelve by sixteen feet, and furnished with several chairs, a desk and table. Gridiron heroes and baseball idols looked at the beholder from their cardboard prisons—Jack had them tacked up all over the walls, while a fishing pole and old-fashioned musket decorated one corner.

The den did not appear extraordinarily neat; several coats, a pile of books, and a box of note-paper with its contents scattered in glorious confusion over the desk might have offended a fastidious taste. But Jack airily explained that a very important matter had prevented him from tidying up.

“And I’ll tell you all about it, fellows,” he said, animatedly, when his visitors had seated themselves. “We—and by that I mean Joe Preston, Aleck Hunt, Fred Winter and myself—have the dandiest scheme. What is it?—Well, I want to hear your story first. Dad has been telling me how you

found the ‘Rambler Club’s Gold Mine’—he’s a stockholder in the company, you know.”

“Yes; and just as soon as father said he intended to go East to see Mr. Lyons on business we made up our minds to keep him company,” said Bob, with a smile.

“It means a whole lot of work for me,” sighed Dave.

“It’s this way,” a peculiarly gruff voice broke in—Tommy was speaking—“Dave always writes a history of our trips. He has about two thousand, one hundred and ninety-seven pages finished up to date. So, of course, this New York trip——”

“Say, fellows!” Jack Lyons jumped up and began pacing the floor. An idea which made his eyes sparkle brightly had suddenly entered his head. “Say, why don’t you chaps stay here a couple of weeks?”

“Eh?” said Tommy.

“And then your historian would have something worth while to scribble about.”

“How?” asked Dave.

“Well, honest, I can’t keep still about it a minute longer.” Jack Lyons’ voice indicated a spirit fairly bubbling over with enthusiasm. “Why, we’ve got hold of a house-boat—a real h-o-u-s-e-b-o-a-t, mind you; and——”

“Intend to take a trip somewhere?” asked Tommy, eagerly.

“Do we?—Well, I should rather say so! It’s all arranged, too. Rah—rah! The ‘Gray Gull,’ Jack Lyons, master, is bound from New York to Albany. Now”—Jack paused; his arm swept around in a half-circle—“you chaps ought to, and, by ginger, must go along.”

“I felt it coming,” sighed Dave. “That means another book to write.”

“How about it?” queried Jack, eagerly. “Don’t say no. It’ll be one of the greatest trips you ever had. Joe, Aleck and Fred are dandy chaps. Say, can’t you go out with me this morning to see our house-boat?”

“Well, r-a-t-h-e-r,” cried Tommy—“eh, Bob?”

Bob nodded.

“Sure thing. It will give us a good chance to see a bit of New York. Where is the ‘Gray Gull,’ Jack?”

“Moored on the Harlem River. Hurray! I’ll call up Joe Preston just as soon as you’ve told me a bit about yourselves. Now, somebody, please fire away.”

The “somebody” happened to be Bob Somers, and, as he related modestly the story of their many adventures, Jack Lyons’ eyes opened wider with interest and enthusiasm.

“Great Scott; what corking times! Don’t I wish I’d been along. I must tell Joe you’re here.” And Jack sprang to the side of his desk, where the boys noticed a telephone.

“Talk about that for a great scheme,” remarked Tom.

“Talk through it for a greater,” returned Jack. “Hello, hello—yes, that’s the number. Hello, Joe Preston! Not Joe! Well, won’t you please tell him that Jack Lyons is at the ’phone?”

“He’s at home, fellows.” Jack looked up; then turned toward the instrument again. “Hello, Joe! Say, old boy, the Rambler chaps are here; honest—no joke about it. We’re going right out to see the ‘Gray Gull.’ Can you meet us there? Good! Yes; maybe they’ll take the trip with us. Wouldn’t that be jolly! You pick up Aleck and Fred. Race you? Sure! Good-bye.”

“Fellows, you’ll meet the whole bunch,” laughed Jack, as he hung up the receiver. “Now, I’ll explain how we happened to get hold of the house-boat. A client of dad’s, who went out west, turned it over to him in part payment for his services. If dad didn’t know what to do with the ‘Gray Gull,’ I did; and the way Joe, Aleck and Fred jumped at the chance to go on a cruise would have made you laugh.”

“How do you make it go?” asked Dave, languidly.

“Oh, I’m coming to that. A Mr. Marshall we know owned a motor boat; and, last month, this boat motored right into a barge. That kind of scared Mr. Marshall—he found he didn’t like the sport so much as he thought he would; and what do you think?”

“Lots of things,” cried the interested Tommy; “go ahead.”

“When he heard about our house-boat he said we could have the engine for it. Wasn’t that nice of him?”

The Ramblers agreed that it showed a thoughtful and proper spirit.

“That’s what I say,” exclaimed Jack, enthusiastically. “And he’s going to have the motor sent right over, too.”

“Who will install it in the house-boat?” queried Bob.

“Jim Benton, a machinist who has done a lot of work for dad. But come on, fellows; Joe thinks he can beat us out to the Harlem River. And say, Bob, when you get a chance, ask your father about going on that trip with us.” And Jack, happy and excited, fairly dashed out of the room.

They were on the street in a few moments. It was a very hot morning in August, with hardly a breath of air stirring.

“Fellows, I have a dreadful fear that I’m going to melt,” sighed Dave Brandon, vigorously mopping his face.

“Do try to last until you see the house-boat,” urged Tom, with a broad grin.

Seeking shade wherever it could be found, the four walked toward the elevated railroad station at Eighth Avenue and Fifty-third Street. The city, full of noise, life and color, possessed immense attractions for the Ramblers, and Jack Lyons’ patience was sorely tried, as they often stopped to look about them. When, at last, all had safely boarded a train for One Hundred and Fifty-fifth Street he breathed a sigh of heartfelt satisfaction.

“Dave, this is quite a change, after the plains and mountains of Wyoming,” remarked Bob Somers.

The stout boy, gazing through half-closed eyes at the rows of buildings and streets flashing by, nodded.

“Not much here to remind us of Lone Pine Ranch, Bob,” he said.

Station after station dropped behind them. At One Hundred and Tenth Street the train swung around a great curve, with Morningside Heights, crowned by the impressive, partly finished cathedral of St. John the Divine, to their left, while on the right they had a good view of the upper end of Central Park.

“Isn’t it stunning!” cried Bob.

“And to think that we’re actually in New York,” murmured Tommy.

“One Hundred and Twenty-fifth!” called out the conductor, a few minutes later.

The boys caught a glimpse of a wide, busy thoroughfare. Then the train sent the rails spinning swiftly behind it again, and the terminus of the line was soon reached.

The four, mounting a stairway, found themselves on a great iron viaduct sloping downward toward the east.

“What dandy views!” cried Dave Brandon, whose languid mood seemed to drop suddenly away. “Magnificent! Eh, Bob?”

“Corking!” Bob’s voice was full of enthusiasm.

To the northwest rose a high bluff with houses on its summit, while near at hand the boys could see the famous Polo grounds. Some distance off, veiled in a scintillating haze, were other hills, with vague suggestions of buildings dotted here and there over their surface. Smoke from passing tugs on the Harlem River seemed to hover almost motionless in the air, sometimes pierced by bursts of steam which shone dazzlingly white in the sunlight.

But Jack Lyons was in no mood to appreciate the beauties of this scene; he wanted not only to be the first to arrive at their meeting place, but to show his interested visitors the “Gray Gull” without delay. So he immediately began walking along the viaduct at a rate which made them hustle.

“First time I’ve ever been in a walking match,” chuckled Tom. “How far is it?”

“We’ll soon be there,” answered Jack, cheerily. “Joe Preston will never win this race.”

In a few minutes they reached a bridge and began crossing the Harlem River.

“There’s the famous High Bridge, fellows,” exclaimed Jack, pointing to the north. “A dandy, eh? And the ‘Gray Gull’ is moored this side.”

“Good!” sighed Dave.

A noisily-puffing tug, towing a flotilla of empty barges, was approaching, and, as a hoarse blast came over the silent air and was answered by the whistle of another boat, the stout boy gave unmistakable evidence of a desire to hold up the crowd for the double purpose of rest and observation.

“Don’t stop, fellows,” pleaded Jack.

All laughed at Dave’s comical expression of dismay, and kept on moving.

A wide roadway led down to the river, and this stretch Jack took at a pace which taxed even the long-legged Clifton.

At intervals the New York boy cheerily exclaimed: “Not much further!” or words to that effect, and just when Dave was beginning to have a dreadful presentiment that this meant nearly all the way to the High Bridge he varied the monotony by announcing: “Hooray! I knew we’d beat ’em. There’s the house-boat, now.”

Over the top of an ancient, dilapidated lumber barge just a short distance away the boys caught sight of the roof of a curious-looking craft.

“Rah—rah!” cried Tom, as Jack broke into a run.

“The ‘Gray Gull,’ fellows.”

These words had the desired effect; even Dave began to sprint, and presently the crowd, hot and perspiring, came to a halt upon a small, wooden wharf.

Quite unnecessarily, Jack pointed toward a solid, substantial house-boat which lay at the end. A bit of bunting suspended from a pole hung limp, making the white letters on a blue ground quite undecipherable.

“Isn’t that a dandy?” demanded Jack, with enthusiasm.

“I should say so,” answered Bob.

The house-boat was provided with a deck that extended about three feet in front of the cabin. The interior was roomy and comfortable, and contained bunks, several chairs, a table, cooking stove, lockers for their supplies, and various wooden pegs upon which to hang clothes. A bench ran around two sides. Four windows admitted light, and, as its former owner had been a man of rather fastidious tastes, neat curtains helped to give the interior a pleasant, homelike appearance.

“Fall on board, and get out of this heat,” said Jack.

He leaped lightly to the deck, threw open a door, and the others quickly followed.

“There’s plenty of room, fellows,” said Jack. “Now, really, aren’t you going with us?”

“I’d like to the worst way,” cried Tommy.

“So should I,” admitted Bob.

“This cozy interior appeals to me,” said Dave, slowly. “My compliments to the man who had sense enough to buy this chair.” He sighed contentedly. “On a nice moonlight night——”

“You’d get enough inspirations for two volumes of poems,” laughed Bob. “The gurgle and lament of restless waves, and all that sort of thing—what’s that?”

“It’s Joe Preston!” yelled Jack; “here he comes, with the others. Oh, Joe—here we are, old chap. Hello!”

A stamping of feet on the wharf and the sound of lusty voices which had called forth this outburst was followed by several yells of greeting. Then the “Gray Gull” was jarred from stem to stern by three distinct and separate shocks.

“A waterquake,” grinned Tommy. “Yes, they’re here, all right.”

“Beat us, after all, you old scamp.”

A rather short and chunky, dark-haired lad uttered these words, as he stepped inside, his movements materially assisted by a vigorous push from behind.

“Joe Preston, fellows,” announced Jack.

Two other lads were now standing inside the door. The introductions which followed were of a most informal kind. Aleck Hunt was a square-shouldered, blue-eyed boy, while Fred Winter, the tallest of the trio, looked quite solemn and studious, and his appearance indicated his general character.

There was a great amount of noise and confusion in the “Gray Gull’s” cabin until all had found places.

“Here’s where Somers and Winter meet,” gurgled Jack.

“Not bad—for you,” laughed Joe. “Say, Ramblers, Jack’s been talking an awful lot about you lately. Let’s hear——”

“I knew it,” grinned Bob. “Dave, it’s your turn now.”

And the stout boy, lolling back in his chair, obligingly answered a volley of questions.

Half an hour later Joe Preston exclaimed:

“That settles it! You fellows will simply have to go with us.”

“And I almost believe we shall,” laughed Bob.

The cabin shook with applause.

“Where on earth should we have been but for Mr. Marshall’s engine?” said Aleck.

“On the water,” gurgled Joe.

“It ought to be here to-morrow morning,” went on Aleck, scorning to notice Joe’s flippancy. “To-day’s Monday; let’s see—Tuesday, Wednesday—Thursday we ought to start; and——”

“Dash madly up the Hudson at about three miles an hour,” laughed Jack. “Say! Who’s going to do the cooking?”

“Oh, I heard such a bully story to-day,” interrupted Aleck Hunt. “It was about—let me see—oh, yes; I remember——”

“Never mind the story. You can’t get out of cooking that way.”

“Honest—I don’t believe I could even boil water,” pleaded Aleck. “We’re all feeling pretty well just now, and it wouldn’t do to take any risks, you know. Now Joe——”

“Who said I could cook?” demanded Joe, arching his eyebrows. “If you had mentioned Fred——”

“Yes; I’ll do it the very first day,” declared Fred, eagerly.

But Jack looked at him with a suspicious smile, and winked.

“Oh, no, my boy,” he said; “we’ll take turns; but yours won’t come the first day. How about that story of yours, Aleck?”

“Won’t tell it now,” grumbled Aleck. “Hello! Who’s that out there?”

Some one had jumped on the deck of the boat. Next instant, the door swung partly open and a man peered in. He was a large, strong-looking man, and, as he pushed the door open wider, the boys saw that he carried a basket.

“Mornin’, gents!” he said, in a very hoarse voice. “I was purty sure I heard some one in here. Any of you want to buy a purp? I’ve got the likeliest little fellers you ever see. Not one of ’em but hain’t got a pedigree.” And he plunged his hand into the basket and drew forth a small, wriggling puppy which voiced a protest to such a proceeding in a plaintive wail.

“Look at ’em, gents. Seventy-five cents; an’ take your choice—a bargain.” He dropped the first specimen back, then took out another and held it up at arm’s length. “Ain’t it handsome—now, I asks you?”

“Never saw such an ugly pup in my life,” answered Joe Preston.

“It isn’t very much on shape,” laughed Jack Lyons.

“Shape?” The man’s tone was reproachful. “Well, maybe it ain’t the purtiest-lookin’ dorg you ever see jist now, but I miss my guess if that ain’t what it grows up to be. Not one of ’em but hain’t got a pedigree. Now, gents, which one is it?”

“Let’s get a mascot for our trip,” remarked Joe Preston. “It’ll be lots of fun.”

“That it will, gents. Goin’ over to Europe?” And the big man grinned.

“Maybe—if we can reach Jersey first,” answered Jack. “Hurry up, fellows; pick out our mascot. My choice is the largest and fiercest of the bunch.”

One with a very black spot on its nose and a very white spot on each foot was finally chosen and placed on the table.

“You won’t never regret a-takin’ of ’im, gents,” said the man, as he turned to leave. “He’s got as good a pedigree as any of ’em.”

“There’s one thing we might have done, Jack,” said Fred, solemnly, when they were again alone.

“What’s that?”

“Hired that fellow for a fog-horn.”

“He has the voice for it, all right,” laughed Jack. “Now what’s to be the name of this fierce purp?”

“Confuse-us,” suggested Joe.

“Confuse-us?” chorused the others.

“Sure! He was a Chinese philosopher. Never hear of him?”

“Oh, my, oh, my,” snickered Jack; “that’s a good one. Ha, ha! You mean Confucius.”

“Oh, what’s the difference?” said Joe. “Confuse-us has about the same number of letters in it. Quit your laughing, Fred Winter.”

“But I don’t see the connection,” gurgled Aleck.

“Call him Confuse-us, because he isn’t a Chinese philosopher, that’s why,” said Joe, calmly. “And, besides, doesn’t he look confused?”

Jack laughed, and so did the others.

“It’s as good a name for him as any other,” said Fred.

And so the matter was settled.

“Now we have a mascot and an engine,” said Jack. “Hooray! I can hardly wait for the chug-chug to begin.”

CHAPTER II

THE ENGINE

Next morning, bright and early, the boys again met at the house-boat. The weather still continued hot, with scarcely a breeze to ripple the surface of the river. The glassy expanse reflected the clear blue sky above; occasionally tugs and other passing craft sent long swells rolling shoreward, to break with a complaining gurgle against the sides of the boat. Smoke and steam drifted lazily upward; and the glare of sunlight made any bit of shade refreshing.

Jack Lyons and Dave Brandon had each brought with him a package, Dave's quite long and Jack's square. These excited a great deal of comment.

But, with a stubbornness that aroused their companions' curiosity to the highest pitch, both refused to divulge the nature of their contents until the house-boat was entered. Then, as they stood in the cabin, Joe Preston spoke up:

"For goodness' sake, fellows, let's see what you have."

Dave smiled in a superior sort of way.

"All right, Joe—here goes; we had this with us out west." And, as the others crowded around, he untied the long package.

"Gee whiz—a telescope!" cried Joe. "I was always going to get one."

Joe was noted for his consistent intention to do something which somebody else always did first.

"A beauty," put in Aleck. "Let's have a squint through it."

"And won't it be dandy to look at the stars!" chimed in Winter, the studious one. "Bully for you, Dave. Now, Jack, what's in the other?"

"Jiminy, doesn't the bridge look near?" cried Aleck, leveling the telescope through the open door. "Seems as if we were right on top of it. And that little boat over there isn't little—it's big, and—say—what's this?"

Jack was holding up a small, framed picture.

“What do you think of that, fellows?” he asked, proudly. “I made it myself. Didn’t know I could paint, eh?”

“Best picture of a hat I ever saw,” declared Joe. “Don’t know just what style it is, but——”

“A hat?” A rather sad smile curled Jack’s lips. “A hat?” His voice quite lost its accustomed cheeriness. “Why, that’s the house-boat—our house-boat, you blundering pirate.”

“Why—er—honest—but now I can see it,” grinned Joe, with a wink at nothing in particular. “Oh, yes, I was too far away. There’s the roof——”

“And deck,” chimed in Fred, forgetting his usual solemnity, and vainly trying to stifle a gurgle.

“And you can even read the name,” laughed Aleck. “All done by hand, too. The water’s great.”

“It ought to be—it’s in water-color, isn’t it?” inquired Joe. “Hang it up, Jack. Never thought you could do anything like that,” and, as Jack looked at him suspiciously, he hastened to add, “Anything so good, I mean.”

“And now let’s have the tube that makes little boats turn into big boats,” said Fred, when the painting had been placed in a prominent position.

For an hour the lads amused themselves with the telescope, and watching the antics of “Confuse-us,” and then began to grow impatient, fearing that some delay might prevent the engine from reaching them that day.

Then a voice outside caused Jack to spring up.

“It’s Jim Benton,” he said, as a hail reached their ears.

The machinist, with a bag of tools, clambered on board.

“Hello, Jack!” he said. “Hello, boys! Where’s your engine?”

“Over in Jersey, I’ll bet,” answered Jack, in a disgusted tone. “Sit down, Jim. What do you think of this—great, eh?”

“It’s swell, that’s what it is,” said Jim, slowly, as he looked around. “Fine as most any room in town. Bless me! Wish’t I was a youngster ag’in. I’d go

with you.”

“They said the engine would be here this morning,” grumbled Jack.

“Well, the morning ain’t half over yet,” said Jim, consolingly. “Ain’t this here b’ilin’ weather, though?”

He settled himself comfortably on the bench, and prepared to take a good, long rest.

The morning passed. Jim ate his lunch, while the boys wandered off in search of the nearest store. When they returned, hot and tired, the wharf wore a deserted look.

Jim and “Confusion,” as Fred Winter had taken the liberty of calling the pup, were taking a nap, but both promptly awoke when Joe Preston hit the door a resounding bang with his fist.

“Sorry,” mumbled Joe, apologetically. “Such things will happen on house-boats.”

About three o’clock, when hope had been given up, a two-horse team rumbled over the wharf, and Jack gave a loud cheer.

“Hooray, fellows, it’s here,” he announced.

Then a wild scramble to be the first off the boat followed, greatly to the terror of young Confuse-us.

“I feel thirsty ’nuff to drink the hull river,” announced the driver, as he stepped down. “That’s a purty heavy injine. Wish I had a piece of gold as big. Where d’ye want it put?”

“On the boat,” said Winter, solemnly.

“All right! Git up there! Whoa, boy! Gee-eee. Give me lots of room, you kids. Gee-ee—whoa! If it bumps like that again, I’ll look to see it go right through the bottom.”

When the interesting moment arrived, and preparations to unload the heavy boxes had been completed, six newcomers, apparently having sprung from nowhere, stood around and watched the proceedings with all the interest which spectators generally show.

The seven boys and two men, after a great deal of tugging and perspiring and straining of muscles, succeeded in sliding several boxes down a pair of heavy planks to the house-boat. Then a block and tackle and a number of thick timbers were thrown on top, and the wagon rattled off.

The way Jack and his friends ripped and tore apart the boxes would have been an inspiring sight to some lazy boys. They forgot the heat, labor—everything; and never paused until a pile suitable for kindling wood lay on the wharf.

“That was done fast, all right,” observed Jim, mopping his brow. “Say, if my boss was to see anything like that, he’d wonder what he was payin’ me for. Well, now, that engine is a mighty fine one.”

“We’re ready to get busy in earnest,” said Jack, impatiently.

“You’ll have to. There’s a whole lot of measurements we’ll need; and it’s got to be done just right, you know.”

“Fire away,” was Jack’s eager reply.

“Wal,” said Jim, reflectively, walking out on deck, “we can’t do the work here. That tree over there is just about in the right place; an’ here’s the block an’ tackle. We’ll pass a rope ’round the whole shootin’ match. Ye’re a strong-lookin’ lot, an’ it won’t take long.”

“You bet it won’t,” said Bob Somers.

Ropes were quickly untied. Then the boys set vigorously to work with long sweeps, and soon succeeded in propelling the unwieldy boat toward a shelving beach.

With Jim’s aid, the heavy block and tackle was rigged to the tree, the rope passed around the house-boat, and the five took hold.

“A long pull, a strong pull, an’ a pull all together,” commanded Jim. “Let ’er go!”

They tugged and pulled, while the perspiration poured from them in streams, and, after long and earnest efforts, the stern of the “Gray Gull” was drawn up upon the beach.

“Now, what’s to be done?” cried Jack.

But it was several moments before Jim felt capable of replying. He sighed, rubbed his aching muscles, and at length said, with exasperating slowness, "You see that there stern-post in the middle? Wal, a hole's got to be bored in it for the shaft."

"All right," said Jack. "Where shall we place the engine?"

"We'll make a bed frame on the cross-beams below the deck. Have to tear up the plankin' a bit."

"What else?" asked Jack.

"That's all for the present. Take it easy; a month from now you'll forgit how much time ye spent on puttin' it in." And with these words of wisdom Jim clambered aboard, drew out his rule, and began to take measurements.

"Right here," he said, marking a square on the floor in the rear part of the cabin, "ye kin take up them boards."

The boys worked with a vim, using saw and hatchet, and soon a large opening in the planking revealed the cross-beams beneath. Then they stood aside, while Jim indicated where cuttings and borings had to be made.

"Make the frame right in place?" asked Joe.

"Sure! I'm ready now to set in a couple of them there beams. It's goin' to be a good, solid foundation for the bed plate."

Jack and Joe sawed two heavy pieces of timber to the required length, and then bored holes for the bolts.

"Tote 'em in now," commanded Jim.

Following the mechanic's directions, the boys soon had the pieces resting at the proper distance apart on the cross-beams; and Jim, after considerable labor, succeeded in bolting them securely in place.

"Now for a couple o' crosspieces," he added, with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Solid as a rock," declared the mechanic at length, testing the timbers with his foot. "Get the bed plate, an' bolt it down."

When this was done, the five took a well-earned rest; but it was for only a few moments.

“Now we’ll lower the engine into place, fellows,” said Jack, jumping to his feet.

By means of an inclined board and ropes, this was done; and Jim began to verify his previous measurements.

“I got the angle o’ the propeller shaft just right, lads,” he announced, holding a stick from the engine to a mark he had made on the stern-post. “The propeller o’ course has to be a sufficient distance below the water level.”

“Won’t be much pitch to that shaft, eh?” said Jack.

“No! I made it the least I could,” answered the mechanic, wiping his face. “Too much makes the boat lose speed.”

“I’ll bore the hole in the stern-post,” volunteered Jack.

“Make it this size,” explained Jim, handing the boy an auger. “It’s large enough to give a clearance around the shaft.”

Jim watched the boy carefully, as the hole had to be bored at exactly the right angle. Several times he tested the slant with a long, straight piece of wood, and by this means accuracy was assured.

No sooner had the task been accomplished than Jim straightened himself up, and took out his watch.

“Not another stroke to-night, young uns,” he said. “It’s gittin’ on to six o’clock, and——”

“Goodness gracious!” exclaimed Jack. “It seems as if we hadn’t worked any time, doesn’t it? Slow job, eh?”

Jim looked pained.

“That’s a fine way to talk,” he grumbled; “an’ me with about twenty different kind o’ aches and pains.”

Jack slapped him on the back, and laughed. “Cheer up, old man. Now mind you get here early to-morrow morning; and we’ll finish the job in great shape.”

“An’ me, too, I guess,” sighed Jim.

Time has a stubborn way of moving slowly when the reverse is desired; and Joe insisted that on the following morning the sun rose fifty minutes late and that the hours were at least twenty minutes too long; and Jack said he was right.

But in spite of time's apparent slowness, the seven boys at length found themselves again on the house-boat.

After an hour of tedious waiting Jim Benton slowly approached.

"Here already?" he asked, with pretended surprise.

Some very scornful and indignant looks rewarded him; and Jim chuckled as he stepped aboard the house-boat.

"Now," he said, "we won't fasten nothin' down till it's tested from A to Z."

"What comes first?" inquired Joe.

"Push the propeller shaft through the hole in the stern-post; then if she fits, we'll bolt the stuffing box in place."

"What's a stuffing box?" asked Joe.

"I know what a stuffing boy is," laughed Aleck, as he pointed to a sandwich from which the other was taking huge bites.

"A metal cylinder fittin' over the shaft," explained Jim. "It's filled with packin' to keep out the water. Jack, you're a hustler. Bet you'd never work that hard for your livin', though."

When the shaft had been put in place, a coupling was attached to the end, and this in turn bolted to a similar coupling on the engine.

"Pretty good work," commented Jim. "Now we'll screw on the propeller; and then back to the water it goes."

The gasoline tank was installed; then the batteries, spark coil, spark plugs and carburetor; and their work now required only testing.

"Bully job," declared Jack, enthusiastically.

"Know how the engine works?" asked Jim, stopping to wipe a very grimy face.

“Sure thing, Jim,” laughed Jack. “This way: a mixture of gasoline vapor and air is drawn into the cylinder from the carburetor; the spark plug ignites it, and the piston is forced downward.”

“It’s a number of explosions, one after another,” put in Fred Winter, solemnly.

“The only thing I know about it is this,” said Joe, with a grin; “when the engine makes a noise, it’s going; and when it doesn’t, it’s stopped.”

“Why doesn’t it explode straight ahead?” asked Aleck.

Jim Benton laughed heartily.

“’Cause the battery connection is broken, young un,” he said. “An automatic arrangement lets a spark shoot across at just the right instant.”

“Oh, I see,” said Aleck.

All but Jim Benton found it very hard to stop work.

“I’m awful glad none of you fellers ain’t my boss,” he said, dryly. “I ain’t worked like this for many a day. Yes, I’ve ordered a tank o’ gasoline; an’ it ought to be here pretty soon.”

The fuel, however, was late in arriving; so, leaving Joe in charge, the others set off to see about provisions for the trip. Jim Benton accompanied them.

“Don’t see why they asked me to stay,” grumbled Joe, dangling his legs over the wharf. “Gee whiz, here comes the stuff now.”

A wagon drew up.

“Hey!” said the driver.

“Hey yourself!” said Joe, pleasantly. “Trot off your old gasoline.”

“All right, bub!” And the man began unloading a number of cans.

Joe soon had these aboard the “Gray Gull,” and then began filling the tank. But a little labor went a great way with Joe, and he quickly tired. The attraction offered by his lunch box was not to be resisted.

“Must be enough in the old thing to take us to Albany,” he grumbled. “I’ll put in some more to-night.”

When the boys appeared he greeted them by exclaiming:

“Everything’s all right, fellows.”

“Gasoline in the tank, too?” asked Jack, with satisfaction.

“You bet.”

“Shove off. We’ll soon find out how the engine works.”

A loud, long cheer went up as the fly-wheel began to revolve.

“Hooray!” yelled Jack. “Isn’t this great?”

“Going like a thing o’ life,” grinned Joe.

“Speed ’most makes a fellow dizzy,” smiled Bob.

“The only thing I’m surprised at is to find the boat going at all,” remarked Dave Brandon, staring solemnly at the water.

After skirting the shore for a short distance Jim swung the boat around, and she slowly chugged her way back to the starting-point.

“It’s all in good shape, young uns,” he remarked, with a smile of satisfaction. “Wish’t I was going along.”

“Mighty glad it’s been decided that we house-boat it,” chirped Tom. “Dandy fun. I’m glad your father didn’t object, Bob.”

“Bet you’ll scrap about the bunks,” said Jim.

“Not on your life.” Tom Clifton laughed. “Why, we’ll just roll ourselves up in blankets and flop down in any old corner.”

“Don’t you Ramblers ever sleep in beds?” queried Jim, with a wink.

“Only sometimes,” answered Tom, loftily.

“Then we’ll start on our trip to-morrow,” declared Jack Lyons, enthusiastically.

“To-morrow,” sighed Joe, “is an awful long way off.”

CHAPTER III

“ALL ABOARD!”

Time did, indeed, seem to move with exasperating slowness. None of the impatient boys slept very well that night, and each arose next morning almost with the sun.

At an early hour, a group had assembled on the ordinarily deserted wharf. There were, of course, all the boys, Mr. John Lyons, Sr., Mr. George Somers, Bob's father, little Bobby Lyons, Jack's brother, and Mr. Montague Winter, besides other near and distant relatives.

Mr. Lyons, jolly and smiling, examined every corner of the boat, gave bits of useful advice, and sought to allay the fears of Mr. Winter.

“I don't consider it a very safe trip,” exclaimed the latter, nervously. “There is danger of their being run down by the big boats.”

“But, my dear sir, they have eyes to look out for such dangers.”

“Then, again, the Hudson is no mill-pond, and in case of storms——”

“Depend upon it, the boys will be safely anchored near shore,” laughed Mr. Lyons. “Jack has promised me to be careful.”

“They will have to stop over night in some pretty lonely localities, and rough characters may molest them.”

Mr. Somers smiled.

“I do not think you need have any fears, Mr. Winter,” he said, reassuringly. “Jack and his friends are old enough to look out for themselves, Bob is used to boats, and a trip of this sort should do them a world of good.”

“Let us hope so, at any rate,” said Fred's father, still a trifle nervously.

The seven boys were dressed for solid comfort, and had brought with them boots, leggins and sweaters. The first flush of excitement over, it was noticed that Fred Winter wore a broad-brimmed felt hat of uncertain age.

“I say——” whispered Joe. “Why?”

“I’m not going to get my face burned to a blister—that’s why. You’ll catch it from the sun and reflections in the water. Better chuck those caps away, and——”

“Oh, that peaches and cream complexion!” gurgled Joe.

The supreme moment had come. The near and distant relatives poured forth a steady stream of advice and admonition. Several curious loungers, all wearing broad grins, added a word now and then, and the boys had their own troubles in trying to hear as little as possible.

“All aboard!” commanded Jack.

At last the captain of the house-boat was actually casting off the lines.

Little Bobby Lyons almost danced with excitement.

“Jack, Jack—don’t forget that letter you’re going to send me,” he called. “And, Jack, be sure to—oh, dear, there’s something else I wanted to say to you, and—I can’t think of it.”

“Send a message by wireless,” laughed Joe. “Everything clear, Jack? That’s good! Now start ’er going.”

“Looks like Miles Standish’s cabin,” remarked a bystander.

“Them there lads has plenty of go,” said another.

“That’s more’n the boat will ever have,” grinned a third.

It was an interesting moment. Captain Jack’s hand rested on the fly-wheel, and he looked at his chums.

“Quick, give it a turn!” cried Joe, with suspense in his tone.

Jack obeyed, and a series of rapid reports immediately followed, bringing forth a round of cheers.

No music could have sounded sweeter to the boys than the chug-chug which was carried away on the breeze.

As the house-boat slowly swung out into the stream, the seven shouted again. Good-byes shot back and forth; Mr. Lyons, Mr. Somers and Mr.

Winter waved their hands; the loungers shouted and laughed—the voyage was begun.

“Isn’t this immense?” said Jack, gleefully, as he turned on full power. “Bet some of those chaps on the wharf wish they were going. What’s that, Joe? Sure, we’ll cross the Hudson—get right over to the Jersey side. Keep your eyes open, fellows,—we don’t want to sink any steamers.”

“Keep a sharp watch for icebergs,” said Bob. “Remember the ‘Titanic.’”

“Look at the land skipping by,” cried Fred. “Bet we’re going all of three miles an hour.”

The blue water lapped and gurgled against the boat, and a gentle breeze tempered the heat. White clouds were slowly passing across the sky, and shadows chased each other over land and water. To their left rose Washington Heights, and to the right another ridge of hills was outlined against the sky. Houses dotted the landscape, and smoke stained and streaked the horizon.

“Ja-ck, Jaa-ck!” came floating over the air; “Jaaa-ck!”

“What’s up now?” cried Jack. “Wonder what little Bobby wants.”

“Ja-a-a-ck,—Ja-a-a-a-ck!”

“Better swing around, and see,” counseled Bob Somers.

“Ja-a-a-a-ck, Ja-a-a-a-a-ck!”

“Whee, what a howl!” said Aleck.

“Settles it, anyway,” laughed Jack, as he followed Bob’s advice.

Laboriously the “Gray Gull” began to turn around, and was finally headed for the wharf. The figures on it began to grow more distinct.

Then came Bobby’s shrill voice again:

“Jack, I remember now what I wanted—send me some picture postal cards.”

And Joe slapped Jack on the back; and Jack laughed heartily, and yelled back, “All right, Bobby!” And again the course of the “Gray Gull” was changed, and soon the wharf and the figures grew faint again.

Keeping close inshore, the “Gray Gull” was often rocked by the long swells from passing craft. The Harlem River presented quite a busy scene, although they were beyond the portion where the traffic is greatest.

Occasionally, they were hailed from the deck of some barge or schooner, and the occupants of a motor boat speeding swiftly by gave a series of derisive yells. But the boys only laughed, and waved their hands, feeling that they wouldn’t exchange the “Gray Gull” for all the gasoline launches in New York.

Joe, sweeping the landscape with Dave’s telescope, uttered so many exclamations of surprise and pleasure that Aleck promptly wrested the glass from his hands.

“Where, which and what?” he asked.

“All three, kind sir,” answered Joe. “But that electric car on Washington Heights looms up strangely large. Somebody on it just dropped a coin.”

Aleck looked rather puzzled, that is until the speaker added, “Hurry up and see if he finds it. Looked to me like a nickel of the year twelve hundred and six.”

Aleck Hunt raised the glass to his eyes.

“Hey! Did you ever see such a wobble?” he exclaimed. “Wouldn’t like to be on a car swinging around like that. This glass makes my arms ache, too; and it’s all out of focus. Want it back?”

“Yes,” said Joe, incautiously.

“Then you can’t have it,” returned Aleck, as he once more raised the telescope.

“Better keep her out a bit, Cap’n Jack,” yelled Joe Preston. “Unless you want to climb the hill.”

And Jack, becoming a little bolder, swung the “Gray Gull” further out into the stream. Fred presently relieved him at the tiller. Then the others took their turns.

On the “promenade deck,” as Jack soon christened it, Confuse-us, feeling no doubt that the occasion was one of great importance, ambled from side

to side, gazing curiously at the lapping water which splashed and gurgled so close beneath his nose.

Time passed quickly, each moment bringing something to attract their attention.

“Brick barges from Haverstraw,” announced Jack, presently, as a tug, moving at a snail’s pace, puffed laboriously along. A column of inky smoke swirled aloft, leaving a long trail to slowly dissipate itself in the clear atmosphere above, while jets of steam gleamed in the sunlight. Each of the clumsy barges was loaded high with bricks, and seemed reluctant to follow the valiant little tug.

As the morning advanced, the breeze slightly increased; the white clouds grew thicker, piling themselves up into great rounded masses, and the swift changes over the landscape, from glancing light to fleeting shadow, were pleasing to look upon.

“Cap’n Jack,” remarked Joe, suddenly, “are we going to stop for lunch, or eat it on the wide waste of water?”

“No stops till the Jersey shore is reached,” answered Jack Lyons, decidedly.

“Right you are,” said Fred. “Joe is always thinking of meal-time. But, please, Aleck, trot out the sardines and crackers, the cheese and home-made pickles, the pound cake and everything else we have.”

And Aleck did. So all but Jack sat on deck and talked and ate, and idly watched the water foaming and bubbling away from the stern, while Confuse-us, fully alive to the occasion, trotted from one to another, and, with plaintive wails, begged for his share of the good things.

Finally, an indignant voice came from Jack, at the tiller.

“Say, do you fellows intend to eat all that grub?” he demanded.

The others looked at each other rather guiltily and meekly said that they didn’t. But each waited for the other to get up, and not until Joe, Aleck and Tom were forcibly ousted from their position did Jack come in for his own.

“Sure as guns, we’re getting near the Hudson,” remarked Fred, an hour later. “It’s right around that bend.”

“Can’t get there too soon for me,” said Aleck. “And—and——” He drew a long breath.

“And what?” asked Joe.

“I won’t be sorry to get across. It’s pretty wide, you know, and this floating log cabin is a good mark for——”

“Ha, ha! Aleck’s getting scared already,” laughed Joe.

“I am not, and——”

“Hello, boys—the Hudson!”

Jack’s voice rang out cheerily, as he peered ahead and caught a glimpse of a broad expanse of water, framed in by a wall of frowning cliffs on the Jersey shore.

“And just think,” said Fred, in a reflective tone, as he pointed toward a tree-covered slope on the left, “that’s the end of Manhattan Island, one of the most remarkable places in the world.”

“Got that sentence out of a book, didn’t you?” inquired Dave with a smile.

Slowly, the “Gray Gull” chugged its way toward the greater river. The boys looked eagerly about them. At the point of junction, the Harlem is spanned by a railroad bridge, and just as the house-boat reached it a heavy freight train rumbled overhead.

“Glad I’m not on it,” observed Tommy Clifton, with a wink. “Must be fierce to go poking along like that.”

“Gee whiz, doesn’t the Hudson look wide!” exclaimed Jack, shading his eyes. “Lots of boats to steer clear of, too. What’s that, Bob? All the power is on, my boy. We can’t go any faster, unless you get out and push.”

Gradually the house-boat drew away from the hills on either hand, and was headed directly across the river. The sunlight, streaming between a break in the clouds, reflected in the water, which the freshening breeze had kicked up into choppy waves. They tumbled against the sides of the craft with a strange, melancholy swish. Now and then shining drops splashed over the bow, and Confuse-us hastily retired within.

“Looks an awful distance across,” remarked Jack, again.

“We’re so close to the water—that’s why,” said Dave Brandon. “But doesn’t it seem lonely out here, fellows?”

“And take a squint at those sea-gulls,” added Joe, pointing toward a flock of birds circling above.

The Hudson greatly impressed the boys with its vastness. The river, viewed from a height of only a few feet, presented a very different picture from the one so familiar to passengers on excursion and ferry-boats.

A vague sense of danger stole over the occupants of the house-boat. The little craft rocked gently, and they could well imagine how, in case of a squall, it would be at the mercy of the foam-crested waves. However, such thoughts soon vanished. The smell of the water was pleasant, and the boys, leaning comfortably against the side of the boat, sniffed the air with keen pleasure.

Straight ahead, a big, lumbering schooner slowly made its way down the river, the breeze being just sufficient to fill out her dingy gray sails. Shouts and commands reached their ears with astonishing clearness, even above the steady chug-chug of the motor.

“Nice mess we’d be in, if the engine should break down,” remarked Aleck.

“If anything is going to happen, now’s the time,” said Tom. “We’re just about in the middle of the river.”

A big excursion steamer was passing astern. Many passengers, crowding to the rails, watched the house-boat with every evidence of interest. Several waved their hands and shouted, and the boys answered with yells and whistles and all the noise of which they were capable, until the boat began to rock and wobble on the heavy swells.

“Thunderation!” exclaimed Joe, loudly.

His stool had flown from under him; and Joe, wildly grasping at the empty air, sprawled full length on the deck, and but for Dave’s prompt assistance would have rolled into the river.

“Jiminy!” panted the boy, picking himself up, rather red and confused.

“Came near being a good cold bath for one,” grinned Aleck. And all laughed but the victim.

The bold, rocky forms of the Palisades began to stand out clearly. At their base and part way up the slope were masses of trees and vegetation; but the general appearance was that of an almost vertical wall, now glistening in the sunlight, then deep in shadow. The cliffs looked so big and grand that all were impressed.

“I tell you what,” remarked Jack, after a long survey, “it’s a mighty good thing the quarrymen were stopped from blasting those rocks. I heard father say they were doing enormous damage, and spoiling the——”

“Natural beauty of the scene,” suggested Joe.

“That’s it. A whole lot of people got together after a while and persuaded the authorities to make a big slice of the Palisades into a public park. It’s dandy up there.”

Numbers of swift motor boats were going up and down, and the sound of rapid pulsations filled the air. Along the shore, at intervals, the white tents of campers-out flashed between the trees; and streamers of bluish smoke floated slowly in front of the rocks. It was a picturesque and beautiful scene.

When about three hundred feet from shore, Jack changed his course, heading up the river.

The “Gray Gull” attracted considerable attention; the campers-out gathered at the water’s edge, and their yells were answered with interest; the occupants of passing motor boats beamed upon them with kindly condescension.

“Those fellows think they’re the biggest things on the river,” grinned Joe; “but give me the ‘Gray Gull’ every time.”

“Me, too,” said Tom. “Plenty of room to move around in, and all the comforts of home.”

“Swell, eh?” said Aleck.

“That’s the word for it,” answered Joe. “Dandy place to camp, over there; but if we want to reach Albany before the summer’s over, we can’t do much of that.”

“One thing is going to help us, though,” put in Fred.

“What’s that?”

“The tide.”

“Why, yes—so it will; and keep us back, too, when it’s running out.”

“Not if we time our stops the way we ought to.”

“If you fellows wish, I can figure out just how it changes. I think there’s about an hour’s difference every day.”

“That’s knowledge for you,” laughed Jack. “Don’t wonder you wear glasses, and forget to smile at times, old chap.”

“It’s one of the terrible effects of deep thought,” grinned Joe. “But still, I should say so much brain work isn’t necessary just now. We’ll drop in a string—if it floats down—well—it follows——”

“The tide,” said Jack.

“Aristotle would have envied such reasoning as that,” laughed Dave Brandon. “What a relief to know that the weighty problem is settled.”

Becoming emboldened by the ease with which he handled the “Gray Gull,” Jack decided to venture further out into the stream.

For half an hour they had kept their course, when Fred Winter adjusted his glasses, and, looking straight ahead, exclaimed:

“That tug is coming along mighty fast; which side do you suppose it will pass?”

“H’m,” said Jack, rather doubtfully, “they must look out for themselves.”

Two short, sharp whistles suddenly sounded; and the boys looked at each other and the swiftly approaching tug in some apprehension.

“What does that signal mean?” asked Fred, nervously.

No one answered; Jack seemed puzzled; but something had to be done quickly, as the “Gray Gull” was almost directly in line. With a quick movement, he steered to starboard, just as the tug swung to port.

“Gee whiz!” yelled Joe, excitedly. “We’re going to get smashed to bits.”

A chorus of exclamations rang out, blending in with another sharp signal from the tug.

“What’s to be done?” gasped Aleck Hunt, in dismay.

It was a moment of great excitement. None understood the commands which were hurled over the air; it seemed as if nothing could prevent the two craft from coming together. The dismayed boys stood almost motionless, while the black hull cut swiftly toward them.

Suddenly Jack Lyons, realizing what was to be done, swung the tiller far around; quick action of those on the tug sent its prow outward.

“Great Scott!” breathed Jack.

So close that his hand outstretched could have touched it, the tug passed abreast; then the “Gray Gull” began to bob up and down on the waves.

The engine of the “Gray Gull” had been reversed, and it was coming to a stop.

“That was a narrow escape,” cried Bob.

“I should say so,” said Jack, in shaky tones.

“Hey! What’s the matter with you fellers?”

A grizzly, weather-beaten man leaning over the rail of the tug was glaring sternly toward them.

“Don’t you know anything about river signals?” demanded the other, sharply.

“No—that is——” began Jack, in some confusion.

“I thought so,” said the captain, grimly. Then, as his eyes took in the pleasing appearance of the lads, his tone softened. “Yer want ter l’arn ’em, young fellers,” he counseled. “It’s risky enough on the water without not havin’ no knowledge o’ them things. Stick what I’m goin’ ter tell yer in them noddles of yourn; an’ don’t let it git out—understand?”

“Yes, yes!” chorused his hearers.

“Wal, one short whistle means we’re goin’ ter starboard; two of ’em says steerin’ ter port; and three, engine is reversed. Don’t forgit it, now.”

“No siree; we’ll write it down,” said Jack. “Jolly well obliged to you, sir.”

“That’s all right, young feller. Whar’ are ye bound?”

“To Albany.”

The captain guffawed loudly; and several of his crew laughed, also.

“Wal, mebbe ye’ll git thar this year, an’ mebbe ye won’t,” he said. “Good v’y’ge an’ pleasant weather!” And, with a wave of his big hand, the captain turned away, for the tug “Juno” was again in motion.

“Dandy fellow, that,” commented Jack. “We’ve learned something, too.”

“But nearly had our trip ended before it was begun,” added Dave.

The late afternoon found them opposite Yonkers. Factories lined the waterfront; and the town, rising on a hill beyond and bathed in a mellow glow, formed a picturesque background.

“Let’s anchor here,” said Jack. “Tide’s running in fast; but we don’t need to get excited about it.”

“That’s right,” said Joe. “Grub time can’t be made to wait for anything less than an earthquake or cyclone.”

“I’ll cook to-night,” went on Jack. “Your turn to-morrow, Joe. Scat, Confuse-us! What’s that, Joe? Do you want a menu card? I’ll write one out, and——”

“Oh, hang the ‘me knew’ card, you silly amateur pirate,” said Joe. “If me knew, I wouldn’t have asked. Tell us gently what it’s going to be.”

“Sing it to him,” grinned Aleck. “Say, that’s a nice little launch coming across.”

“It’s the ferry,” explained Jack, with an air of superior wisdom. “Runs between Yonkers and this big pile of rocks,—been on it often.”

The “Gray Gull” was run nearer the shore; then Jack shut off power, and, a minute later, the anchor was heaved overboard and disappeared with a tremendous splash in the rippling water.

Deep shadows were soon stealing over the landscape; and the towering crags outlined themselves against golden clouds and pearly green sky.

When dusk came, Jack lighted the lanterns.

“I know one thing about this river business, anyway,” he remarked.

“Surprised to hear it,” said Joe, cheerfully.

“If I didn’t want to show my knowledge, I wouldn’t tell you, after that,” laughed Jack. “This green light goes on the starboard side, red on the port, and white placed forward.”

“Looks fine,” commented Tom Clifton when the lanterns were in position. “Makes me feel like a real mariner.”

When the lantern which hung from the middle of the ceiling had been lighted, the interior of the house-boat seemed doubly attractive.

Jack proved himself to be a good chef; and the others praised his cooking with an earnestness that amounted to enthusiasm.

After supper, it was voted too late to go ashore; but Bob Somers’ suggestion that the voyage be continued was acted upon, in spite of a protest from Fred.

“Oh, sugar!” he said. “Why not let’s read? I brought some dandy books along; but who in the dickens could enjoy ’em with that engine making such a thundering racket?”

“Oh, bother your old books,” said Joe. “I’ve got something better than that.”

“What?”

“I’m going to write a history of the trip.”

“Goodness; my job as historian is threatened,” murmured Dave.

“Gee whiz! A history of the trip?”

“Certainly! Why not?”

“Begin to-night, eh?”

“No—to-morrow.”

“Oh, oh!”

And the rest began to chuckle and gurggle, and Joe scornfully walked out on the promenade deck, closely followed by Confuse-us.

The moon shone brightly, and a cool, refreshing breeze came from the west. Masses of clouds, now gray and solemn-looking, rested in the rapidly

darkening sky. Yonkers was aglow with lights. Singly and in clusters, they flashed from the line of hills and along the water-front. As Joe sat down, he heard the whistle of a locomotive and saw one of the New York Central trains skirting the river. At the base of the Palisades, a lone camp-fire spurted tongues of flame against the gloom beyond, and the sighing breeze brought with it the sound of voices.

“Up anchor, fellows,” commanded Captain Jack. “Guess we can make a mile or two.”

Willing hands seized the chain, and, with a rattle and bang and lots of unnecessary noise, the anchor was dragged aboard.

“Great difference between the night and day,” remarked Aleck.

“You bet—it’s darker,” said Tom, with a grin.

“If I weren’t jealous of such brilliant conversation, I’d help it along by asking which is darker?” observed Fred Winter. “Say, you chaps certainly do waste a lot of words over nothing.”

“Correct,” put in Joe, “and here’s another sample. Kind o’ queer-looking on the river—pretty black, at times, I guess. Never struck me before how hard it must be to pilot a big steamer on a pitch dark night.”

“Don’t think I should care to try it,” said Fred, with a slight shiver.

A bit out, the waves were choppy, and the dory at the stern bobbed merrily up and down. The moon played hide-and-seek with the silver-edged clouds, and threw a strange, weird light over the landscape.

“Guess I’ll tell you that story I heard now, fellows,” remarked Aleck Hunt. “Say, Jack, you know Joe Archer, the chap who played short-stop on our baseball team—well——”

“Hello, what’s the matter?” interrupted Jack.

The pulsations of the motor had suddenly ceased.

CHAPTER IV

A VOICE IN THE NIGHT

Captain Jack stepped inside, with an exclamation, and gave the fly-wheel a twist.

“What’s wrong with the thing?” queried Bob Somers.

“Don’t know yet,” answered Jack, his tone betraying a trace of anxiety, “but I’ll find out in a jiffy—have to; the tide’s carrying us right out, and it’s a risky business floating around on the river at this time o’ night. Get outside, Joe, and keep your eyes peeled.”

Jack set to work. He first tested the batteries, and found them in working order, then examined the spark plugs.

“Nothing the matter there,” he remarked, in a perplexed tone.

“Feed pipe all right?” asked Aleck.

“Of course it’s all right.”

“How about the carburetor?” said Dave.

“Can’t see anything wrong with that; and I’m not going to take it apart unless I have to.”

“Try the engine again,” suggested Bob, after they had spent some little time upon it.

Jack did so; but the only result was one faint report.

“Very queer,” he mused.

“All right?” called a voice from outside.

“Certainly,” responded Jack; “except that it won’t go.”

Jack threw himself upon the bench, and started to think it out. While thus engaged, and, for the moment, quite oblivious to his surroundings, he was startled by exclamations from his chums.

“Hey there!” shouted Joe in excited tones, as he suddenly popped his head inside. “Somebody out on the river yelling for help—listen!”

The boys made a concerted dash for the deck, just as a faint cry floated over the air.

“By Jingo, I wonder what that means!” cried Bob, looking eagerly around. “Which side does it come from?—Hello; I see something out there.”

“Where—where?” chorused the others.

“Right to the left of Yonkers. Jiminy, the moon had to go back of a cloud just at the wrong time.”

“Help!”

The cry again caused their nerves to tingle, and all strained their eyes in the direction which Bob pointed out.

As a flood of pale moonlight once more streamed between the clouds, a dark object could be seen not more than a quarter of a mile away.

“That’s it, sure enough!” cried Aleck excitedly. “Looks like a rowboat. Somebody may be in a pretty bad pickle, and no boats near enough to help him. If our engine was only all right, we might get there in time ourselves. There, he hollered again.”

“What’s to be done?” asked Joe, blankly.

The boys looked at each other and shook their heads. Then Bob Somers’ lips suddenly tightened and an expression came over his face which the Ramblers knew from experience meant a determined resolve.

“Fellows,” he said, quickly, “I’m going out in the dory. We can’t stand around and not try to help him.”

“Good boy,” said Joe. “That’s the idea exactly. Let me go along, eh?”

But Bob shook his head.

“Can’t, Joe,” he answered, laconically. “Not room enough. Do what you can with the engine, Jack, and all keep a sharp lookout. I’m off. What’s that?”

A faint ray of light suddenly flashed its way through the darkness, slowly moved up and down, then swung around and disappeared.

“Search-light,” cried Bob, hurriedly. “Some steamer coming along—yes, there it is. See—away off? But I can’t wait.”

He dashed inside, seized the oars, while Joe Preston hauled in the rope and the dory was brought alongside.

Bob speedily clambered in and set a lantern in the bow, then with the aid of an oar, shoved off.

“Look out for yourself,” cried Jack Lyons. “For goodness’ sake, be careful.”

“Don’t bother about me, fellows,” said Bob, cheerily, and he bent to the oars, while his excited friends watched the dory melting into the darkness, the lantern reflecting in erratic, wriggling lines.

Bob pulled with long, steady strokes. Every ounce of strength in his muscular arms was brought into play, and in a few moments the house-boat assumed a strange, weird appearance in the gloom. He could still hear the voices of his chums, and yelled a cheery, “All right, fellows,” then strove with might and main, as another call for assistance was borne to his ears.

The choppy water lapped and gurgled, and the dory’s sharp bow plunging in sent a shower of drops flying aboard. It was all very dark and mysterious on the river and a strange sense of loneliness stole over the young skipper. The waves were higher now, and as they bore down upon the frail craft its occupant was forced to carefully judge his strokes.

Again the ray of the search-light flashed across the water and a glance over his shoulder enabled him to get a clear view of the approaching steamboat.

“If the sky were only clear, it would be twice as easy,” he murmured. “Still, I haven’t much further to go. Whew, this is quite an adventure for the first day.”

The rowboat was not far ahead now, and, as the moon again appeared in view, Bob saw in it a man waving his arms.

“I’ll be with you in a minute,” he yelled, and an answering shout floated over the water.

But the last stretch dragged out, and when, with aching arms and panting breath, Bob neared the boatman in distress, the steamer with the flaring search-light was not far away.

“You’re just in time,” called the man, over the intervening space. “My old boat sprung a leak and is half full of water.”

His voice was pleasant and youthful, and when the rays of the lantern fell across him, Bob saw the good-looking, clear-cut features of a man about twenty-one.

“By George, I owe you a debt of gratitude,” he cried, in a tone of great relief. “I’m not much of a swimmer.”

He laughed, nervously, then paused and looked at Bob in surprise.

“Why!” he exclaimed, “I—never—expected to——” and he stopped again.

“Expected what?” asked Bob.

“Well, to speak frankly, I’m surprised to see a boy. Where in the world did you come from?”

“We—that is some fellows and myself—have a house-boat over there,” explained Bob, waving his hand. “See those lights over there? That’s it. Heard you shout, but couldn’t come over because the engine’s out of order.”

“In search of adventures,” laughed the young man, who seemed to have recovered from his scare.

“Yes, and this is number one,” grinned Bob. “Be careful when you climb aboard—this dory’s a cranky little boat—mighty easy to upset.”

“And we must look out for the swells from that steamer. Guess it’s one of the Albany boats.”

Bob skilfully paddled close to the sinking boat and glanced at the steamer not a hundred yards away. Her windows were aglow with lights and the water close by quivered and shook like molten gold. A powerful search-light cut its way against the blackness, and Bob uttered an exclamation as its rays suddenly swept across the rugged face of the Palisades, bringing out their forms with strange sharpness against the clouded sky.

As yet, the young man had made no move to clamber aboard, and Bob rightly guessed that he was waiting until the swells due from the steamer should have subsided.

For the moment, the weird pictures brought into view by the search-light held him in a spell. Alternating lights and shadows played fantastically over the rocks. Then it vanished. Deep gloom again enfolded the cliffs, and the search-light, slowly sweeping across the dark river, picked out the familiar form of the "Gray Gull."

"Look!" gasped Bob, in delight.

There, bathed in the electric beams, the strange-looking house-boat could be seen, floating out on the tide. As if those on the steamer wished to study such an unusual sight, the light was played upon it for several moments. Then the night suddenly covered it again.

Having had his eyes fixed steadily on the search-light, Bob found that his surroundings assumed a very black and forbidding appearance. The waves splashed and lapped with a peculiar, monotonous chant, and over the air came the river noises, the puffing of tugs and whistles of various boats in the distance.

As the dory answered to the call of the choppy masses, Bob thought of his situation, adrift on the great Hudson. How strange and mysterious it seemed, with both shores lost in the gloom of night.

"Look alive there; it's coming!"

A long roller was rushing shoreward, followed by a succession of others. Bob saw them looming dimly in the half-obscured moonlight. The foremost seemed to glimmer for an instant, then the dory was carried high over its foaming crest and plunged down on the other side, to meet another which sent it heeling almost to the gunwale, while drenching spray dashed over the skipper.

For an instant, the water battled with fury against the frail craft, but Bob Somers' arms were sturdy, and he managed to keep the dory headed toward the waves. Soon the violent wobbling ceased, and he pulled alongside the other boat.

"I'm just as wet as you are, now," he said, with a smile, "even though we're not in the same boat," and Bob chuckled at his own witticism. "Ready? I've got her tight."

"Yes, ready now," answered the stranger.

He stepped lightly from one boat into the other. Then Bob quickly fastened a line to the water-logged craft.

“I certainly am thankful for your timely aid,” said the young man, extending his hand. “Perhaps I oughtn’t to admit it, but I was getting pretty badly scared. I was afraid that my boat might go down at any minute. I’m completely played out—couldn’t make any headway at all. My name is Norman Redfern.”

Bob introduced himself and, in a few words, explained about their trip.

“How did your boat happen to spring a leak?” he asked.

“I don’t know. But I noticed a bit of water coming in when I rowed over to Yonkers. It wasn’t much, and I thought it had merely splashed over the side. Coming back, though, it got worse and I finally decided that if any one was within hearing distance I needed his help.”

“Glad we heard you,” said Bob, heartily.

Progress with the other boat in tow was very slow, and the boy’s arms began to ache. He cast many a glance over his shoulder, to note the position of the “Gray Gull,” which was revealed by the lanterns.

“Hard work, eh?” remarked Norman. “Let me give you a hand.”

But Bob shook his head and pulled away, while the perspiration poured over his face.

“Listen!” he exclaimed presently. “Listen!”

A steady chug-chug suddenly started up, and the faint lights began to slowly move toward them.

“Isn’t that great?” panted Bob, gleefully. “Hooray! We’ll just wait for ’em on the bosom of the rolling deep.”

“Good idea,” assented the other.

And Bob, lolling back, watched the house-boat’s lights growing brighter with great satisfaction.

“Hello, fellows!” he yelled, with all the strength of his lusty lungs; and a chorus of voices immediately answered from the distance.

In a short time, the “Gray Gull” loomed up close at hand, and a loud cheer arose when the eager boys saw Bob and his companion safe and sound. The pulsation of the engine ceased, and the house-boat came to a stop. Then the two were helped aboard, while Confuse-us, alarmed at the noise, fled in terror to the darkest corner.

Mutual explanations and introductions followed.

“What was the matter with the engine?” asked Bob.

“Nothing. The supply of gasoline gave out, and but for those extra cans we might have floated for—well, put it down at as many days as you like.”

Fred Winter laughed, then added, “Joe Preston was going to see that it was full, and, of course——”

“Forgot,” finished Joe, not in the least disturbed. “Next time I’m going to sublet my contract. Hard work doesn’t agree—well say, Bob, what’s the matter—waves out there mountain high, or just a cloudburst?”

Then the whole story had to come out, and a ripple of mirth went around the room.

As the rescued boatman stood in the brightly-lighted interior of the house-boat, the four saw that he was a very good-looking young man of slight build. His refined speech and manner were in striking contrast to his worn and threadbare clothes.

He was enthusiastic about the house-boat trip.

“I wish I were going with you,” he said rather wistfully. “If you use your eyes to advantage a great deal can be learned. Travel broadens one’s views, and even in a short trip of this sort habits of self-reliance are formed. How far are you going—to Albany, eh?”

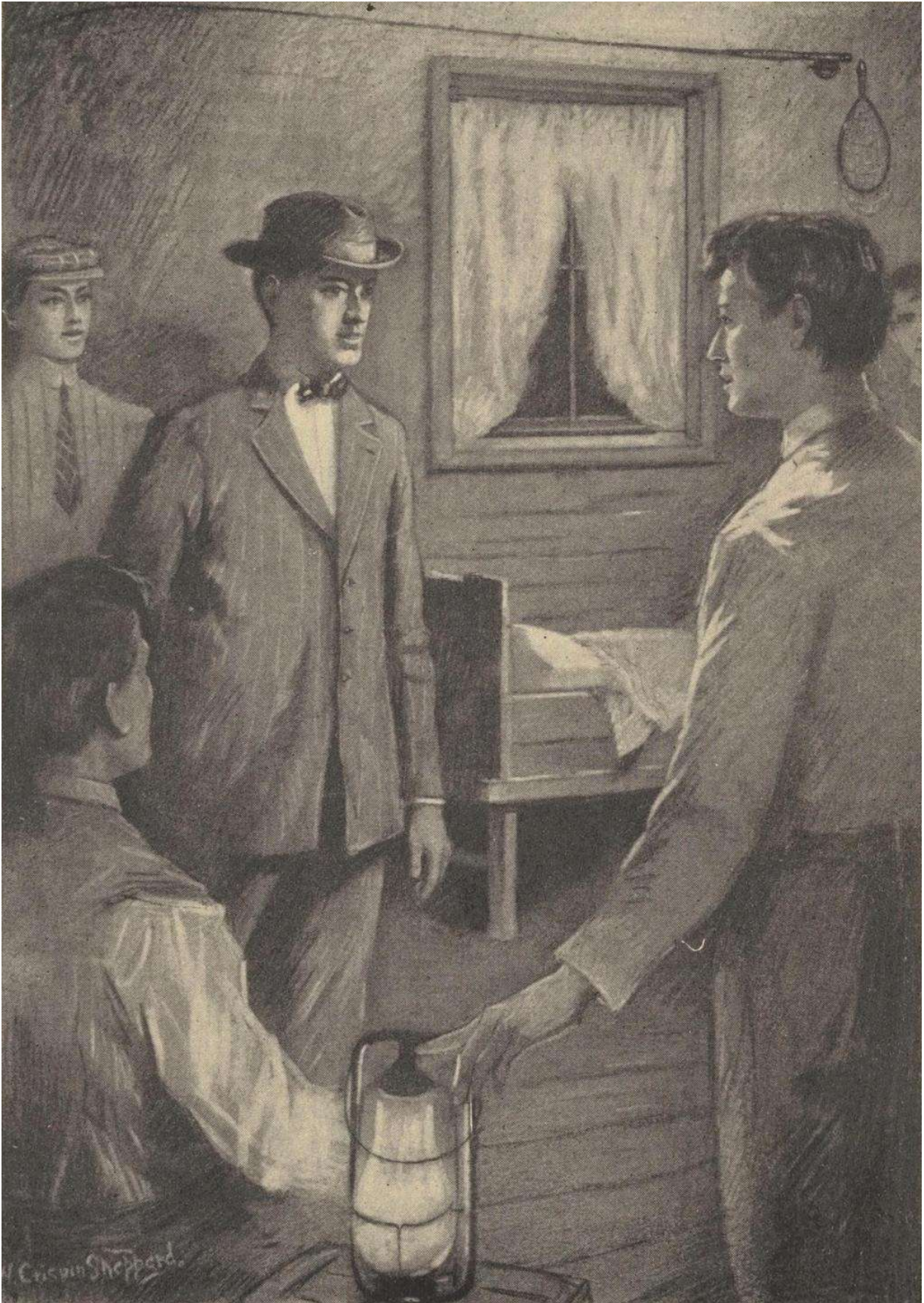
The smile on his face suddenly vanished, and he gazed reflectively at the floor.

“Know the city?” asked Joe.

“Yes, very well. It’s a nice town, and I——” He stopped short and looked at his watch, then added, “Hello! What’s that in the corner—a telescope?”

“Yes,” answered Fred. “Some night we’re going to have a look at the stars.”

Norman Redfern seemed greatly interested; he walked over, picked up the instrument and examined it carefully.



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“I WISH I WERE GOING WITH YOU”

“A very good one,” he said, approvingly. “Too bad the boat isn’t steady enough for us to take an observation.”

“Why not go ashore?” asked Fred, eagerly.

Redfern glanced at the others, and they nodded.

“A great idea,” said Bob; “though it isn’t a very good night.”

“We can get flying glimpses between the flying clouds,” grinned Tom. “Come ahead.”

The “Gray Gull” was headed for shore. Jack Lyons took her in as far as he dared; then the anchor was put over, and the house-boat came to a rest for the night. The Palisades, dim and mysterious, loomed high above them. From the shore came the musical sighing of the trees, and faint rustlings, as the underbrush was swayed by the gentle breeze. To the boys, it sounded very much like footsteps going and coming; and more than one felt rather creepy sensations steal through him.

Jack, Norman Redfern and Joe Preston jumped into the dory and pulled away, with the other boat in tow.

“Isn’t it dark?” observed Norman.

“Kind o’ spooky,” said Joe.

“And awful gloomy,” chimed in Jack.

Jack landed his passengers; then returned for the others. As they walked along, the flashing rays of their lantern flitted over the shore in a strangely fantastic manner, now and then dimmed by a flood of pale moonlight.

“Here’s a pretty good tree,” declared Dave Brandon, at length. “Only wish we’d brought our telescope stand along. Still, this lower limb will do as a rest.”

“Yes; that’s the idea,” said Fred.

“Of course,” went on Redfern, “this is a very poor way to use a telescope; a firm stand is essential, even for small instruments; and a moonless night would be much better for observing the stars. But Luna herself is such an

interesting object that we should be satisfied. How many of you have seen it?"

"I have," answered Jack, "at the Harvard observatory."

"And we fellows have often studied it through Dave's telescope," said Bob.

"Who discovered the moon?" asked Joe.

"Do get over your silliness," said Fred, witheringly. "It's growing on you."

Jack was allowed first glimpse through the telescope.

The surface of the moon, with its mountains and deep black craters and portions here and there just a shade less brilliant than the rest, is always an interesting object, and Jack uttered an exclamation of pleasure as he placed his eye to the tube.

"What are those funny light streaks near the bottom?" he asked.

"Do they all seem to radiate from one of the craters?"

"Yes," said Jack. "And, my, but don't they spread out for a distance, though?"

"Their nature is not perfectly understood," explained Redfern. "It is generally believed that they are in some way connected with volcanic upheavals, but just exactly what story they have to tell no one knows."

"Very strange," murmured Jack.

"Don't suppose that even Joe knows all about it," remarked Fred Winter.

"Never looked through a telescope—that's the reason," retorted Preston, with a laugh.

"Don't some of those craters look black, though?" said Jack.

"That's due to the absence of any atmosphere on the moon," commented Norman. "You know of course that there's no water or vegetation to be found on its surface. If you were there, you would see no soft, hazy effects, nothing but a brilliant glare, intensely black shadows and sharp contrasts. Of course," he added, "this is the general nature of all lunar landscapes—it would be modified to a greater or less degree by circumstances."

"I had an idea it would be something like that," came from Joe.

Fred really seemed to be hurt at such levity, but he said nothing, and looked at Redfern as if waiting for him to continue.

“The sky would be black,” went on the latter, “and the sun brighter than we ever see it on the earth. Some shadows would also be absolutely black, because all light is cut off; others might be faintly illuminated by the reflection from some mountain wall.”

“And even the parts in sunlight would show a lot of differences,” said Joe. “I——”

“Go on, Redfern,” said Fred, hastily.

“Oh, Joe’s all right. There would be differences, of course. The varying character of the surfaces, some darker than others, would have an effect; and the angle they presented to the sun must still further increase or lessen their brilliancy. All told, however, these things would hardly be sufficient to do more than slightly modify the general effect.”

“What’s the name of that crater?” asked Jack, several minutes later; “I mean the one with those funny streaks shooting off all around.”

“Copernicus.”

“Well,” remarked Jack, “it certainly looks great. Keep away, Fred Winter; I haven’t finished yet.”

“Scrap beginning already,” chuckled Joe. “Bring Confuse-us ashore, and sic the dog on him, Jack.”

“Wonder how the moon ever got there?” put in Aleck Hunt, reflectively.

“Astronomers have various theories,” answered Redfern, with a smile. “Some contend that it was thrown off from the earth; while others think that it was once a part of the sun.”

The telescope was next turned upon the planet Mars. Norman Redfern spoke quite like a professor addressing his class.

“Mars is now about as near as it ever gets to be,” he said. “Put it down at about thirty-five million miles, and you’ll be very nearly correct. The so-called canals were discovered by an Italian astronomer named Schiaparelli.”

“My, but you talk like a book,” said Joe, a little awed.

“I can’t see those canals,” remarked Aleck, with his eye to the tube. “Doesn’t look like anything more than a little round dot.”

“Very likely not,” said Redfern, dryly. “It requires a powerful telescope. At Flagstaff, Arizona, the astronomers have made many photographs of the planet, and on these the faint lines are distinguishable.”

“Mighty interesting,” murmured Jack. “Canals, eh? You mean somebody dug them?”

Redfern smiled. “Well, that’s what is claimed,” he said. “But I’m bound to say not all the astronomers believe it, yet. I can get some books that tell all about it, if you like.”

“Say, will you?” exclaimed Fred. “I’d like to know about that.”

Jupiter, with its four moons, the boys found better suited to the power of their telescope. The disc was large enough to show a faint dark line crossing it, while the satellites were strung out all on one side, like a row of tiny stars.

Of course, Saturn came in for a share of their attention, and although its rings were visible as nothing more than an extremely small oval, they found it decidedly interesting.

Owing to the unfavorable weather conditions, it took the boys a very long time to make their observations; and when Bob Somers looked at his watch, he uttered an exclamation.

“Good gracious—nearly half-past ten!” he cried.

“Well, we’ve passed a fine, profitable evening,” declared Fred, “and owe Redfern a vote of thanks.”

“You bet,” chimed in Jack.

The young man smiled.

“I have enjoyed it, too,” he said. “Now, I must be going; but I’d be mighty glad if you would pay me a visit before you leave. I live close by. It isn’t much of a place—to be plain, just a wooden shack.”

“Look out for us to-morrow morning,” said Jack, promptly.

After receiving instructions where to find him, the boys rowed back to the house-boat, the clanking oars sounding strangely distinct.

The novelty of their situation at first prevented several from sleeping; but about midnight slumber finally overtook them all, and thus ended their first day on the Hudson.

CHAPTER V

AN EXPLORING TRIP

After breakfast next morning the "Gray Gull" was run closer inshore. A favorable spot for anchorage was found, doing away with the necessity for using the dory. Each boy was able to leap across to a jutting point. Then, jolly and enthusiastic, they began to walk along the shore.

Often they stopped to gaze upward at the gigantic cliffs, or to admire the masses of rich green vegetation or broad expanse of river, now a greenish-gray, for the sun was hidden.

Around a bend they saw a cabin built at the base of the cliff.

"That must be it," said Bob.

"Hooray!" cried Tom. "Say, fellows, I like that chap, Redfern."

"But what a funny idea, living out here, all alone," commented Fred.

"Oh, I don't know. I was always going to do something of the kind, myself," said Joe, and the others laughed in such a lively fashion that it brought the occupant of the cabin to the door.

"Welcome, boys," he said, with a smile. "Come in and make yourselves at home."

So the boys trooped in, took seats on anything they could find, and looked about with interest.

In one corner a bunk was fastened against the wall. In another, a shelf contained several books, which Dave and Fred immediately spied and began to examine. A rude table and several equally rude stools completed the furnishings, save for a charcoal drawing which hung between the windows.

"That's bully," said Tom, admiringly. "Didn't know anybody but Dave Brandon could draw so well."

“I’m acquainted with the artist,” explained Norman Redfern. “He and his wife are spending the summer in a bungalow not far from here.”

“Well, he’s a dandy, that’s sure,” said Tom.

“Oh, look at these frivolous books,” laughed Joe Preston, a moment later. “You’ll never get Fred Winter away from ’em. Listen! Here’s Plutarch’s ‘Lives,’ Motley’s ‘Rise and Fall of the Dutch Republic,’ Gibbons’ ‘History of Rome,’ and books on Latin and Greek.”

“The kind of literature a tutor ought to read, I suppose,” said Norman, with a faint smile.

“Great Scott, have you tooted?” asked Joe. “Doin’ it now?”

An uncomfortable expression flitted across the other’s face. He hesitated for a moment, then, seeing the frank, interested looks on his visitors’ faces, replied, “No, not just at present—that is—oh, well, I suppose I might as well tell you——” then, as if half regretting his words, he stopped short.

But Joe Preston’s curiosity was aroused. Joe hated mysteries, or, rather, always liked to have them explained at once. So he said “Well?” in such a tone that there was no getting out of it.

“I’ll have to give you a short history of my life,” began Redfern, dryly. “Being an orphan, I had lived most of the time with an uncle, near Albany. He hadn’t much money, but he was of the right sort, and saw to it that my education was attended to. I was sent to a large academy near the city. There was another school not far away, and the rivalry between the two institutions was pretty fierce at times—mostly good-natured, of course. But that hasn’t anything to do with my story. After I graduated Uncle Ben passed away, and the little money he left, divided among numerous relatives, was soon gone, and yours truly was thrown on his own resources.

“Well, through the influence of a friend, I got a position as tutor to the ward of a rich man who lives at Nyack. This young chap is very wealthy in his own right, or will be when he reaches the age of twenty-one. He has everything that a boy could wish for, and——”

“Oh, of course nobody could get along with a chap like that,” sniffed Joe. “Why, in our school——”

But Norman smiled.

“George Clayton is a most unmillionaire boy, if I may use the expression,” he said. “He always longed to be like others, in fact, wanted to rough it a bit. George is a bright, manly chap. Why, he’d be wild to go on a trip like yours.”

“Glad to hear it,” observed Joe. “Some boys wouldn’t have the nerve to brave the dangers of a wide stream like the Hudson.”

“We got along splendidly together,” continued Redfern, “and but for an unfortunate occurrence I should be his tutor still.” Norman stared reflectively at the floor for a moment; the light seemed to fade from his eyes, and, with a half sigh, he added, “But I was entirely blameless, and—and—well, his guardian did not view the matter in that light—and—so he fired me.”

“Humph! And why didn’t this George What’s-his-Name stand up for you?” demanded Jack, indignantly.

“He did. But his guardian is one of those men who, when they get an idea, stick to it. Unfortunately, I had no proof of my—my—I mean,” he added hastily, “of my being in the right. So that is the way my position as a tutor slipped away from me last spring.”

“Well, by George—no joke intended”—cried Bob, energetically—“I’d never let a thing like that drop; you bet I wouldn’t, eh, fellows? I’d follow it up till I showed this gentleman where he stood.”

“Wish I had a bit more of that spirit in me,” sighed Norman, “but the fact is, I’m not much of a fighter,” he added, with a faint smile. “The odds were against me, and I got discouraged.”

“And what are you doing here?” asked Joe, bluntly.

“Well, one of my old school chums once spent a summer in this old shack. He told me about it—no rent to pay, you know. I’m going to look for a job in New York pretty soon, and hope to make out until then.”

“Don’t you feel awful lonely?”

“My books are company, and I get a good opportunity to study and write.”

“Say,” remarked Jack, “we’ll pass right by this George Clayton’s town, won’t we?”

“Surest thing I know of,” answered Joe.

“Then why not join our crowd, Redfern?” said Jack, in his usual free and easy manner, “and go and see Mr. Guardian again, eh, fellows?”

He glanced inquiringly toward his companions.

“Just the scheme,” agreed Bob, warmly.

“Very kind of you chaps to make such an offer,” said Norman, hesitatingly, “but——”

“Don’t let there be any ‘buts’ about it,” urged Jack. “Unless you fight the thing, Mr. Guardian will always say you are in the wrong. That’s plain, eh, Bob? It might do you a whole lot of harm.”

“Of course it might,” chimed in Tom.

“I’m glad you have confidence in me,” said Norman, pleased at their earnestness, “and I can assure you it is not misplaced. That affair broke me all up.”

“When did you see the guardian chap last?” inquired Joe, with a directness that almost made his chums smile.

“Several months ago.”

“Plenty of time for him to have changed his opinion. Was the millionaire boy mixed up in the row?” asked Dave.

“No, it did not concern him in the least.”

“Honest—don’t you think you gave up a bit too soon, though?” said Jack. “Come along with us as far as Nyack, tackle Mr. Guardian again, and our crowd will have a chance to meet the millionaire boy. I’m awfully curious to see what kind of a chap he is. It will kind o’ give variety to the trip. What do you say?”

“I don’t know how I can resist such an invitation,” laughed Norman, his face lighting up with pleasure. “You have given me hope, boys. I guess you are right—I got discouraged too soon. I hate quarrels, and Colonel Ellison is a hard man to deal with; but it won’t do any harm to see him again.”

Bob Somers, who had taken a great fancy to the quiet, studious-looking young fellow, was delighted.

“That’s the idea,” he cried, “eh, fellows?” and a chorus of assenting voices came from his chums.

“And now that it’s all settled,” remarked Fred, as he slowly turned the pages of a history, “would you mind taking a couple of these books along? This is a dandy—tells all about Peter the Great; and there’s another about Mars, by a chap named Lowell, and——”

But Joe interrupted him with a loud burst of laughter, whereupon Fred told him just what he thought of such conduct, and of the dreadful risk he ran of growing up to be a perfect ignoramus, all of which Joe listened to with many smiles and chuckles.

After sitting around for a quarter of an hour, Jack proposed climbing the Palisades, and this being agreeable to all, the five soon started out.

Viewed at close range, the cliffs loomed up grim and gigantic, the fringe of trees lining the top appearing like a row of bushes. The base of the Palisades is almost everywhere broken into a slope formed by the débris that has fallen from the cliffs, and in places this extends upward for hundreds of feet, reaching to the very summit. Norman Redfern declared that he would soon pilot them to a place where the climb to the top would be easy.

The slope along which they made their way was thickly wooded in parts, and the rich green foliage and cool, refreshing shadows pierced by the shafts of sunlight presented a delightful picture. Close by was the ruin of a mill. A few crumbling walls and a rusted fly-wheel alone remained to tell of its existence. A melancholy stillness seemed to hover about it, as if to draw a contrast between its present condition and that of its busy past, and the boys, scrambling over the cracked and broken walls, speculated with interest as to the causes which had brought about so wonderful a change.

A startled hare leaped quickly over a pile of bricks and was soon lost to view amidst the underbrush.

“If we only had a pop gun, we could have popped him,” said Jack.

Wandering in and out, now close to the river, then near the cliffs, Redfern finally pointed out a path which zigzagged its way upward. But the active lads were not long content with this easy way of climbing and took advantage of any short cut that presented itself. Some of these were very

steep, and often they slipped and slid and only saved themselves by clutching tightly to the tangled grasses and bushes. Showers of stones and earth occasionally rattled downward, and Joe distinguished himself by falling flat in a deep cut formed by the rains and still wet and soggy.

Every foot of the climb so far was through a charming little wood, composed mainly of small trees, and all aglow with sunlight.

Panting from their exertions, they were often compelled to rest.

“Look!” exclaimed Jack, presently, pointing downward.

There, far below them, was the “Gray Gull.” The breeze had straightened out the bunting and it fluttered gracefully at the end of the pole. It was their boat—their home for the time being, and all surveyed it with a sense of pride and pleasure.

The further they climbed, the more often they had to wait for Norman. His strength was not equal to theirs, and, at length, he was obliged to follow the beaten trail. All the boys were surprised at the length of the climb, for they were at one of the highest parts of the Palisades.

But the top was finally reached, and, with aching limbs and panting breath, they threw themselves amidst some tall grasses to rest.

“What a dandy view!” cried Jack, enthusiastically.

From the heights a magnificent panorama opened out before them. The great Hudson reflected the gray, somber clouds, and the hills beyond melted into the haze of distance. It was all vast and impressive. The sound of a motor boat, a mere speck, four hundred feet below them, reached their ears with singular clearness.

“You now have a good view of one of the most famous rivers in the world,” said Norman.

For a long time they gazed, and it is safe to say that there was not much that escaped their attention.

Finally Jack arose.

“Come ahead, fellows,” he said. “We’ll have to explore a bit.”

Through patches of woods and across rocky ledges they made their way, sometimes keeping close to the edge of the cliff and stopping to look down the precipice. How far below it seemed to the narrow strip of beach! As they looked, a solitary bird winged its way across, its harsh cries gradually growing fainter and fainter in the distance.

Norman Redfern's nerves were not equal to the task imposed by a near approach to the brink. He admired the courage of the active lads, though cautioning them to be careful. But danger only lent spice to the situation.

"Don't worry about us," said Jack. "It's easy to see the dangerous places; and we know that the shortest route down isn't the best."

After a time, the party found their progress along the edge of the cliff barred by a wide, deep gully extending inward. The slopes were broken and irregular, full of rocky ledges, tangled masses of vegetation and trees. A small stream of water could be seen trickling down the center.

"Here's where we have a chance to do some tall climbing," said Aleck Hunt. "Going to be a rough job, too."

"Better let it be a case of walking around," advised Norman Redfern.

"Looks as if it would mean a quarter of a mile tramp," objected Joe Preston. "If I see an easy place, I'm going to beat all hands to the top of the cliff on the other side."

"All right," laughed Jack. "If I knew how to climb and be on the level at the same time, I'd accept your challenge. Guess I'll walk around."

This apparently settled the matter, and all five started off.

Sometimes, with loud yells, the boys chased bright-colored butterflies—that is, all but Dave and Fred. Their interest was centered on the plants and flowers which grew so abundantly about them.

Joe Preston, who had stopped several times at the brink of the gully, finally went on ahead.

"Hello!" cried Bob, presently. "What in the dickens has become of Joe?"

"Gee Whitaker, where in the world did he get to?" chimed in Aleck.

“I saw him standing by that rock,” said Redfern. “It was only a moment ago.”

Around them was an open stretch, with nothing to hide the view, but Joe Preston was nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER VI

JOE IN TROUBLE

“That’s the strangest thing I ever heard of,” cried Jack, excitedly. “Don’t believe Joe would have given us the slip.”

They walked to the edge of the gully and looked up and down.

“Hello, Joe, whoop la, hi, hi!”

But no response followed the sound of his voice.

“Jiminy, I don’t understand that!” gasped Aleck.

“What can have become of him?” said Norman, apprehensively, and he raised his voice with the others in a series of tremendous shouts.

Still there was no response.

“Come on, fellows,” shouted Bob. “Sure as guns, something must have happened.”

He dashed ahead, with the others following closely at his heels, all a prey to the most dreadful forebodings.

Far ahead were two figures, but no others were within range of their vision.

Panting and excited, Jack Lyons and Bob Somers kept well in the lead, and so the mad race was continued, until they had nearly reached the spot where Joe was last seen.

Suddenly Bob, who was plunging through a mass of tangled weeds and grasses, gave a yell which sent a thrill of terror through his companions’ hearts. They saw him fall forward and wildly clutch a straggling bush.

“Look out!” he gasped. “Look out!”

The warning cry came just in time. Stretching straight across their path was a gaping, V-shaped cleft almost hidden from view by vegetation.

With faces drawn and pale, they gathered at the edge and looked below. Bob Somers, scarcely realizing how he had managed to save himself, was still the foremost.

A thrill of horror shot through them. There, caught on a projecting ledge about fifteen feet below, lay the motionless form of Joe Preston, and still below him was a terrifying, almost vertical drop to the deepest portion of the ravine.

“Great Scott!” gasped Bob. Then: “Joe, Joe!” he called. “Joe! Speak—are you badly hurt?”

A moment of dreadful suspense followed.

Joe slowly stirred and passed his hand across his forehead.

“Joe, look out—don’t move an inch!”

Bob spoke with thrilling intensity, and Joe Preston’s awakening faculties began to grasp the peril of his situation. He huddled close to the smooth, rocky wall and shut his eyes to hide the depths below.

“Are you hurt, Joe?” inquired Norman Redfern, breathlessly.

“Must have hit my head an awful crack,” answered the boy, weakly. “I was chasing a butterfly, and all of a sudden felt myself going down—it was awful.”

“No bones broken, I hope?”

“I don’t think so, but I’ve got a terrible pain in my head.”

“You had a mighty close call, Joe. But for that ledge——”

Norman glanced gravely at his companions, and they nodded.

“Whew! Makes me shiver to think of it,” breathed Bob, with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

Then they began to discuss the means of bringing Joe to the top.

“If we only had a rope,” sighed Aleck Hunt.

“But we haven’t,” said Jack, “and there’s no use talking about it.”

“Then what can we do?”

“Form a human chain. Our crowd is big enough. Beside, those two men coming along will most likely give us a hand. Feeling better, Joe?”

“Yes! But, for goodness’ sake, fellows, hurry up. This ledge seems awfully small, and my head is dizzy.”

“Courage, Joe, old boy, we’ll have you up in a jiffy.”

By this time the two men were close at hand, and divining that something was amiss, hurried forward. One was rather tall, with sandy hair and a pointed beard, while the other, shorter and not quite so stout, had intensely black hair and mustache.

“Hello, what’s this?” exclaimed the former. Then, as his eyes rested on the dangerous cleft and Joe Preston on the ledge, he gave a low whistle of astonishment.

“H’m, your friend’s in trouble, sure enough. How did it happen?”

Jack briefly explained.

“Certainly we’ll help you—no doubt about that. But can you stand it down there for about a second, my boy?”

He hastily unstrung a small camera, sighted it, a click sounded, and Joe had been snapped.

“Ought to make a remarkable picture,” observed the man. “Now to work.”

A difficult and dangerous task was before the boys, but none faltered. Bob’s lips were drawn tightly together.

“I’ll go first,” he announced, briefly. “My muscles are pretty strong. Ready! Grab my legs, Jack, and hold on tight.”

Without another word, Bob threw himself flat and worked his way slowly over to the edge. Jack hung to him with all his strength, and he, in turn, was held tightly by another. And thus the dangling human chain hung downward, and Bob’s waving arms approached the helpless prisoner.

Three feet—two feet—one foot—for an instant Bob closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Joe Preston was within reach.

“Quick, Joe,” he gasped. “Quick!”

But as Joe slowly raised himself to an upright position, he found that his strength was practically gone.

“I could never hold on, Bob,” he said, “never!”

“Don’t have to. Give me your wrists.”

Bob Somers’ sinewy hands closed around them with a grip that could not fail.

“Pull up, fellows,” he yelled.

The tug began. Their knowledge of the danger seemed to give them double strength. Straining every muscle, never daring to pause for an instant, the boys and men worked silently, while white-faced Joe Preston swung over the chasm.

Jack Lyons felt himself being dragged to safety. His face was purple; his joints seemed to fairly crack, but, with a determination that increased as the moments slipped by, he held on.

How long it seemed! But finally the burden was taken from him by willing hands, and exhausted Jack Lyons lay back on the turf. Then Bob Somers was drawn slowly over the edge, and, at length, other hands seized Joe Preston’s wrists. One final tug, and the boy was safe.

For several moments, not a word was spoken. Joy and an intense feeling of relief filled their hearts, making them forget aching bones and sore flesh.

Then Joe spoke up.

“I’ll never forget this, fellows,” he said quietly, “never!”

“And I guess none of the rest will, either,” observed one of the strangers, dryly. “It was a narrow shave, my lad. How do you feel—hurt yourself much?”

“A bit bruised, and my head aches; that’s all. That ledge seems to have been put there for my especial benefit, eh, Jack?” and Joe smiled rather weakly.

The boys thanked the strangers heartily for their assistance. Norman Redfern was interested when he learned that the two were on their way to visit his artist friend.

“Yes, we three,” the man indicated his dark-haired companion, “knew each other in Paris. I’m from the South, spending a month or two here, and want to renew old friendships.”

“You are artists, then?” inquired Redfern.

The others nodded.

“But sometimes I amuse myself with the camera,” said one.

“Say—you ought to take one of our house-boat,” put in Joe, eagerly. “That will make up for the picture you got of me.”

“House-boat?”

Then explanations followed, and before they parted the strangers promised to visit the “Gray Gull” that afternoon.

Joe Preston had been pretty badly shaken up, and, as his head still ached, it was decided to return.

“Makes me feel like a number one dunce, too,” he remarked, sheepishly. “Guess maybe I deserved it for chasing butterflies. Isn’t that so, Redfern?”

“Well, hardly,” responded the ex-tutor. “I was glad to note that none of you made any effort to wantonly hurt the little creatures. That I would consider indefensible; though some boys are inclined to be thoughtless about such matters.”

“Never saw such a trap in my life,” said Bob. “Who would ever expect to find such a place, all overgrown with weeds?”

“Oh, you fellows can’t excuse yourselves that way,” said Fred Winter, with a rather forced laugh. “If the crowd stood in need of a frightful scare we got it, all right.”

“You seem to be taking the lesson to heart,” said Norman Redfern. “That is the best course. I never was more thankful in my life. If this place had been like one I know of a few miles from here, nothing could have saved you, Joe.”

“What is it like?” faltered the boy.

“A narrow, half-hidden cleft running in from the face of the Palisades. There is a clear drop of several hundred feet.”

The boys felt a shiver run through them.

“That shows how well it is to be careful,” added Redfern.

By easy stages they covered the distance back to the zigzag road; and upon reaching Redfern’s shack Joe was able to assure them all that he felt much better.

“Ready to leave with us to-morrow morning, eh, Norman?” inquired Jack, presently.

“But won’t it crowd you too much?”

“Not at all; there’s room for two or three more—six the diameter of Tom.”

“Yes; I have no very particular engagements to keep me. I’ll be glad of a change—was getting kind of rusty.”

“I declare, I most forgot poor young Confuse-us,” remarked Jack. “He must be a bit hungry by this time. Who wants to go over to the boat?”

“Guess I will,” answered Fred, closing the book.

“I’m with you,” put in Joe.

Then the others decided to join.

So off they started, in lively spirits again, for Joe declared that he now felt no worse than if he had just come out of an ordinary football scrimmage.

“Fellows,” said Aleck, suddenly, “I never finished that story I was going to tell you. Listen—it’s a bully one.”

“Get it off your mind—do,” snickered Joe.

“I’m going to. Well, it’s about Joe Archer, who played short-stop on our team. He was down on Battery Park the other day, when——”

“Thunderation!” broke in Bob, suddenly. “Look at that, fellows!”

“What’s up?” asked Joe.

“Don’t you see——”

And Joe saw. Two figures were reclining in indolent ease on the deck of the house-boat, and the first glance showed the boys that they were unprepossessing specimens of humanity.

CHAPTER VII

THE BATTLE FOR THE BOAT

“Tramps, as I live!” cried Jack, excitedly. “Did you ever hear of such nerve!”

“The worst ever!” exclaimed Tom. “We ought to rout them out of that pretty fast.”

“And we will, too,” said Bob. “Come ahead, fellows,” and he broke into a run.

“Hold on,” said Fred, solemnly. “Diplomacy is a good word.”

But the others did not seem to hear.

As they crashed through the underbrush, then swooped pell-mell across an open space, the men arose, with ludicrous haste, and were about to leap ashore, when the larger laid a restraining hand upon his companion’s shoulder.

“Why, it’s nothing but a parcel of boys,” he said. “Don’t disturb yourself, pal; let’s continue our peaceful meal.”

He laughed, and sank back against the side of the boat, and calmly surveyed the indignant boys, who arrived on the scene quite out of breath.

They were both large men, ragged and unkempt in appearance—typical specimens of their kind; although the one who had spoken wore a very mild expression for a tramp.

“I say,” began Jack, impetuously, “can’t you chaps find some other place to eat your grub?—and—by Jingo, I’ll bet it’s our grub, too.”

He stared at the open window, then at several familiar pots and pans which rested beside the grinning tramps.

“Well, I like that. I—I——”

“We thought you would. That’s why we done it, pal,” said number one, eating a large slice of broiled ham, with evident relish. “Are you the head duffer, might I ask—but surely you ain’t running this here craft yourselves?”

“You’d better get out!” cried Jack, fiercely, despite the efforts of Fred Winter to resort to diplomatic measures.

“Nuttin’ annoys me pal s’much as when he’s disturbed at eatin’, eh, Duke?” and, as number one nodded and helped himself to another supply, the speaker waved his arm threateningly.

“Scat, scatter, an’ fade away; likewise, depart,” he said. “Drift, skip and begone. What d’ye think, Duke, of a lot of youngsters like them bein’ so fur away from their own little firesides?”

“I think,” remarked the other, “that briled ham and potatoes, as a staple article of food, can’t be beat. Some gingerbread, Count; and if you don’t mind, I’ll top off with some crackers and cheese.”

“So be it, Duke. If you see anything you don’t want, ask for it. My good breeding won’t rub off—wilderness an’ parlor life, it’s all the same. Sardines? Certainly, Duke; but them mostly comes at the beginning of repasts. Tote away there, you on shore; it ain’t perlite ter stare at people eatin’.”

“You needn’t think you’re so funny!” cried Jack Lyons, indignantly. “I’ll have the constable after you quicker than a wink, if you don’t skip.”

“The dearest friend I have; he’s cost me many a dollar. Don’t hurry yerself, Duke.”

“I say, my man,” said Fred Winter, in a soft voice, determined to show his chums the beneficial effects of diplomacy, “come now, get out quietly, like good fellows. We don’t want any trouble, and won’t make any fuss about all that grub you—you—swiped.”

“Listen to birdie chirping. Methinks that butter in summer ain’t no softer than him, eh, Duke?”

“A dub,” said tramp number one, squinting at Fred Winter. “His phiz shows it.”

“Needs a good beatin’ ter put some spunk in him,” added number two.

Both howled with laughter, while Fred, much disgusted and red in the face, forgot, in the wave of indignation that swept through him, all about diplomacy.

“I’m only going to tell you fellows once more,” warned Jack. “Better get out, or you’ll meet your dearest friend arm to arm.”

“Well, Duke, did yez hear that? There’s a real live humorist fur ye—‘Arm ter arm.’ More gingerbread? Certainly, Duke. Floatin’ groceries in their wilderness is a wrinkle of the twentieth century wot don’t harm no one.”

The boys looked up and down the river and at the motor boats passing. But no one was in sight on the shore and the boats were too far out. There seemed to be no help at hand and, in vexation and disgust, they withdrew to talk the matter over.

“We’ll have to get those fellows off in a hurry,” said Bob, determinedly.

“What in thunder can we do?” asked Jack.

“Go right on board, and pitch into them,” suggested Joe, doubling his fists and making about four savage passes in the air. “Fire ’em off, bag and baggage.”

But Fred hastily shook his head.

“No, no!” he demurred. “Besides, they’re much too hefty. Maybe Redfern could help us.”

“I’m afraid not,” mused Jack. “He’s a jolly nice chap—but doesn’t look quite old enough to scare ’em.”

“We mustn’t allow ourselves to get excited,” drawled Dave.

“But those fellows can’t be allowed to stay on the ‘Gray Gull’ all afternoon,” protested Joe. “I’m beginning to boil over. I’ll bet they get away with most of our grub, too. And who knows but what they may have assassinated poor Confuse-us.”

“What? You don’t think that—that—they——” began Fred, aghast.

“Not on purpose, perhaps. But if they stepped on him, in some dark corner—well, Confuse-us hasn’t a constitution which could stand that.”

“Well, it certainly makes us look like a lot of softies,” declared Joe, walking slowly toward the water’s edge. “Look at the grinning chump waving his hand. Hello—this is good stuff.”

Joe stooped over, and gathered up a handful of mud, and, almost before his companions could divine his intentions, the boy’s arm swung around and a nice, compact mud-ball was spinning swiftly through the air.

The distance was not very great, and the throw unfortunately successful.

The “Count,” with his back turned, was just on the point of arising, when the missile thudded against him. Being partly off his balance and taken entirely by surprise, he gave a yell, and finding himself going forward, miscalculated the amount of energy necessary to regain his former position.

The result was startling. He could not save himself, and, with surprising suddenness, lurched over the side of the boat.

A great splash went up, and the astounded “Duke” received a generous shower bath.

“Great Cæsar!” gasped Jack.

“Thunderation!” cried the author of the mischief, almost as much astonished as the unfortunate “Count.”

The latter completely disappeared for an instant, and when his bushy head came in sight above the surface, gone was the humorous twinkle in his eye, gone was the smile which had curved his lips.

“Gee whiz, this is no place for us,” murmured Joe. “He looks peevish—perhaps he dislikes water.”

“It’s had a frightful effect on him, anyhow,” laughed Dave.

“Whew!” sputtered the “Count.” “I’ve swallowed a gallon of the saltiest water that man ever tasted. Who throw’d it, Bobby?”

“That little fat one.”

“Ketch ’im, then!” roared the “Count,” wading toward the bank with an energy that indicated trouble ahead. “Quick now, Bobby. Jist let me git a hold of ’im. Quick! He’s goin’ ter rue the day he left his own little fireside.”

And the “Duke,” heeding the lusty voice of his companion, leaped ashore and made directly toward the group.

But they resolutely held their ground.

Jack Lyons’ eyes began to flash. The fellows who had played against him at football knew the look that was in his eyes now.

“Keep back, ‘Duke,’” he said, quietly, “or you’ll get mixed up in a good deal of a row.”

“Yes, you’d better!” said Bob Somers, quietly, and, as the tramp showed no intention of heeding this well-meant advice, seven pairs of hands reached down, for even Fred was aroused, and seven mud-balls were hastily formed.

Then Jack spoke up again:

“Did you hear?”

“I hear’d,” snarled the “Duke.” “We ain’t a-goin’ to do a thing to you. Wait till——”

“One—two—three!” Jack’s voice interrupted.

The “Duke,” urged by his companion, who had just scrambled ashore, broke into a run.

Then Jack nodded to his chums.

“Let him have it,” he said, still quietly.

Seven arms drew back, and seven missiles shot through the air.

The tramp let out a yell and stopped short, for most of the mud-balls had landed squarely. Then, furious with rage, he made a headlong dash toward them.

But again the arms swung around with perfect precision.

Swish, splash—the mud was just the proper consistency for mud-balls. It splattered all over the unfortunate tramp number one, and stung him until he could no longer face the bombardment.

Unmindful of the yells and fierce commands of number two, he ignominiously turned his back and fled before the storm.

The “Count,” a sadly bedraggled and dripping object, witnessed the rout with unconcealed feelings of disgust. Slowly he walked to where his companion had halted. The boys were then treated to a volley of violent threats.

All the ugliness in the natures of the men was aroused, and, determining upon revenge, they picked up whatever missiles lay within reach and began a fierce onslaught.

Sticks, stones and lumps of hard earth whizzed and rattled around the boys.

Before such a dangerous hail, the lads were compelled to retreat. Joe uttered a yell, and began limping around on one foot; Fred Winter dropped his glasses.

The tramps, with shouts of triumph, continued to lumber forward, promising the boys that when they had finished with them their house-boat would be wrecked.

And just then, when things looked a bit discouraging, the sound of hurrying feet came to their ears. Three men dashed forward, and the boys instantly recognized two of them as the artists whom they had met on the top of the Palisades.

The man with the sandy beard was well in advance, and had his camera pointed.

Click!—the scene of battle was snapped.

The “Count” and “Duke” turned abruptly at the sight and began to flee.

Perhaps neither had ever before sprinted in a livelier fashion, and in a moment their forms were lost to view behind the intervening trees.

“Gee whiz! They ought to enter for the next marathon,” gasped Jack. “Mighty lucky you happened along.”

“Well, boys, you’re having what might be styled a fierce day. We seem to have frightened those tramps pretty badly; perhaps they thought this camera was a new sort of a blunderbuss.”

“Big scrap?” inquired the dark-haired artist.

“Yes, sir; you see it was this way,” and Jack soon acquainted their rescuers with all the facts.

“I declare,” remarked the sandy-bearded artist, with a smile, “if I stick by you boys a little longer, I’ll get some remarkable snapshots. By the way, this is the artist friend I was telling you about.”

The boys nodded, and surveyed Norman Redfern’s friend with interest. He was a clear-cut, smooth-faced and solidly built young fellow of about twenty-five.

Anxious to see if any damage had been done, the boys lost no time in boarding the “Gray Gull.” Confuse-us greeted them with wagging tail and plaintive cries, but his constitution did not seem to have suffered.

“They’ve eaten about four days’ grub; that’s what they’ve done,” remarked Jack, indignantly.

“Lucky they didn’t take your painting along, Jack,” said Joe.

But Jack’s suspicious glances rested on a guileless, innocent face.

Fred presently slipped off, and they saw him hovering like a shadow around the spot where he had lost his glasses. He returned shortly, bearing them in triumph.

The visitors were much interested in the house-boat. Redfern soon after joined them and, of course, heard all about the latest adventure.

They passed a jolly afternoon. The artists talked entertainingly of their experiences abroad; about roughing-it trips through France, Switzerland and Italy; of climbing Vesuvius and sleeping on the cliffs at Capri; of ancient Pompeii, and the historic ruins in Rome.

“Dandy chaps,” remarked Jack, when they had gone.

“Aren’t they, just?” said Tom. “Did us a good turn, too.”

“Awful easy life, being an artist,” quoth Aleck. “All they have to do is to sit down and paint pictures; then people come along and say, ‘That’s bully—swell—out of sight,’ eh, Jack?”

“Some of ’em starve in garrets, though; I’ve read about it.”

“It’s because they’re not good artists, then,” said Aleck, with an air of superior wisdom.

“Now, you chaps,” remarked Jack, “I move that we get out in the stream a bit. Those tramps may take it into their heads to come back and throw a few rocks.”

“That’s right,” agreed Joe. “Up anchor, jolly tars.”

The “Gray Gull” soon drew away from the shore and was brought to a stop at a safe distance. The weather was dull and gloomy, and the opposite hills were almost swallowed up in the heavy atmosphere.

By and by Jack lighted the red and green lanterns, and, feeling secure and content, they retired within the cozy interior and had their supper in peace and comfort.

Finally Aleck opened the door and stepped out upon the deck.

“Say, fellows!” he called, “we’re up in the air.”

“You are, maybe,” grinned Joe.

“No—honest, the anchor must have pulled loose, and we’ve floated off. Makes me dizzy. Who knows but what we’re a mile high by this time?”

“Oh, come down,” laughed Dave.

“Well, look and see.”

As the boys joined Aleck outside, each uttered an exclamation.

“If this fog were any thicker, it would be solid,” said Jack, solemnly.

CHAPTER VIII

A COLLISION

It did seem indeed as though the house-boat were suspended in space. The lanterns threw a strange, weird light on the swirling mist which swept slowly by. The unseen water lapped and gurgled against the sides of the "Gray Gull."

Far out, the long, hoarse blast of a fog-horn told of a passing boat groping its way along; then came a response, fainter, like an echo from the distance. The damp air brought with it other sounds, too; the sharp, imperious whistle of a tug nearer at hand, and the steady, rhythmic clanking of its machinery.

A strange sensation as of drifting came over the boys, and but for the fact that Jack tested the anchor, all would have believed they were floating further out on the river.

When Aleck Hunt appeared with a lantern, a chorus of oh's and ah's escaped their lips.

None had ever seen such a weird and startling effect before.

"Great Scott!" cried Jack.

As Aleck slowly swung his lantern from side to side, a crowd of shadowy giants hovered menacingly above them. Each movement sent them springing about, to dance and flutter on the restless, eddying vapor.

As arms uplifted, great images with giant bands waved threateningly, and then flashed downward, as if to pluck them up and disperse them through the whitish haze.

Suddenly the grim shadows blended into one; then, with startling rapidity, the swinging lantern threw fantastic blots and blurs and queer-shaped patches of light on the moving curtain.

"Oh, but it's strange," remarked Joe, in awesome tones. "Wish we were a bit nearer the shore. Kind o' ghostly, eh?"

“Creepy enough, I should say so.”

“Makes a fellow’s head dizzy.”

“Great Scott, that boat must be awfully near,—’most on top of us.”

The sharp, warning notes of its whistle, again sounding, seemed to burst forth from a point close at hand. The pounding of the engine, the labored exhaust all told of its approach, and seven figures, with a sudden flush of excitement, crowded to the edge of the deck, and vainly tried to pierce the gloom.

“Can’t see a thing,” muttered Aleck.

“Great Scott, look out!”

A series of frantic yells suddenly went up from the occupants of the houseboat; then followed another.

Lights, like great eyes, struggled to show themselves, and, immediately after, the frightened boys saw a confused blur of shadowy masses forging its way toward them. The swish, as the sharp prow cut through the water, reached their ears clearly.

There was no time for action; their voices united in one long cry of alarm.

But it was too late.

A dark mass, cutting the vapor, loomed high up; the eyes shaped themselves into lanterns. There was an instant of breathless suspense.

Then the “Gray Gull” staggered and groaned, and seemed to fairly rise out of the water under the force of the impact. A series of terrific bumps, jolts and grinds carried terror to their hearts, while a hissing, boiling sheet of angry water rising between the two craft swept across the deck.

For an instant, it seemed as if the “Gray Gull” had been struck a mortal blow. Wobbling violently, she swung around with a creaking groan and tugged hard on the anchor chain.

Confused blurs of light and dark, a grim, black hull, slipped by. Shouts rose, then grew fainter; the lanterns became eyes again, and in another instant, all had vanished in the gray gloom of fog beyond.

For a moment, not a sound escaped the boys' lips. Clutching whatever support lay within reach, they steadied themselves.

Sharp and clear came the clanging signals from the engine-room of the tug; then the sound of machinery stopped and a loud voice hailed them.

"Hello, back there, are you all right?"

"What do you think, Jack?" asked Fred, in a voice that trembled with excitement.

The first shock of fear had passed; Jack was calm and collected again.

"Still right side up—she hit us a glancing blow, luckily." Then, raising his voice, he yelled, "All right, we don't need any help. But you will, if you don't keep a bit further out—you'll break a chunk out of the Palisades!"

A hoarse laugh followed; the whistle sounded, and the tug was again in motion.

"What's that—what's that?" asked Joe, excitedly.

He had been swinging his lantern close to the water's edge, in an effort to find out the extent of the damage, and detected a small object floating slowly away. It had a strangely familiar look.

"By Jingo, Confuse-us overboard!" yelled Joe.

He leaned far out, and grabbed the dog, which in another instant would have been beyond his reach.

Confuse-us' eyes were shut and Confuse-us' tail was still.

"Poor little dub," echoed Aleck, sorrowfully.

"Quick," cried Bob. "Bring him in!"

Their own danger was forgotten on the instant. They gathered around, and set to work with all the energy and earnestness that such a desperate case required, and their efforts were presently rewarded.

Confuse-us blinked his eyes, and, with returning consciousness, wagged his stubby tail; and a loud, long cheer went up, which did a bit more to bring the pup around.

“Now,” said Jack, with a shrug of his shoulders, “we had better get nearer the shore. That was a pretty close shave.”

“Rather!” said Tom. “Whew! I thought we were going down, sure.”

“If that boat had struck us squarely,” added Dave, “it would have been _____”

“A case of swim,” put in Jack. “Plenty of excitement for one day, eh?”

“A bit too much,” said Joe, with a vivid recollection of his own mishap. “Don’t let Fred get hold of a book; we might as well turn in.”

And they did.

Early next morning, Norman Redfern appeared, bringing with him a few articles which he especially valued.

“Up anchor—let ’er go!” said Dick, and the “Gray Gull” resumed her voyage.

The river and its surroundings seemed to grow more interesting as they progressed. The great excursion boats plying to Newburgh; the Albany day line of steamers, and a host of other craft, from handsome private yachts and motor boats to lumbering schooners and clumsier barges from Haverstraw, loaded with bricks, all came in for a share of attention. The telescope swept them from stem to stern and back again, and a running fire of comments and speculation often resulted.

They, too, were regarded with interest, and occasionally, when sarcastic hails and laughter reached their ears, the boys yelled back replies with all the riotous energy that the incident warranted.

The great wall of the Palisades, they found, came to an abrupt end, and some distance further along rose a thickly wooded hill, skirting the shore of the river for miles. On the eastern side Norman Redfern pointed out Irvington, the home of Washington Irving, and then Tarrytown and the historic Dobbs’ ferry.

The river soon widened out into the Tappan Sea, and the opposite shore could be seen but faintly through a gray-blue haze.

Saucy little waves reflected the clear blue overhead. The day promised to be hot, and white clouds piling up in the west began to assume an ominous

appearance.

“Nyack the next stop, captain?” asked Joe.

“Right you are.”

“Then for the millionaire boy,” grinned Aleck.

Norman Redfern became grave and thoughtful. No doubt his rather timid nature shrank from the interview which only the house-boat boys’ urging had induced him to seek. The disastrous end of his first engagement as a tutor, the subsequent loss of another post upon which he had set his heart and the discouraging search for a position, all served to increase his tendency to shrink from the hard knocks which the world sometimes deals out. Self-effacing, and with an almost over-developed sense for the rights of others, the game of life was a much more serious matter to him than to one like the lively, courageous Bob Somers.

Colonel Ellison, George Clayton’s guardian, had none of these traits. He was a large man, with a big voice; aggressive, strictly honest, stubborn—one of that type who rises superior to any situation, and who has very little sense of the rights of others.

So Norman’s heart misgave him; but his lively companions served to encourage and cheer him, and keep alive his reawakened determination to assert his rights.

“Jolly curious to meet the millionaire boy,” remarked Jack. “Hope he won’t be too stuck up to notice us in this rig. We don’t look any too stylish, you know.”

“He isn’t that kind,” said Norman. “He is a fine lad; but of course you must remember one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“His surroundings and life of ease and luxury have formed certain characteristics which are only to be expected. Perhaps, if you didn’t know him well, he might be considered a trifle overbearing—a bit set upon having his own way. But, in the main, his good traits more than counterbalance it.”

“I’ll bet he’s a silly chump, after all,” Joe whispered to Bob, a moment later, as they stood on the deck. “Norman’s an easy, good-natured chap, and would like ’most anybody. Gee whiz, but the river’s wide, eh?”

“It certainly is,” answered Jack. “Looks more like a bay. Let’s have the tube, Joe. There’s a train. See it? looks great through the glass.”

“So it does,” agreed Joe, taking his turn with the telescope; “and there’s a motor boat close inshore.”

“We’re coming to Nyack, boys,” said Redfern, stepping out upon the deck. “Getting along at racing speed, too—the tide is with us. In a few minutes you’ll see Colonel Ellison’s house.”

“Dandy place to live, out here,” said Dave.

“Swell,” agreed Joe. “A chap could have no end of fun.”

The charming little town of Nyack was now in full view. Handsome residences extended along the river for a considerable distance and many fine trees were outlined sharply against the white cumulus clouds.

Redfern presently touched Jack Lyons’ arm.

“That house with the big columns in front is Colonel Ellison’s home,” he said.

CHAPTER IX

THE MILLIONAIRE BOY

“And a mighty fine place, too,” said Jack.

“Looks like a museum,” added Fred.

“Aren’t the grounds magnificent?” went on Redfern. “That long line of columns at the side of the house is a pergola; then there are statues, and graveled walks, and beautiful flower beds.”

“Doesn’t look like any of the other houses around,” observed Aleck Hunt.

“No! The Colonel is an enthusiast on all things pertaining to ancient Greece, and built his house accordingly. Those of you who have seen pictures of the Parthenon at Athens will recognize the style.”

“Fine inside?” asked Fred.

“It is—more than fine. A bit beyond that wharf, Jack, is a good landing place; water’s pretty deep, and you can get in close. I think I’ll spruce up, now, and prepare for the Colonel.”

The “Gray Gull,” at full speed, was turned shoreward. The trees and houses were reflected in confused, wriggling patches in the listless water, as were several white motor boats, lazily swinging at their moorings.

Captain Jack navigated the craft skilfully, while Joe, with a piece of lead, kept sounding. Within easy jumping distance of the shelving shore they finally came to a stop, and the anchor rattled overboard.

“Now, what’s the program, Jack?” asked Aleck.

“We’ll explore a bit, while Norman visits the Colonel.”

“And if you hear loud calls for help, lend me a hand,” remarked Norman, with a faint smile. “The Colonel is a man of a more certain than uncertain temper, and, like the Colonel, it rises rapidly and eclipses all competitors. Well, boys, wish me luck.”

“You bet we do!” cried Jack. “Don’t let him worry you.”

“Keep your fists flying, first, last and all the time. Yes—we’ll be along here somewhere,” added Joe. “Don’t hurry, and do your best.”

“Wonder what the row was about,” murmured Aleck, as the slender figure of the former tutor went along the road.

“Ask me an easy one,” said Joe. “Norman doesn’t seem to want to talk about it much, does he? But he’s all right; I’d bet on that. Maybe the silly millionaire youngster——”

“Oh, give the poor thing a chance,” said Jack.

“How are we going to meet him, anyway?” asked Aleck. “It would look kind o’ funny for the whole bunch to go up to the front door——”

“Wait till Norman gets back,” advised Bob.

“But suppose the Colonel won’t listen, and fires him out—what then?”

“Oh, I’ll have to see George Clayton, and fix it up some way,” laughed Jack. “We must back Norman to the finish in this affair—eh, Joe?”

“That’s one of our jobs; but are we standing here for our health, or to ornament the landscape?”

“Right you are; let’s walk around a bit.”

Not far away, they found the principal street, running straight back from the river. At the foot of this was the ferry landing, and, as the group came up, the Tarrytown boat was swinging rapidly in.

“Solid-looking craft,” remarked Aleck.

“Has to be,” said Jack. “Guess it’s nearly four miles across, and once in a while they run up against some pretty bad storms.”

The boys found much to interest them. The neat dwellings, surrounded by pretty gardens; the stores, and a fire house, all claimed their attention.

At an automobile supply store, Jack left an order for an ample quantity of gasoline, to be delivered that afternoon.

The situation of Nyack is very charming, and the boys did not wonder that it has become quite a popular summer resort.

In about an hour, they were back at the house-boat, but Norman had not yet returned.

“Now, fellows,” remarked Aleck, “I’m going to finish that story about Joe Archer.”

“You had him at the Battery, last time,” grinned Joe.

“Yes, I know. It’s rich. Well, it was this way: Joe Archer was strutting around in the park, with that great walk of his, when, all of a sudden, he saw——”

“Say, that chap’s a dandy rider,” interrupted Joe. “Sits on his horse like a little major.”

“And the horse is a crackerjack, too,” put in Tom.

A boy on a white saddle-horse was rapidly approaching along the road.

Suddenly, as his eye rested on the house-boat and group in front, he reined in.

“Whoa, there, Bucephalus, whoa!” he exclaimed. “Steady, boy—whoa! Hello, you chaps, what is that funny-looking thing, anyway?”

“What does it look like?” asked Joe, witheringly.

“Like an old log hut that had broken loose from somewhere, and floated somewhere else. Whoa, you cheeky beggar! Say—belong to you chaps, eh?”

“You guessed it the first time,” said Jack.

“Well, it’s the funniest-looking thing that ever floated around these parts. Ever see a horse dance before? Whoa, Bucephalus! Where’d you come from, and where are you going?”

“The ‘Gray Gull,’ from New York, bound to Albany; Jack Lyons, master,” said Joe.

“To Albany?” The boy whistled. “Jolly good distance—but what a dandy idea. Great Scott, I wish I could go on a trip like that! Take passengers?”

“We’ve taken one, already,” laughed Jack.

“How about another?”

“We might——”

“Well, don’t let your enthusiasm bubble over too much. But, say—honest, I am interested. Bucephalus won’t let me talk. Want to come up to the house a minute?”

“Where is it?”

“That big one, with the columns in front.”

The boys looked at each other in surprise, and Jack murmured, “Well, did you ever?”

“My name’s George Clayton,” the boy rattled on. “Coming?—good! Now mind—don’t back out.”

Next instant, Bucephalus leaped forward, George Clayton waved his hand to the boys, and galloped down the road.

“Well, doesn’t it beat the Dutch that we should run into him like this?” mused Aleck. “Good-looking chap, too; but cheeky. Nice of him to invite us to the house, though. Shall we say anything about Norman?”

“Not at first,” advised Jack. “Guess we’ll meet him at the house, anyway; and if we don’t, leave the talking to me.”

When the boys arrived at the gate, and entered between the high, sculptured posts which stood on either side, horse and rider had disappeared back of the palatial Greek mansion.

Shrubbery and flower beds were strewn about with orderly profusion; cedars and other trees dotted the green, sloping lawn, and statues, mellowed in tone by contact with the elements, stood out sharply against the background. On the soft, languorous air floated the mingling scents of many flowers, and the sun-kissed paths, and shady nooks, and rustic benches were a delight to look upon.

Soon they reached the white-pillared pergola, heavy in the scent of grapevines, with the thick masses of leaves flashing green and gold, and the graveled walk beneath streaked with purple shadows. On either side of a broad flight of steps leading to the terrace around the mansion were Greek vases mounted on high pedestals.

For several moments, the boys surveyed the handsome façade, with its six columns and sculptured reliefs in the tympanum above, and wondered how it must feel to live in such a place.

Then George Clayton, with undignified haste, appeared around a corner.

“I was afraid you chaps wouldn’t turn up,” he said, waving his hand. “Come along; I want to hear about that trip,” and his tone grew imperious, as if he were accustomed to having his commands obeyed.

The visitors, nothing loth, sprang quickly up the steps.

As they passed an open window, the sound of voices floated out. Apparently a rather animated discussion was in progress, and the lads exchanged furtive glances.

George Clayton, too, seemed interested. He paused for an instant; then, with a shrug of his shoulders, led the way toward a handsome stable and garage in the rear.

“I’ve got a workshop there,” he explained, “though it’s precious little work I do.”

“Greek workshop?” asked Joe, with a grin.

George looked at him quizzically.

“Smart—very smart boy,” he said. “I see your education has been attended to. Yes, everything Greek, here—except the automobile. Uncle Dan’s got a hobby for Greek stuff.”

As they entered the stable a short, slight man, with a dark, flowing moustache, looked up in surprise.

“Ma foi!” he exclaimed. “Master George, how you scare me—so many peepuls. Does monsieur, your uncle, want the automobile this afternoon?”

“Don’t know, Pierre,” answered George, and he bounded lightly up-stairs, followed by the four.

“That’s Pierre Dufour, our French chauffeur,” said the boy, when they had entered a room adjoining the hay-loft. “Speaks rather funny English; but I practice my French on him, and how the poor chap stands it I don’t know. Parlez vous Français?”

“Not on your life,” said Jack, with a smile.

“Et moi pas beaucoup, which means I don’t know much either,” said the millionaire boy. “But never mind. Sit down anywhere you can. Honest, it’s funny to have a whole lot of fellows here and not know one of your names. But I’m always doing funny things; Uncle Dan says so, anyway.”

The boys quickly introduced themselves.

“You have a dandy place to work in,” said Jack.

“And such a fine room to sit around and read,” sighed Fred. “Got a lot of books, too.”

“Well, just keep away from ’em for once,” grinned Joe.

“But let’s hear about your trip,” said George, with a slightly impatient gesture. “I’m awfully curious; must be simply great.”

Jack explained, and George’s eyes began to sparkle.

“Well,” he said, with a long breath, “that’s just the kind of a trip I’d like to take. You see, fellows,” he went on, confidentially, “I’d like to rough it a bit, and forget all about mussing up my clothes and getting my hands dirty. You chaps may think it funny that I want to butt in, when I never saw you before; but you look like the right sort, and I guess we could get together all right. Hang it, I’m sick of having everything I want thrown at me. There—it’s out now. Knocking around does a chap a world of good.”

“Nothing better,” agreed Bob Somers.

“Well, will you take another passenger? I was going to Albany at the end of the week, anyway. I’ll pay you well.”

Jack glanced at his chums, and they nodded.

“Certainly,” he answered. “Never mind about the pay; but you’ll have to rough it a bit.”

“Didn’t I tell you that’s just what I want to do?”

“Perhaps your guardian will object?”

“I generally have a way of doing what I like,” said George, dryly; “though once in a while uncle puts up an awful kick.”

“We were going to leave this afternoon,” suggested Joe.

“I can easily catch up with you if your house-boat doesn’t put on too much speed,” laughed George. “Pierre can make that auto fairly hum. But come ahead, fellows, and take a look at the house.”

The interior of the Greek mansion, they found, was fully up to the standard set by the exterior. It was only two stories in height, but the rooms were large and imposing. A broad stairway led up to the gallery, at the four corners of which were blue and gold Ionic columns. The ornate railing was in the same scheme of color, while suspended from it were gorgeous draperies imported from China and Japan.

When George led the way into the atrium, a room of marble and mosaic, with a beautiful little fountain in the center, the boys opened their eyes with wonder. At both ends were statues and marble benches.

“Like it?” asked George.

“Well, I should say so,” answered Jack, with admiration in his tones. “Never saw anything to beat it.”

“Nor I,” added Fred Winter.

“Some of your friends, George?”

Turning, the boys saw a tall, well-built man with a military carriage surveying them with a questioning look. His hair and moustache were iron-gray. His aquiline nose and keen gray eyes would ordinarily have given him an air of sternness, but, at the present moment, this was greatly increased by his very evident look of annoyance.

“Never saw them until to-day, uncle,” replied George, cheerfully.

Colonel Ellison’s frown deepened.

“Never saw them until to-day!” he echoed, somewhat to the embarrassment of the house-boat boys. “How is that?”

“Uncle,” said George, without replying to his question, “this is Jack Lyons, of New York——”

“Jack Lyons—any relation to Mr. John Lyons, the New York lawyer?”

“My father,” said Jack, promptly.

“H’m.” The Colonel’s face relaxed somewhat. “I know him by reputation—a good lawyer and useful citizen,” he said, less stiffly.

Then, with a bow, Colonel Ellison turned abruptly on his heel.

“Uncle isn’t in a good humor to-day,” remarked George, calmly. “Something must have upset him.”

“Say, George,” whispered Jack Lyons, as they stood at the front door, “I want to tell you something—Norman Redfern is with us.”

“What!” cried the other, in the greatest surprise. “How in the dickens did you ever run across him? I want to know all about this.”

And linking arms with Jack, he led the way out to the pergola.

Jack briefly explained.

“Now I know what disturbed my guardian,” said George, with a low whistle. “Why didn’t you tell me at first?”

“Thought we’d let it go for a while,” grinned Joe.

“Well—Norman is a peach,” said George, slowly. “But Uncle Dan is awfully set against him, and I guess it didn’t do him a bit of good to come here. Too bad. Honest, I never knew what the row was about. I asked Norman, but he’s a sensitive chap, and grew red in the face, and stammered; and Uncle Dan said, ‘It’s not necessary for you to know, young man,’ and when he says ‘young man’ to me that ends it. But I’d stick up for Norman every time.”

“And so should I,” said Jack, warmly. “Wish we could help him out.”

“But how can we, when none of us even knows what it’s about?” said George, in a perplexed tone. “Jiminy, I’ll try to get him to tell me. Let’s go down to the house-boat.”

But Norman Redfern was nowhere to be seen, and, after waiting for some time, George took his leave.

“Remember, fellows, keep an eye open for a big gasoline tank and cushioned seats,” were his parting words.

“And now, Joe, what do you think of the millionaire boy?” asked Jack, when the former was out of hearing.

“He’s all right,” said Joe.

CHAPTER X

IN THE AUTOMOBILE

George Clayton did not broach the subject of his trip that afternoon. Colonel Ellison was still decidedly out of sorts, and George knew from experience how he should be approached.

But the boy had been too long pampered and indulged to make him regard the prospect with any trepidation. The Colonel might object—he often did that, but only to capitulate in the end in the face of his ward's importunities—and the present case seemed only to call for a little tact.

"I'm going," muttered the boy to himself, "and I'd like to see anybody try to stop me."

After dinner that evening Colonel Ellison's frown had departed and George entered his study with confidence.

"Uncle," he said, "you remember last week I spoke about going to Albany; well, I'd like to start to-morrow."

Colonel Ellison laid down his pen, and glanced inquiringly over the rim of his eyeglasses.

"One of your school chums lives there, I believe?" he said.

"Yes, sir; and I want to get a chance to see him again before I'm bundled off bag and baggage to college."

"Well, I don't see any objections," said the Colonel, slowly. "Remember the advice I have given you on previous occasions. And now, George, I'm extremely busy to-night, getting ready for a meeting of the board to-morrow, and I don't wish to be disturbed under any pretext, as I must take an early train for New York in the morning."

"But, uncle," said George, "I wanted to ask you if——"

Colonel Ellison frowned, and impatiently seized his pen.

“You have my permission,” he said sharply. “Not another word, young man.”

He waved his hand, and George left the room.

“Well, it’s not my fault if he doesn’t like it,” thought the boy. “Let’s see how things stand. I have his permission to go to Albany; he said ‘Jack Lyons’ father is a good lawyer and useful citizen’; in that case, Jack must be all right, too. Besides, he would have consented—of course he would.” And, having satisfied himself that everything was as it ought to be, George retired, with pleasant visions of his trip.

Colonel Ellison left before George had a chance to see him, and the latter ate a hasty breakfast alone, his aunt having also gone to New York.

Then he packed up a few necessary belongings, donned one of his oldest suits, and made his way to the garage.

“Bon jour, Pierre,” he said.

“Bon jour, monsieur,” returned the Frenchman, politely. “You desire to speak with me?”

“Yes, get out the machine, Pierre. We’ll have a spin.”

Pierre looked at his young master’s clothes, and arched his eyebrows; then, with a slight gesture, turned toward the car.

“When monsieur is ready, I will be, too,” he said.

“I’m ready now.”

“Ma foi!” But beyond this momentary expression of surprise, Pierre made no comment, and, in a few minutes, he announced his readiness to go.

George deposited his suit case in the car, and took his place beside him.

“Let ’er rip,” he said.

“What is rip?” asked Pierre. “My coat?”

“No, no,” laughed the other. “Allez vite—go fast.”

“Ma foi! I see—you speak such funny English. Ha, ha! Yes, we let her rip, which not means that I tear the machine to pieces.”

“Oh, no,” laughed George. “The car belongs to me, you know—bought it with my own cash. When that’s to be done, I’ll attend to it myself.”

The touring car was soon passing between the gate-posts at the entrance.

“Now, where?” asked Pierre.

“Follow the river.”

George settled back on the cushioned seat with a sigh of contentment. The morning was pleasant, with enough air stirring to temper the heat; and the broad Hudson sparkled and gleamed between the trees like silver. Birds were singing and flitting about; a couple of red squirrels dashed frantically across the sunlit road, making for the nearest tree, and were soon lost to view amidst the foliage. It was all very pleasant and cheerful, and George’s shining eyes told of his enjoyment.

“How far we go?” asked the chauffeur, presently.

“Oh, a good way yet, Pierre; I’m bound for Albany.”

“Ma foi!” exclaimed the Frenchman, in great astonishment. “But why you not say that before we go wrong way?” and he brought the machine to a standstill.

“Oh, no, it’s all right, Pierre,” laughed George. “Keep straight ahead till I tell you to stop. I’m not going to the railroad station.”

“Oh, you take a boat, then?”

“Yes, a kind of one.”

And Pierre, sorely puzzled, shook his head, and muttered, “Ma foi” several times, under his breath.

The boy’s eyes were constantly roving over the river for any signs of the “Gray Gull”; but half an hour passed, and it had not been sighted in any of the numerous little coves, or along the broad sweep of the river.

“Wonder where in the dickens it can have gone to,” murmured George, with a sudden fear that his plans might after all go astray.

“What you say?”

“Nothing, Pierre; I was only thinking.”

“H’m,” muttered the Frenchman, and he contracted his brow, and cast a very strange look at his young companion.

“Hooray! I see it!” exclaimed George, suddenly. “Put on a bit more speed, Pierre. That funny-looking house-boat is what I’m after.”

“Eight seconds I take you there, but for the law,” said Pierre. “We go fast, but slow, too. Is it enough?”

“Yes!” cried George, holding on tight. “Whizz! Look at that trail of dust behind us!”

A few moments later, the millionaire boy was waving his arms, while the puzzled expression on Pierre’s face grew into one of positive wonderment.

“Hello, Jack—hello!”

An answering hail came over the water, and the “Gray Gull” began to put inshore.

“Hold on, Pierre; we don’t go any further,” said George, his eyes sparkling with pleasure. “You can skip back home.”

“Ma foi! You—you go on that thing, Monsieur George? It isn’t possible. No—no; you say it for to make a laugh—what you call it in English a joke; ees that not it?”

“Joke, nothing, Pierre. Just wait here a minute and you’ll see me sailing away.”

“I no understand it, monsieur. Your uncle, he knows?”

“Now look here, Pierre,” said George, whose eyes were beginning to flash; “I don’t see that it’s any of your affair. I’m surprised at you. Stop here, and I’ll get out.”

“Ha—that man again,” cried the chauffeur, suddenly. “Ah, ha, monsieur your uncle say to him, ‘Keep away—I no want you here.’ Yes, saire.”

“Great Scott!” gasped George. “If it isn’t Norman Redfern standing on the deck. Well, of all things! I thought he had gone back to the Palisades.”

Although more than glad to see his former tutor, George was vexed that the chauffeur should have noted his presence, especially as Pierre had, for some reason or other, taken a strong dislike to him and never made any effort to

conceal it. Then, again, he felt that his uncle would certainly object to his traveling in company with the young man whom he had so unceremoniously discharged; yet to back out now would be to put upon Norman a slight which he felt was not deserved.

The result of these cogitations was to make George very irritable indeed; and Pierre's next words added fuel to his feelings.

“Yes, saire, he say, ‘Keep away—I no want you here;’ and you go with that man, Monsieur George? Ma foi—pouf! What will monsieur the Colonel say?”

George, suit case in hand, had stepped to the ground.

“Cut it out, Pierre,” he exclaimed, angrily. “You have the worst nerve I ever heard of.”



W. C. Steppard

“HIS EYES SNAPPED FIERCELY”

“I understand monsieur the Colonel’s English; but not yours, sometimes,” returned the chauffeur, in withering accents.

“Well, you’ll understand it pretty fast when I get back home. Unless you learn your place a bit better, I’ll have you fired. Hello, Jack! Hello, Norman! Be with you in a moment.”

“Fired—fired! What you mean by fired?”

“Sent off—discharged, stupid.”

A wave of intelligence crossed Pierre’s face; his eyes snapped fiercely.

“You have insult me,” he said, haughtily. “Very well—we see. Bah! And if he say anything to me,” indicating Norman by a wave of his hand, “I smack him in the face like this,” and Pierre smote the air with considerable force.

George looked at him for a moment in silence. Then the chauffeur’s ludicrous expression caused his own angry feelings to suddenly vanish; he burst into a hearty laugh, much to the astonishment and disgust of Pierre, and, picking up his suit case, walked toward the river.

“Hello, George! What’s the row?” asked Jack Lyons, from the deck of the “Gray Gull.” “Did you try your French on him again?”

“Wait a second, Jack; very glad to see you, Norman,” and the rich boy’s tone spoke of his sincerity. “Hello, what’s that duffer up to?”

Pierre, whose Latin blood was thoroughly aroused, had started forward.

“You have insult me!” he cried. “And for why?—For him,” pointing to Norman Redfern. “I no stand it, monsieur; your uncle shall hear—ma foi—he shall!”

“Duck him in the river, and cool him off,” advised Joe.

“Ha, you call me ‘duck,’ hey? And I say to you—‘goose’! Pouf! In the belle France, children no talk like that.”

“Oh, ring off,” remarked Joe, scornfully.

“I will myself to your uncle report, and——”

“Don’t report any one else,” laughed Joe.

“By and by, I come for you with monsieur the Colonel,” went on Pierre, fiercely. “You say fired—fired, to me? Pouf—you see!” and, with another wave of his hand, the excited Frenchman was off, while the others stood gazing after his retreating form in silence.

CHAPTER XI

GEORGE GOES ALONG

“Well, what do you think of that?” exclaimed George, at length, with a disgusted look. “Doesn’t it beat all? Just as I thought I was going to have the jolliest kind of time, that poor Frenchy has to try to spoil the fun. I’m afraid he’ll do it, too.”

“But surely you told your uncle that you were coming on the house-boat?” put in Norman Redfern.

“I’ll explain in a second, Norm. Give your old dory a shove, Jack—that’s it. Whoa! This thing is most as bad as Bucephalus.”

In spite of his disturbed condition of mind and the dory’s apparent desire to move in every direction at once, George was landed safely on the “Gray Gull.”

From the distance came the faint toot of an automobile horn; the big red machine seemed to be fairly flying.

“Scorching—speed laws busted,” grinned Joe.

“Shake, Norman; I am real glad to see you,” said George. “No, Uncle Dan didn’t know I was coming on the ‘Gray Gull.’ Here’s the way it happened.”

And George, seating himself comfortably on the bench, related his story.

“And doesn’t it seem the queerest thing in the world that we should meet like this, Norman?” he commented. “And all on account of these chaps.”

The former tutor’s face had clouded over.

“Yes, it’s very strange,” he said, gravely. “And though I’m more than glad to see you, George, I should advise you to go back.”

“Go back?” echoed George, with a decided shake of his head. “I guess not. Do you think I’d let Pierre crow over me? No, sir—why, he deserves to be fired out, bag and baggage.”

“Certainly did act a bit snippy,” said Jack.

“Must be a fussy fellow,” added Joe. “‘I say to you, goose—pouf,’” and Joe laughed heartily.

“Well,” remarked George, reflectively, “there’s going to be a nice little row. I can feel it coming; but it isn’t my fault. Anyway, I’m tired of being looked after as though I were like a pound of butter on a hot summer day. I’m going to Albany on the ‘Gray Gull.’”

Norman argued the point; but George’s expression bespoke a determination which was not to be shaken, and the others sided with him. The former tutor was, therefore, forced to yield.

“By the way, Norman, what makes Pierre dislike you so much?” asked the rich boy, presently.

“Pierre heard me discussing the French, one evening, and not understanding English very well, he thought, quite mistakenly, that I had referred to la belle France in slighting terms,” answered Norman, with a smile. “He is excitable, and I couldn’t convince him of his error.”

“That’s Pierre, all over,” grunted George. “Say, how did you get along with Uncle Dan, yesterday?”

“Not at all; he explained that I need not call again.”

“It’s a downright shame.”

“I suppose you were surprised to see me here?”

“You bet I was.”

“The boys persuaded me to keep on; and it didn’t take much persuasion, either, for I want to see my old alma mater, near Albany.”

“I tell you, fellows, I feel like a bird out of a cage,” said George, stepping to the door. “Look at these duds—it’s roughing it with a vengeance, eh? Wait till Uncle Dan’s eyes rest on ’em. For goodness’ sake, Jack, get the old scow moving.”

“Just what I’m going to do; but the tide is against us, and we’ll never beat out your uncle’s auto.”

“Perhaps some constable will nab that chauffeur,” remarked Joe, hopefully.

“Autos are not much on swimming, are they?” suggested Tom Clifton. “And your uncle’s hasn’t any wings; so we needn’t worry. A little wireless conversation over the water won’t hurt.”

“When Uncle Dan gets his dander up, things are apt to hum,” said George, as he picked up Confuse-us by the nape of the neck, and examined his pudgy little face. “He’ll get back from the city about three, and then——”

“Scorching, and ‘pouf,’ again,” grinned Joe.

“You’ve hit it,” said George, with a laugh. “But until trouble begins I’m going to enjoy myself.”

Not far from Ossining, which is situated on the eastern shore, the boys saw a narrow strip of land jutting out into the river.

“Curious, isn’t it?” said Redfern.

The boys decided that it was. But they voted down a proposition to cross the stream.

“I no run away from any trouble,” said Joe, with a remarkable French accent.

“Haverstraw’s the next town,” declared Jack Lyons.

“That’s where those barges loaded with bricks come from,” explained Norman Redfern. “No doubt you have often noticed them. The annual production of the town must be enormous.”

“Lots of boats around,” said Fred. “Wonder where they all come from.”

“The great volume of traffic on the Hudson is largely due to the Erie Canal,” explained Norman. “Running from Albany to Lake Erie, it connects the East and West. Wheat, lumber, grain and many other products are brought here, while from New York merchandise is sent to many distributing points. The Hudson is really an arm of the sea, with the tide running as far as Albany.”

“There’s an old lumber boat out there, now,” said George.

“Yes! Perhaps its cargo came all the way from the forests of Wisconsin. Isn’t it a picturesque sight, with those dingy gray sails?”

“Looks great,” admitted Jack. “Funny life—guess the captain’s an old, wrinkled chap with a voice like a fog-horn.”

“Most of ’em are,” said Joe. “But look at that dandy steam yacht. Isn’t she just scooting along?”

“I’ve been on her several times,” put in George, with his eye to the telescope. “Belongs to a Wall street broker, a friend of Uncle Dan’s. But there’s lots more fun on a house-boat.”

“You can bet; I wouldn’t change,” said Bob.

The famous Highlands of the Hudson, consisting of numerous ranges of hills, many over a thousand feet high and a few of considerably greater altitude, were now assuming definite shape; Haverstraw Bay, a continuation of the Tappan Sea, was coming to an end.

George almost forgot his troubles. Sitting at his ease on the “promenade” deck, or taking his turn at the tiller, he told the others that he had never enjoyed himself more.

Haverstraw, with its kilns and factories, its smoke, and the odd-shaped, precipitous mountain which looks down upon it, was soon passed.

The Highlands were now close at hand. Above their lofty summits floated a succession of hazy clouds, which sent fleeting shadows to dim the fresh green of the tree-covered slopes. And how steep and rugged they were; with here and there bold, rocky forms flashing into view between the vegetation.

While the “Gray Gull” slowly chugged its way toward the narrow stretch of river a sense of smallness came over the boys.

“Looks as if the river ended,” cried Jack, suddenly.

“Certainly does, skipper,” said Dave. “We seem to be headed straight for the rocks.”

“Follow the water, and you’ll be all right,” laughed Joe.

“We’re coming to what is known as the ‘Horse Race,’” explained Norman, “and, as the tide is in our favor, we ought to make good progress. Isn’t it magnificent, boys?”

“It’s all right, twice!” cried Jack, enthusiastically. “Simply great.”

The transition from the very broad expanse of river to the narrowness of the gorge was novel and interesting. Here and there the steep slopes jutted out into the stream, and Jack kept far enough from shore to hold a straight course.

They soon found that the Horse Race was well named. The water surged and swirled along as if angry that the clumsy house-boat should invade its domain. A fresh breeze helped to agitate the surface, and the blue waves sometimes rose high enough to splash on deck.

“Could anything be finer?” asked George, enthusiastically.

“I don’t see how,” responded Norman.

“I thought the Palisades were pretty high,” said Jack, “but they are not much compared with these.”

“Now we are going to be tossed about a bit—here comes an excursion steamer,” remarked Fred.

A huge white boat, standing out clearly against the dark background, rapidly approached, the smoke from its funnels floating backward in a long, bluish streak. Jack got his clumsy craft as far out of the way as possible, and the “Gray Gull” rode out the huge swells with many a lurch and wobble.

“Hooray!” cried Joe. “Never even touched the bottom.”

George took his hand off the support which had enabled him to remain erect, and said, “Guess I needn’t bother about Uncle Dan just now.”

“An automobile along here ought to make a hit,” said Aleck.

“You bet; and an awful splash when the pieces struck the water.”

Joe Preston laughed loudly at his own words, and the others, except Fred Winter, rewarded him by an appreciative smile.

“So, at the present moment,” went on George, with a sigh of satisfaction, “there is nothing to bother us. What are you doing with those pieces of board, Norman—going to make a rest for the telescope?”

“Yes—so that we can study the stars.”

“That’s a great idea,” said Fred Winter. “Joe, here, needs special instruction in most everything; and a bit of astronomy may help.”

“And while you are about it,” giggled Joe, “add a course on bookworms and diplomacy.”

“And on the awful fate that overtakes young chaps who are always going to do, but never start,” retaliated Fred.

“So that we shall have a little floating college, all to ourselves, and with rather unusual branches,” chimed in Norman, with a smile.

The swift tide carried the “Gray Gull” ahead at a lively pace, and the views seemed to grow more and more picturesque. Nature seemed to have combined the wild and grand with the delicate and poetic; dark, frowning crags above; and sylvan dells below. Here, the banks steep and rugged, with the shadowed river rushing swiftly by; there, gentle, sloping stretches, whose sunlit groves seemed to extend a cheerful welcome. At another place, the hills on the right opened out, giving them a glimpse of the far distance, with deep blue mountain forms.

And on this late summer day, with the white clouds floating overhead and a tender, dreamy effect enveloping the entire landscape, the boys felt like breaking forth into song. And they did; and the result, while not especially harmonious, proved that their hearts were as light as the glancing beams which traveled across the hills and valleys.

“Fellows,” said Bob Somers, at length, “I move that to-night we do the Nimrod act; camping out will be good for a change.”

“Agreed!” answered Jack. “Plenty of good places around. It will be great; build a fire and cook our grub like you Rambler chaps used to do.”

“And afterward, we can take a look at the stars,” said Fred, with his usual solemnity.

Miles and miles were traversed, and still the Highlands continued.

“I say, my jolly tars,” remarked Jack, suddenly, “we’re coming to West Point. It’s on that hill to the left.”

“Such a place as this is enough to make a fellow feel like becoming a soldier,” said Aleck. “Those lads must have a dandy time.”

“The discipline is very strict,” said Norman, “and they have to study hard. But our future generals have probably as fine a military academy, and one

as well situated as any in the world.”

At this point, the river takes a bend to the west; then, a short distance further up, the general northerly direction of the channel is resumed.

The “Gray Gull” slowly rounded the base of West Point, the boys, in ease and comfort, enjoying the changing scenes. As the course of the house-boat was again changed, a magnificent view opened out before them. A placid reach, considerably wider than the one they had just traversed, stretched far off toward the horizon. A mountain rose on either hand, while beyond these the vista melted into the bluish haze of distance.

“Perfectly stunning,” cried Dave, enthusiastically.

“Storm King Mountain to the west; the other is known as Break Neck Hill,” explained Redfern.

“And it looks it,” said Jack. “Whew! Did you ever see such a pile of slippery-looking rock?”

“It’s about twice as high as the Palisades,” went on Redfern, unconsciously assuming the air of a tutor, “and got its name from the many accidents which have happened on its steep, rocky sides. Imagine the dangerous places which might be encountered by any one climbing it.”

“But why should any one wish to?” asked George.

Redfern laughed.

“Some people have a strange desire to conquer the seemingly impossible,” he said, dryly, “and, now and then, one pays the penalty.”

The boys surveyed the vast pile with interest. Stern and forbidding, it seemed to frown menacingly upon the quiet water below. Steep declivities, patches of barren rocks and precipices make this mountain strangely different from the verdured heights close at hand.

Civilization has encroached upon the wild grandeur of the scene. A railroad skirts the base of the hill; and now a train rattles along, the sharp blasts of its whistle being flung in a series of echoes from hill to hill.

Storm King Mountain is a great rounded pile, its base rising abruptly from the river.

The wonder and delight of the boys increased.

“This is one of the most celebrated places on the Hudson,” declared Norman Redfern. “I once heard Colonel Ellison say that it reminded him of Lake Como, in Italy.”

“Doesn’t it seem shut in by the mountains?” said George. “And only a little further down it was miles across.”

Finally, the stream widened out, though not like the Tappan Sea; the country became less hilly, and looking back, they could see the Highlands to the right and left, in a long, unbroken line, their summits illuminated by a delicate, rosy glow.

Another hour’s journey, and Bob, whose eyes were constantly roving about, exclaimed, “Hello, look at those two motor boats tied up by the shore!”

“The ‘Reindeer’ and ‘Dart,’” read Aleck, after a moment’s survey through the telescope.

“That’s a swell place for camping out,” put in Joe, pointing ahead. “Lots of trees to hide the boat from any one on the road, if there is one. George’s uncle would never think of looking for us here.”

“You’re right, Joe,” agreed Jack, “and—what’s the matter, Norman?”

The former tutor had just lowered the telescope.

“I’ve made quite a discovery, boys,” he answered, with a smile. “One of those motor boats belongs to the school which I attended, and the other to the rival institution I told you about.”

“Gee whiz! That’s interesting,” cried Jack. “We might meet some of those chaps, and have a jolly good time together. Here’s where we camp for the night.”

CHAPTER XII

PIERRE CATCHES UP

“You can go a bit further in, Jack,” said Joe, who was busy sounding with the lead.

“Too much risk of getting the propeller all choked up with weeds, Joe, old boy. Shut off the power, Norman; that’s right. Give me a hand with the anchor, George. Good! Now, fellows, we are all right for the night.”

“I don’t see any of those school chaps around; do you?” asked Tom, presently.

“No,” said Jack.

“Wonder what in thunder they are doing, so far away from Albany; and how is it that the rivals are together?”

“Say, does this sort of thing go on every year? I’d jolly well like to join.”

Norman smiled, as the volley of questions was fired at him.

“Give me a chance, boys, and I’ll explain,” he said. “No! I don’t believe the boys are together. Most likely there is the same rivalry as before; and they are having lots of fun at each other’s expense. You see, the seniors of Ripley Academy—my school—formed a motor boat club; and every year, just before school begins, they take a long cruise on the Hudson. Thornton Preparatory School, not to be outdone, followed their example, and this time the rival clubs may have met by chance, or, perhaps, one followed the other.”

“Should think they’d leave some chaps on guard,” murmured Tom.

“Probably a truce has been declared,” smiled Norman. “But if you don’t see some lively times when the boys get back, things have changed since I left the school.”

“And I hope we do,” said Bob, briskly. “We may give ’em a bit of help, too.”

“Now let’s get our stuff on shore, and do the camping out in the best style.”

“Wonder if the fish would bite, out here,” mused Aleck.

“Put your hand in the water and see,” snickered Joe.

“No fooling, fellows; but lend a hand,” said Jack. “Fire to start and grub to cook, you know.”

Within a few minutes, the boys had gathered and chopped a quantity of wood, an old, decaying log close by furnishing most of the fuel. Then the bright flames began twisting and curling, sending aloft a shower of sparks, while the smoke lazily drifted away among the trees.

“We’re just as good as woodsmen at this game even if we do come from the city,” remarked Jack.

“Some fellows would have been crazy enough to try and cook their grub hunter fashion,” added Joe, with a wink at Bob.

A slice of ham was soon sizzling away; then the coffee-pot began to simmer over a pile of glowing embers. Sardines, biscuits and gingerbread completed the supper, which all the boys thoroughly enjoyed.

By the time they had cleaned up, the clouds above were edged with an orange glow. Between the trees close at hand, they caught glimpses in the western sky of brilliant yellows, pinks, and purples, and pale, delicate greens, all forming a riot of color which rivaled that of the rainbow.

“Must be a jolly fine sunset,” said George; “I’m going to take a walk and get a good look at it. Coming, fellows?”

All but Norman assented.

“I’ll stick by the ‘Gray Gull,’ George,” he said; “and work on that telescope stand a bit. It will be a fine night for a peep at the moon, too, which should be at its best.”

“All right,” said George. “If those school chaps get back, tell ’em to wait. Funny the duffers are staying away so long.”

The five plunged directly into the woods. A touch of the warm sunset glow rested upon the foliage and tree trunks, relieving the somber tones of the denser portions. Over vines and masses of ferns, with George in the lead,

they went, listening to the chatter and song of the birds so soon to be hushed by the approaching night.

“Haven’t enjoyed myself like this for a year,” declared George, enthusiastically. “It’s grand to feel as free as one of these birds. Guess I can square it with Uncle Dan.”

“And ‘Pouf,’ too?” asked Joe, with a grin.

“Pierre may learn a few things,” said George, with a touch of anger in his voice. “Say—isn’t that a road ahead?”

“Surest thing you know,” said Jack. “And the woods end right here; and I’m glad of it—about forty-five twigs have scraped acquaintance with my face already. Great Scott, what’s that?”

A weird cry suddenly echoed through the woods; then from the distance came another.

“Only an owl, Jack,” laughed Bob. “Thought you were going to jump out of your boots.”

“Make an all-fired racket, don’t they?” murmured Jack, slightly confused.

“Here’s the road, fellows. Lovely view of the sunset. Going to put this in your history, Joe?”

“You bet.”

“Begin to-night?”

“Of course,” said Joe, in very uncertain tones. “Say! Where are we going now?”

“This way,” said George, waving his hand.

“I’d rather go in the other direction,” objected Joe. “Looks more interesting, eh, Jack?”

“Count me in, old boy.”

“I’ll go with George,” said Bob Somers.

“Think I’ll go that way, too,” put in Dave.

“So shall I,” added Tom.

Aleck and Fred studied the situation a moment and also decided to cast their lot with George.

“All right,” laughed Jack. “Have your own way. We’ll meet you here, after a bit. Come on, Joe.” And the boys separated.

The road was wide and lined here and there with trees and fences. Broad fields extended off toward the low-lying hills, now purple against the sunset sky. It was a pleasant pastoral scene, with farmhouses and growing crops and patches of trees.

The two wandered along until the glow had faded from the clouds and a grayness was beginning to steal over the landscape.

“Better be skipping back now, Joe,” remarked Jack. “It’s getting kind o’ late; and you’ve got that history to write.”

“And you could begin makin’ some pictures for it,” gurgled Joe.

When the two arrived at the place where the others had parted from them, they found it deserted; so Jack seated himself on a broad slab of rock, while Joe idly leaned against a fence close by.

“Maybe the whole bunch got tired, and went back to the boat,” remarked Jack, presently. “We won’t wait here all night, either. Say! There’s an auto coming along to beat the band.”

“Let it come,” said Joe, absently; he was looking for a chance to tickle Jack on the back of the neck with a blade of grass.

Nearer and nearer the car approached, until its red color was faintly distinguished; the two acetylene lamps threw a dazzling glare, to pierce the gathering gloom.

To the surprise of both boys, it suddenly slackened speed, and just as it came abreast, halted. A stern-looking man, leaning forward, stared down at them.

“Great Scott!” thought Jack, with something like a start; “it’s George Clayton’s Uncle Dan!”

CHAPTER XIII

COLONEL ELLISON TAKES A HAND

“Look here, boys,” exclaimed Colonel Ellison, in a voice that plainly indicated the ruffled state of his feelings, “have you seen a house-boat with a party of rascally young scamps on board?”

Quite startled at the situation in which they so unexpectedly found themselves, neither Jack nor Joe answered for an instant.

Each was sure that the fiery Colonel would recognize them, and pour forth his vials of wrath upon their heads.

But the gathering dusk and the Colonel’s short-sightedness came to their rescue.

“What’s the matter—can’t you speak?” demanded Colonel Ellison, impatiently.

“No, we haven’t seen any rascally boys,” answered Jack, in a voice so unlike his own that Joe narrowly escaped a laugh.

Colonel Ellison did not seem to notice the evasion of his question.

“A party of young scoundrels and a rascally tutor, whom I recently discharged, had the audacity to induce my nephew to run away,” he stormed, angrily.

Jack and Joe exchanged swift glances at this piece of news.

“And it will go hard with them,” went on the Colonel, with a vigorous movement of his arm. “How far is the river from here?”

“Only a short distance,” answered Jack, scorning, even at the risk of possible consequences, to mislead the angry gentleman.

“But monsieur the Colonel,” put in the chauffeur, eagerly, “ze boat-house must be near. Ma foi! ze man just back, he see it pass in ze afternoon, en

route; and we shall catch ze scamp before it makes ze night. Ha! Vat ees this?”

“Rah, rah, Thornton!
That’s the name;
And it’s the greatest, just the same;
And its teachers are the best;
And it beats out all the rest.
Rah, rah, Thornton!”

“Sounds like a squeaky wheelbarrow and about nine croaking frogs,” said Joe.

“Ripley, R-i-p-l-e-y!
Tear-able name;
We’ll rip ’em to bits—
That’s what we claim.
Poor, p-o-o-r R-i-p-l-e-y.”

A half dozen boys were swinging along the road, singing as if every note gave them the greatest possible enjoyment.

They were solid, lusty-looking chaps, and the house-boat boys watched them approach with interest. So did Colonel Ellison and his chauffeur.

“Good-evening, boys,” said the former, abruptly. “Have you seen a house-boat in this vicinity?”

“A queer-looking pile of logs?” queried one of the students, as the group stopped short and surrounded the automobile.

“Yes, that ees it!” cried Pierre, quickly. “You see him—where?”

“He was on the river,” replied the spokesman, with a laugh. “Can’t be very far from here. Your private yacht?”

Colonel Ellison glared very sternly over the rim of his glasses at the author of this audacious speech.

“Ah!” he said; and the tone was so ominous that the students were interested at once.

“If you young men will lead the way to the place, I’ll pay you for the service,” continued Colonel Ellison, coldly. “My nephew is aboard that boat, associating with a parcel of young rascals, who have no better way of using their time than to be cavorting along the river in a shackly mud-scow.”

“Awful—terrible—frightful,” murmured the student, nudging his neighbor in the ribs. “Run away from home, has he? Hello, you two chaps! Thought you were a couple of statues—you stood so still.”

“Hello yourself,” came in Jack’s weak falsetto.

“Same here,” said Joe, in his heaviest tones.

“Belong around these parts?”

“Belong where our feet find us,” said Joe.

“But ze boat-house,” interrupted Pierre. “Ma foi—if you no hurry, Monsieur le Colonel, ze scamp have ze time to give you what you call it, ze slip—ees that not it?”

“You are right, Pierre,” said Colonel Ellison, with dignity. “We are fortunate to have met these young gentlemen. That rascally tutor will find that he made a mistake. If it is possible, I shall make an example of him. Show us the house-boat, please.”

“I say,” whispered Joe, “did you ever hear of such mean luck? These chaps are going to get us in a peck o’ trouble. What’s to be done?”

“Face the music and toot a little, to help it along,” said Jack, calmly.

“It’s going to be a lively tune while it lasts, I’ll bet,” grinned Joe. “Let’s make a flank movement, and by the time they get there, we’ll be out in the river a bit.”

“But how about George and the others?” asked Jack, in perplexed tones.

“You’ve got me there, Jack; but come on, or that crowd will be away ahead of us in no time.”

Already Colonel Ellison’s tall form was following the students.

Pierre Dufour, leaning back on the cushioned seat, rubbed his hands with satisfaction, and murmured, "Ma foi, we have it, zis boat-house, yes."

The academy boys had again taken up their jolly refrain; and soon their forms were lost to view in the dim and silent woods.

Jack and Joe found that their plan of executing a side movement was much more difficult than they had imagined. Neither was sure of the way, and the woods were now very dark. An astonishing number of obstructions seemed to spring up on all sides. Joe tripped over a fallen log and fell in the midst of a mass of bushes; Jack ran full tilt against a low-hanging branch, and soon they were floundering about in such a dense growth of underbrush that Jack halted.

"What silly chumps to come in here!" he exclaimed, impatiently. "If those mean lobsters weren't nearly yelling their heads off, I'd never know what direction they took."

"Fierce lot of trees and stuff," grumbled Joe. "Come within a foot of these vines and they make a grab for a fellow."

"And that branch swooped down and banged me on purpose," grinned Jack. "Aren't we in a mess, all tangled up in the woods? Redfern's going to catch fits; and I guess George will be yanked back to Nyack."

"And just on account of those silly rah-rahs," growled Joe. "Say, did you notice that chap, Bates?"

"Who could help it, with such a looking face?"

"Like that smile of his?"

"I've seen scowls I liked better."

Joe laughed.

"So have I," he said. "But, by jinks, look!"

"What at?"

"Why, don't you see? There's the river—the wide, wet river, and just back of those trees, too."

"I believe you're right."

“Of course I am.”

And Joe, in desperation, literally forced his way through a mass of bushes, with Jack close at his heels.

Breathing hard, and bearing numerous scratches, as a result of their encounter with twigs, brambles and stickers, the two at length reached the shore, and saw, to their great satisfaction, that it extended on either hand in a clear stretch.

“And there’s the ‘Gray Gull,’” cried Jack. “Redfern has lighted the lanterns. Run like the dickens, Joe; and we may get there by the time the row starts.”

Both boys were good runners; and they dashed ahead pell-mell.

Soon they saw seven dusky figures emerge from the woods just ahead and make straight toward the house-boat. Colonel Ellison was now stalking pompously in the lead.

Another hard spurt; and Jack and Joe dashed up just as the Colonel’s stentorian voice rang out.

“Hey, you on board that scow, step outside! I have a few words to say to you.”

CHAPTER XIV

“THAT CHAFFER FELLOW”

“Ma foi, I hope that monsieur the Colonel finds that scamp,” murmured Pierre Dufour, for the tenth time. “It was for him that George run away; and for him that he insult me; and for him that he say ‘fired’—‘fired’ to me. Bah! And what does monsieur the Colonel say? He say, ‘Pierre, you have done well; I make you my compliments.’ A la bonne heure.”

And Pierre sank back, and gazed fixedly toward the woods.

Soon the wait became monotonous; and, thinking that beyond the road might lead toward the river, where he could get a sight of the house-boat, Pierre gave the starting lever a pull, and the big red touring car was again in motion.

Gliding slowly ahead, the chauffeur suddenly heard the sound of voices, and, on looking around, saw several shadowy figures approaching. He did not need to see their faces in order to know that they were boys. They seemed to be in high spirits.

In a few moments, the glare from the acetylene lamps revealed a number of good-natured faces staring into his own.

“Oh, look who’s here!” cried one.

“Good-evening, chaffer,” said another.

“Where are you bound for, show-fear?” chimed in a third.

Pierre stopped the machine, and shrugged his shoulders in characteristic French fashion.

“Ma foi, but these American boys are a lively lot,” he commented to himself; then aloud: “You have not, I suppose, seen a boat-house near here?”

“A boat-house?” queried one.

“Ma foi! Yes. I am seeking a boy; he run away from home—oh, such a fine home—and join a party of scamps on a boat-house. But monsieur his guardian, he——”

A hearty burst of laughter interrupted him, and another peal brought a gleam into Pierre’s black eyes.

“For why you laugh?” he demanded, suspiciously.

“Because, chaffer,” said one, “you made a little slip.”

“A little slip? I no slip; what you mean?”

“In plain, unadulterated, unvarnished English, chaffer, we say, if I grasp your meaning aright, a ‘house-boat.’”

The giggles broke forth again.

“Ah, ees that it? We say not like that in Français; ma foi, no. I would, in la belle France, be driving an automobile rouge; and the boy, he go off on a boat-house,” muttered Pierre, shaking his head.

“So you’re after the kid to take him back with you, eh?”

“Yes; to-night he sit here, and whiz—it is to Nyack he go.”

“What did he run away for?”

“Because he knows not what is good for himself.”

“Well, if we meet the lad, we’ll tell him where to find you,” laughed one of the boys.

“No, no—ma foi, no!” cried Pierre, in alarm, as he made an emphatic gesticulation. “No, no—make not like that!”

But his only answer was another loud burst of laughter; and, singing a college refrain, the boys resumed their march, while the chauffeur, wishing that he had not spoken quite so freely, started his machine again.

The road, however, did not approach the river, and, fearing that the Colonel might return, Pierre soon turned, and within a few minutes was back at the starting point, again staring at the dark line of woods.

Suddenly he heard a sound which made him start to his feet with an exclamation of alarm.

Over the still air, from the direction of the river, came a faint call for help; and Pierre's nerves tingled with excitement, as he strained his ears to catch a repetition.

"Ma foi! Monsieur the Colonel—I think it ees his voice!" he cried aloud, in agitated tones.

"Help!"

This time, Pierre was sure of it. With a wild shout, he sprang to the ground and dashed across the road, then headlong through the thicket, his form soon disappearing amidst the trees.

Like some huge monster guarding the highway, the red touring car, now dusky and gray in the gloom, sent its acetylene glare streaming over a silent and deserted road.

But it was not for long. George Clayton, whistling merrily, accompanied by the others, came along at a brisk pace.

"Hello!" cried George, as he espied the car. "Wonder if anything's the matter? There's no one in it. Looks like a good machine, too; eh, Aleck?"

"A dandy; kind of funny to leave it standing here. Maybe something's busted, and the choofer has gone off after tools."

"Chauffeur, you mean," corrected George.

"Sure—that's what I said. He wouldn't—what's the matter?"

"Goodness gracious! Also, did I ever know the beat!" cried George, his voice trembling with excitement. "Well, of all things!"

"What's the matter?"

"Matter enough; this is Uncle Dan's, or, rather, my car—my car; do you understand?—my car."

"Your car?"

"As sure as you live; and I might have run right into Uncle Dan before I knew it. Whew! Let's skip, fellows. Gee whiz, what a narrow escape! Who would have thought of his being right here? I expected he'd be coming along, too; yet—say—I'll bet——"

“Bet what?”

“That Uncle Dan and Pierre have discovered the house-boat.”

“And I guess you are right,” said Bob, with a long breath. “Why else should they have left the machine just here? This is about where we came through the woods.”

“Did you ever hear of meaner luck in your life?” cried George, his eyes flashing with anger. “I declare! I’m no two year old, to be dragged back home; and I won’t be, either.”

All the obstinate, combative spirit in George’s nature was aroused, and, as he pictured Pierre Dufour’s triumph, he paced up and down and clenched his fists.

“But how could they tell that the ‘Gray Gull’ was there?” murmured Tom. “You can’t see the river.”

“It beats me,” answered George, in puzzled tones. “Mighty lucky we stumbled across the car, or else I should have walked right up and found Uncle Dan waiting to receive me with open arms.”

“What’s to be done?” yawned Dave.

“Lie low. They’ll have to be pretty smart to catch me. I haven’t done anything wrong—tried my best to tell Uncle Dan about the trip, and he cut me short. Then what did he say about Jack Lyons’ father—‘A good lawyer and useful citizen.’ Of course I was surprised to find Redfern aboard; but he’s a dandy chap, and I wouldn’t hurt his feelings by backing out—no, sir.”

George spoke in a rapid, excited manner which showed the disturbed condition of his feelings, all the time keeping a watchful eye open for any signs of his uncle and Pierre.

Suddenly, boyish voices, raised as though an animated discussion was in progress, reached their ears.

“Look out,” cautioned George.

“Just a lot of young chaps,” said Bob, reassuringly.

“I knew you were taking us about a mile out of our way, Bill Stiles,” cried a voice. “Felt it in my legs, I did. Hang the luck, I’m so tired now, I can

hardly move.”

“If you knew so much about it, why didn’t you set us right, Roy Pinger?” demanded another, loudly.

“Because Bill Stiles said he knew the way—that’s why.”

“Say, why doesn’t the whole crowd jump on me at once? If I hadn’t kept my eyes open, you’d be strutting ahead now.”

“Oh, Jiminy! what a whopper, Bill Stiles. Bet you don’t know anything about it. Hello—there’s that chaffer fellow out here yet.”

“He must have nabbed the lad on ze boat-house; and oh, how please monsieur the Colonel will be! Oh, I say, chaffer, did you get him?”

“Gee whiz, listen to that! They must have been talking to Pierre!” exclaimed George, turning excitedly toward the newcomers. “Look here, you chaps,” he continued, “what do you know about this?”

“Why, where’s the shoofur?” asked one.

“Has the show-fear skipped?” said another. “Hello, you fellows—belong around here?”

“No, we don’t,” answered George, shortly. “You met the chap who runs this car, eh?”

“Surest thing you know. Monsieur the Colonel sent him after a lad who ran off on a boat-house, and——”

“You don’t mean to say that he was alone?” queried George, in astonishment.

“Sure he was,” replied the other, apparently surprised at the rich boy’s manner.

George Clayton whistled; and then, as if feeling that it might not be wise to let the others know too much, broke into a laugh.

“I suppose he’s over by the river, hunting for the poor chap, eh?”

Bill Stiles looked at the rich boy earnestly.

“Bill,” he said, very calmly, “you know something about this. The chaffer says, ‘Whiz; it is back to Nyack he go.’”

“The choofer said that, did he?” exclaimed Aleck Hunt.

“Yes; that’s what the chaffer remarked, Bill number two. Get your legs a-moving, Roy Pinger.”

“Say, you’re kind of fresh, aren’t you?” said George, quizzically.

“The salt of the earth are always fresh. So-long, Bill! Whiz! Look out for monsieur the chaffer—whiz—which way is it, Roy Pinger? Whiz—through the woods, eh? All right—toddle,” and, laughing and jesting, the party of students made across the road.

“Well,” exclaimed George, as he gazed after their retreating forms, “did you ever hear of such a piece of nerve in your life as Pierre thinking he could come out here alone and yank me back? Just think of it! I’m surprised at Uncle Dan—ab-so-lute-ly astonished; but I’m going to teach that nervy chauffeur a jolly good lesson.”

“He needs it the worst way,” approved Bob. “And the cheek of him, telling all those chaps about you.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Fred Winter, with interest. “Listen—is that any one comin’?”

The boys strained their ears, but heard nothing save a faint rustling caused by the fitful breeze.

“Pierre Dufour has just a little bit of a walk ahead of him,” went on George, speaking rapidly. “This is my machine, bought with my own coin; and if you chaps want a dandy ride, jump in.”

“What?” gasped Fred Winter.

“Why not?”

“That’s a bully idea,” laughed Aleck Hunt. “I’ll go, all right. Know how to run the machine?”

“I can start and stop it,” answered George; “and talk a streak about carburetors, spark plugs and steering gears; and if nothing busts, and it stays face up, I’m all right. Jump in. That silly chump may be nosing back any minute—quick! Want to go, Somers?”

Bob shook his head, and asked:

“How about the other boys?”

“We can leave the car in a garage somewhere and look out for ’em. I’ll bet Pierre is over by the house-boat now; and you wouldn’t catch me falling into any trap.”

“You two fellows go,” said Fred, solemnly, “and we’ll walk back. It’s going to be a fine night to look at the moon, and——”

“That settles it,” laughed Aleck.

He jumped in beside George, who already had his hand on the steering wheel.

“Sure you won’t take a ride, Dave?” asked the millionaire boy, fairly bubbling over with impatience.

“No, thanks; that nice chair in the house-boat appeals to me.”

“You, Tommy?”

But Tom didn’t feel like going without the others, and declined regretfully.

“Awfully sorry; but if you won’t accept the treat that settles it,” said George, waving his hand. “This will be a great joke on fiery Pierre; and a good lesson besides. So-long! What’s that? Sure—look out for the two of us anywhere along the line. Bye, bye!” And almost before the boys realized it the big car was in motion.

By this time the moon was just above the eastern horizon, and already its silvery radiance was stealing over the landscape. The sky was a deep gray blue, and not a cloud dotted its surface.

The two boys in the auto saw the pale white road extending off in an almost straight line; back of them the distant hills rose dim and ghostly against the sky, while over the broad expanse of gently rolling country lights sparkled in various farmhouses. Far above, a night-hawk screamed its way in a circling flight, and from the woods came the melancholy hoot of an owl. It was a scene that awakened the admiration of both boys, and, as the soft breeze fanned their cheeks, they enjoyed it and the swift, gliding motion to the full.

What George lacked in skill as a chauffeur he made up in recklessness. Soon the fields and the trees and the white road became a confused blur. His

eyes danced with excitement, and he put on still greater speed. Faster—faster raced the touring car, until Aleck Hunt began to grow dizzy.

A bridge flashed by; then tall trees seemed to spring up like warning sentinels on either hand, and the road became a blotch of grim shadows and silver lights.

By the side of a sycamore, whose spreading foliage entirely hid the moon from view, George slackened speed.

“Can go some, eh?” said the boy, breathlessly.

“You bet,” answered Aleck, a trifle bewildered. “Gee whiz! Just like being in a cup race.”

“And it isn’t anything to what it can do.”

“Perfectly stunning, anyway—dandy; but if we went a bit slower, we’d see the scenery better,” said Aleck, ingeniously.

“That’s so,” admitted George. “Don’t I wish I could catch a glimpse of Pierre’s face when he finds the machine gone—ha, ha! I can’t get over it. If Uncle Dan had been along, I wouldn’t have done it—but——” and George’s teeth shut together with a snap.

The woods were soon passed, and a little later, lights gleaming ahead and a soft, hazy patch in the sky indicated that they were approaching a town.

“Must be Newburgh,” remarked George. “And say, this is such jolly good fun, I have an idea.”

“What is it?”

“Stop over night in the town, and early to-morrow start for Poughkeepsie. Fred and the Ramblers will tell the boys we’re all right, eh?”

“It’s a great thought,” said Aleck, enthusiastically. “A dandy time ahead of us—hooray!”

“That’s what I think, too,” laughed George.

“Now we’ll swing along gently, so that no lynx-eyed constable will greet us with open arms.”

Here and there a house was passed. Soon they became more numerous, and, finally, the car was pounding slowly along the streets of Newburgh.

It was still early; the shops were brightly lighted, and in the business section, quite a crowd ebbed and flowed along the sidewalks. The experience was a novel one to Aleck Hunt, and he wondered at the ease and coolness with which his companion steered the big machine around wagons and out of the way of electric cars.

“Oh, this isn’t the first time I’ve done it,” laughed George, apparently divining his thoughts. “Once or twice I have been in pretty tight places, too. Look at that silly chump turning in ahead of us. He never stopped to see where he was going. That’s the kind of thing which often takes up a couple of inches’ space in the newspapers. Whoa, boy! Just grazed his wheel. There’s a garage over on the other side of the street, Aleck. We might leave the machine; then for something to eat, and a nice room in the best hotel in town.”

“All right,” grinned Aleck. “This is more fun than looking at a few little specks o’ light. Those other chaps certainly missed it.”

George quickly made arrangements to have his machine housed at the garage, and, in a few minutes, the boys were off searching for a hotel.

One to their liking was found in the upper part of the town, and they were soon enjoying a good meal in ease and comfort.

CHAPTER XV

THE COLONEL SPEAKS HIS MIND

At the sound of Colonel Ellison's familiar voice Norman Redfern, whittling a piece of wood in the cabin, sprang to his feet and stepped out on deck.

The sudden appearance of the Colonel was quite the greatest surprise he had experienced in many a day; and when he saw a half dozen boys, this was still another.

"See here, Redfern," thundered Colonel Ellison, with an emphatic wave of his arm, "what do you think of yourself? Such a miserable piece of conduct; such a downright, underhanded scheme of paltry revenge is beyond my comprehension. I could have the law on you!"

"Why—what have I done?" stammered Norman, altogether taken aback by the sudden attack, and embarrassed by the snickers of the students.

"What have you done—you have the audacity to stand there and calmly ask me that? Well——" the Colonel brought his right fist down in the palm of his left hand with a resounding smack, and glanced at the group of boys, as if to say, "Just listen to that."

"He's got his nerve with him, all right," said Bates, unable to conceal his pleasure.

If there was any row under way, Bates could be depended upon to help it along.

"I will tell you, then," stormed Colonel Ellison. "When you found your whines and wretched excuses were of no avail——"

"Pardon me, Colonel Ellison, I made no excuses," interrupted Redfern, his face flushing.

"Now this is what I call a real interesting conversation," said Bates.

"What did you do?" went on the Colonel, without heeding these interruptions. "You induced my ward to join a gang of rascally,

irresponsible boys, who are idling away their time in a miserable mud-scow. A fine thing for a man of your age to be with such a crowd.”

“Simply awful,” said Bates.

“You are mistaken, Colonel Ellison,” said Redfern, and there was a certain ring in the ex-tutor’s voice which the Colonel had never heard in it before.

“Do you have the effrontery to deny it?”

“I’ll bet he will,” came from Bates. “He’s tipping a wink to those chaps in back.”

Jack Lyons stepped forward.

“I know all about this affair,” he remarked, calmly. “Redfern had nothing to do with it. He tried to make George go back home, and——”

“I’ve heard that voice before,” exclaimed the angry Colonel. “Boy, where have I seen you?”

The speaker gazed searchingly at Jack Lyons, whose face was clearly revealed by the moonlight, and almost instantly added, “Why, you’re the very boy who was in my house, and—didn’t I see you on the road just a few minutes ago?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Ah! And you saw fit to change your voice, eh? and actually had the impudence to tell me you hadn’t even seen a house-boat?”

“Sad, very sad case,” observed Bates.

“I beg pardon, Colonel; I said I hadn’t seen any rascally boys, and that’s the truth.”

“You are one of the young scamps yourself,” thundered Colonel Ellison. “I suppose, Redfern, you will even deny that George was on the boat?”

“You ought to know me better than that, sir.”

“He’s losing his nerve,” said Bates.

“Well, just understand, Redfern, that if I ever catch you having anything more to do with my nephew I shall seek redress through the law. George will go back with me to-night, and——”

“A mighty good thing for George, too,” remarked the irresponsible Bates.

“I have given orders that you shall never be allowed to enter my grounds again. Do you understand me?”

“You have done me an injustice in one case, and are repeating it in another.”

“Injustice? Fiddlesticks! You are a cowardly, underhanded scoundrel. For all I know, my ward may be hiding inside at this very moment.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me a bit, sir,” said Bates. “I’d search the house from cellar to garret.”

“Hey, you smart duck,” interposed Jack. “You’re throwing your words around pretty fast, now aren’t you?”

“What’s that?” demanded Bates. His exasperating grin grew broader; he stuffed his hands in his pockets and said, “What’s that?” again, in a much louder and shriller key; and, as Jack made no response, continued, “Salt water might take some of the freshness out of you—this water is salt.”

“Is it?” said Jack.

“It is—to reverse your words,” returned Bates.

“If you don’t stop that grin pretty soon,” said Jack, solemnly, “it may get frozen on your face.”

Bates opened his mouth to make a reply, but Colonel Ellison interposed.

“Enough of this silly bantering,” he said, sternly. “George!” he raised his voice—“if you are in that boat, I command you to come out!”

“Ah, the plot thickens,” said Bates.

“Redfern, bring that mud-scow further inshore,” went on the Colonel, sharply.

“George is not on board; my word must be sufficient.”

Colonel Ellison stared at the speaker in unconcealed astonishment. He had felt a sort of grim triumph in the thought of forcing the mild-mannered young man to execute his commands. But something of the spirit of Jack Lyons seemed to have been aroused within Norman Redfern, and he returned his former employer’s gaze unflinchingly.

“You absolutely defy me, then?” cried the Colonel, furiously.

“Oh, he’s a sly one,” said Bates. “The water’s deep enough here; you mustn’t let him fool you, sir.”

“And he won’t. Once more, Redfern, will you bring that boat close ashore?”

“You can come over in the dory.”

“A nice way to talk,” said Bates. “But don’t get in a cranky little boat like that, sir. Not one of us would think of risking it; you’d be upset sure—hello! Didn’t I hear a sound inside the boat—listen!”

Sure enough; something had evidently dropped to the floor; then came a repetition of the sound.

“It’s as certain as you’re knee-high to a grasshopper, there’s some one inside!” cried Bates, excitedly.

He walked quickly past a tree to the edge of the steep bank, stopping at a position which afforded a good view into the brightly lighted cabin.

“See anything?” queried one of the students.

“Kind of,” was the rather non-committal response.

Colonel Ellison stepped hastily forward and paused by the student’s side.

“Redfern,” he began, sternly, “I——”

Then, without warning, a curious thing happened.

The bank suddenly began to slide away beneath their combined weight. Bates gave a wild cry of alarm, and scrambled to safety, while Colonel Ellison, finding himself going down amidst an avalanche of dirt, sticks and stones, frantically threw his arms above his head. His hands closed tightly over the tree’s lowest branch, and the next instant the doughty Colonel was suspended over the water, with the branch slowly dipping down beneath his weight.

“Help!” he yelled, in an amazingly loud voice, holding to his frail support with the grip of despair.

“Good land!” cried Bates.

“Much needed,” said another.

“Help! Don’t stand around like a lot of addlepates!” shouted the Colonel, furiously.

Several feet of the bank, splashing into the water, had sent forth a succession of rollers. The victim’s dangling legs could find no support, and each instant, fearful that the branch might break, Colonel Ellison could only look at the dark, lapping water just below and anticipate the dreadful moment when he would be immersed.

It was certainly a strange spectacle in the moonlight to see the usually dignified Colonel dangling from the limb like a fish at the end of a line; and when the first moment of surprise and alarm had passed, several very suspicious gurgles came from the students.

Jack Lyons was the first to take action. The second tremendous blow from the Colonel’s fog-horn voice had scarcely ceased echoing, when, with a cheery, “Hang on tight, sir,” he jumped into the dory, quickly untied it, and paddled in Indian fashion toward the victim, whose feet were now almost touching the water.

“Hurry!” gasped Colonel Ellison, despairingly. “I can’t hold on much longer.”

“All right, sir!”

The boat glided beneath his feet.

“Be careful,” said Jack. “Steady—don’t let go till I say the word.”

He reached up, bore his weight upon the limb, and the Colonel’s feet soon rested upon the bottom of the boat.

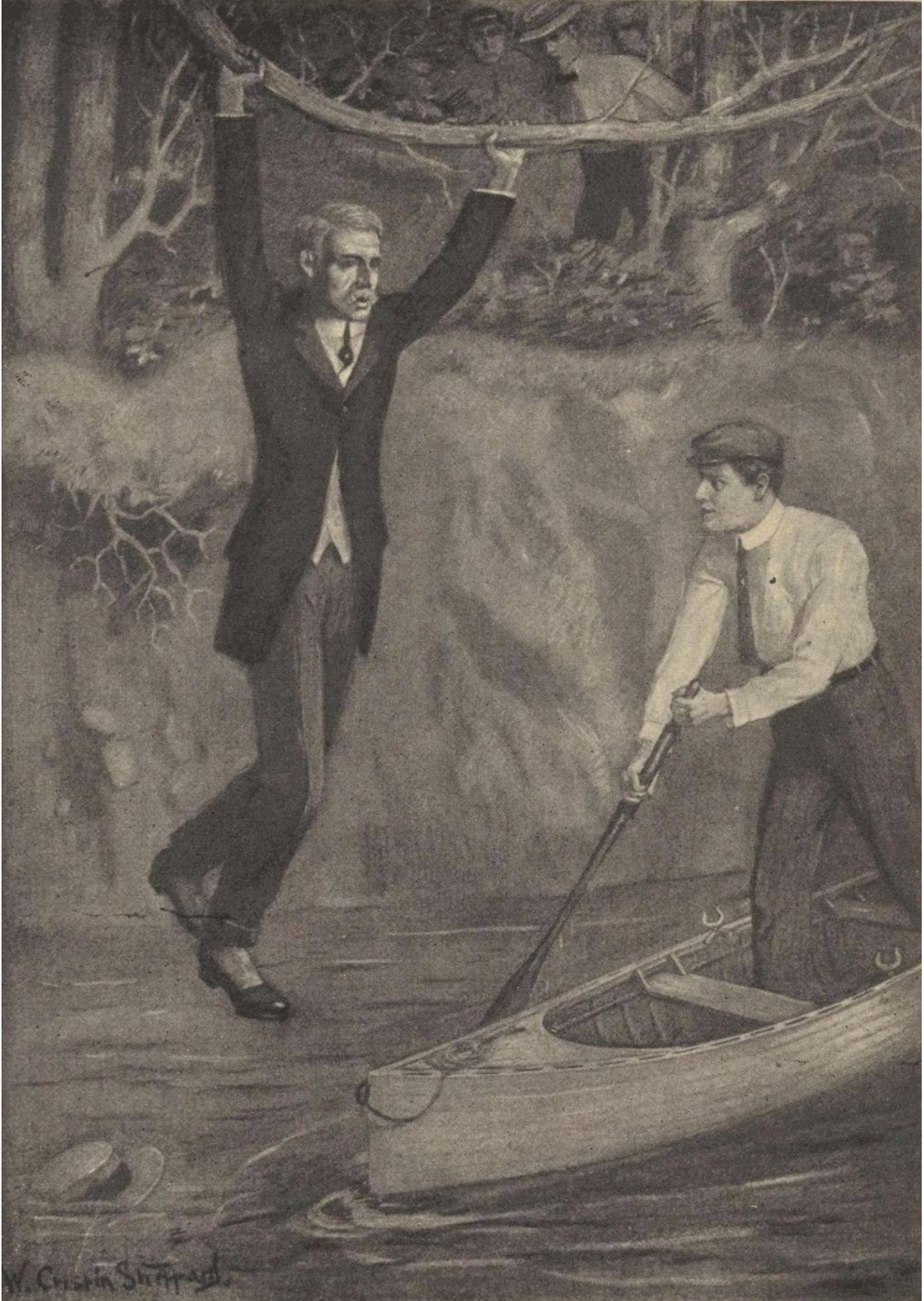
“Take your time, sir—easy now.”

But the Colonel was in too excited a frame of mind to heed this advice, and only Jack’s watchfulness and care prevented a catastrophe.

“Rest your hand on my shoulder, sir,” said the boy. “I’ll steady her—look out!”

For an instant it looked as if the Colonel would upset them both. Advice and suggestions came in a steady stream from the shore.

“Don’t be afraid, sir; if you fall in, we’ll fish you out,” yelled Bates, encouragingly.



“HANG ON TIGHT, SIR”

But Jack’s skilful efforts finally triumphed, and Colonel Ellison was landed safely on shore.

Perhaps never before had so many conflicting emotions surged through his brain. He was conscious that he had cut a very sorry figure before the much despised tutor; and the mirthful chuckles and grinning faces which the moonlight disclosed added to his feelings of wrath and mortification. He owed a debt of gratitude to Jack Lyons, yet he could not force his lips to frame the words which he knew the boy deserved.

While in this very uncomfortable state of mind, there was a crashing among the underbrush some distance off, and the group saw a slim figure dashing madly toward them.

“Pierre!” gasped Colonel Ellison.

The chauffeur, who seemed about to hurl himself bodily upon the foremost, stopped short, breathless and panting, and stared wild-eyed at the group before him.

“Monsieur the Colonel, Monsieur le Colonel, I had such fear,” he stammered. “Such fear!” he placed his hand over his heart; “I hear you cry, ‘Au secours!’ and I run, oh, how I run! Ah, I had such fear—but you no hurt, eh?”

Pierre’s words came out in a series of jerks, and he stood quite still, as if the shock yet gripped his heart.

Bates whistled.

“Certainly I am not hurt, Pierre!” exclaimed Colonel Ellison, his tone indicating a great lack of appreciation for his chauffeur’s solicitude.

“Ah, then I am content, monsieur the Colonel; I had such fear—for why you——”

“You should never have left the automobile, Pierre,” said the Colonel, hastily.

“But your voice; it came over ze air like——”

“A steam whistle in distress.”

“And I say, ‘Ze Colonel, he must need me.’”

“Horrible carelessness, anyhow,” said Bates. “I’d give him a piece of my mind. But, if you please, sir, don’t you think there’s some one hiding inside that house-boat? You heard a noise yourself. What’s that over there?”

Norman Redfern was holding up a small object which emitted several plaintive squeaks and tried to wriggle out of his grasp.

“The pup was on the table, and knocked off a couple of pieces of wood,” he explained.

“Oh!” exclaimed Bates, sadly disappointed.

“Go right back, Pierre,” commanded Colonel Ellison, with a frown. “Such a valuable machine should never be left for an instant.”

“Of course it shouldn’t,” remarked Bates.

“Very good, monsieur the Colonel; I go,” said Pierre, bowing. “Ah, but I had fear! Ma foi, but I no understand why you——”

“That will do, Pierre—go!” thundered Colonel Ellison; and the chauffeur turned away sadly puzzled.

“When George returns,” remarked the Colonel, grimly, “he will find me here.”

“And now,” said Bates, “this little party is entirely composed of pleasant people. Let us introduce each of us to the other; fellows, step up. Don’t be afraid—light isn’t strong enough to show your faces very well. Colonel—Ralph Chickens, sometimes known as ‘Chickens’; Ben Drayton; Tom Allen—he’s only done one sensible thing in his life—entered Thornton Preparatory School; here’s Sam Wilde, and, last and least, Ban Twining.”

“Like fun,” came from the owner of that name.

“Of course I do,” said Bates.

Jack Lyons and Joe Preston entered into the jolly spirit of the students; but Colonel Ellison, like an avenging nemesis, kept aloof, his tall, gaunt figure moving almost silently up and down the bank, stopping only now and then to listen intently to any suspicious sounds which came from the woods.

Bates seemed astonished to learn that Norman Redfern was a graduate of Ripley.

“H’m,” he sniffed. “I can tell by your voice that you hate to admit it. Why, we’re kind of looking after a lot of foolish Ripley chaps now. Guess at this very minute they must be doing the babes in the woods act. What’s that?”

A voice came floating over the silent air; its tone of anguish and utter despair made them look at each other in alarm.

“Monsieur the Colonel, monsieur the Colonel, it’s gone!”

“Gone!” cried Colonel Ellison, with a start. “What does the man mean?”

“Looks like another circus coming,” grinned Bates, in delight.

The crashing amidst the underbrush grew louder, and Pierre presently emerged, waving his arms even more furiously than before, while his agonized spirit poured itself forth in a series of wails.

“Monsieur the Colonel, he—it—has gone!” he gasped. “Gone!”

“What?” roared the Colonel. “The machine gone?—it can’t be possible!”

“That’s what I say, monsieur the Colonel. I run both ways on ze road, but I nevaire see him; it’s gone!” and Pierre wrung his hands in despair.

“Ah, ha!” said Bates.

“Gee whiz!” cried Jack Lyons. “Come ahead, fellows!”

“More excitement, eh?” chimed in Joe, as he followed Jack.

Without a word, Colonel Ellison strode toward the woods; his face wore a terrible frown, and with one look he completely silenced the unhappy chauffeur.

Jack Lyons and Joe Preston reached the road with the students.

“Yep,” said Bates. “Not a sign of it. Oh, what a row I feel coming.”

In a moment, Colonel Ellison and Pierre burst out of the wood, the former almost winded by his unusual exertions.

The pale moonlit road, as far as it could be seen, was deserted. No sound but the lowing of a cow away off in the distance broke the silence.

“Gone!” cried the Colonel, in a terrible voice.

“Gone!” echoed Pierre, weakly.

“You stupid jackanapes,” shouted Colonel Ellison, now completely overcome with wrath. “This is a pretty kettle of fish—a valuable machine stolen, and we stranded here on a lonely country road, miles from anywhere—a fine muddle you’ve put us in! How dare you look me in the face?”

“Oh, monsieur the Colonel.”

“Don’t moo-seer the Colonel me!” roared the angry gentleman, beginning to pace excitedly up and down.

“It’s terrible,” said Bates, after some moments had elapsed. “You’ll never see that whizzer again. Fine autos can’t be plucked from trees.”

“Monsieur the Colonel,” pleaded the unhappy chauffeur, “I hear you cry, ‘au secours’; and I say——”

“Silence!” thundered his master. “Redfern is responsible for this. He shall _____”

“What’s that noise?” interrupted Bates, holding up his hand with the greatest assurance. “Listen, sir! It sounds exactly as if the house-boat was putting off. Hello; those two chaps belonging to it have disappeared; that settles it—they are giving you the slip. Bet your ward is on the old pile of logs, after all, and you’re jolly well left again, sir.”

A distinct, though faint pulsation had suddenly started up.

“Come with us, sir,” yelled Bates, “and we’ll chase ’em.”

“After the rascals!” roared Colonel Ellison. “Very likely you are right.”

A group of shadowy figures were soon struggling pell-mell through the woods, the boys giving their school yells.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WAR-CALL

“Well, I don’t know that I like this,” murmured Fred Winter, glancing after the fast-departing automobile. “Awful nervy of those chaps to run off that way, eh, Somers?”

“I can’t blame George very much,” laughed Bob. “Pierre seems in need of a good lesson.”

“And what a perfect night for a joy-ride,” sighed Dave.

“Almost wish we’d gone along with ’em,” added Tom. Then, as his ears suddenly caught the sound of distant voices, he added: “Let’s catch up with those cheeky prep-school boys. Guess they know the way. Mighty easy to get twisted up in this tangle.”

A network of fairy lights and shadows now streaked the ground and tree trunks, and here and there a rock shone strangely distinct. Each moment new vistas of weird beauty opened out before them.

“If there were any such things as woodland sprites this would be just the place for ’em,” said Fred, as he surveyed the scene. “Ah, I see those chaps now.”

The group had come to a halt in a small clearing, and the house-boat boys soon realized that they were in no hurry to leave. Bill Stiles and Roy Pinger were having another animated discussion.

“Hello!” called Bob Somers.

Conversation stopped, and the boys, evidently taken by surprise, awaited their approach.

“Why, say, you’re the chaps we saw on the road,” remarked Stiles, as the four came up. “Where are the other two Bills? There were six of you, I thought. Whiz—is it to Nyack they go? Did you see the chaffer?”

“Oh, no,” laughed Bob, “not yet.”

“I’m awfully glad that chap gave them the slip; don’t blame him for keeping out of sight for a while. Say, I’d like to see that house-boat of yours.”

“We don’t even charge for looking at it.”

“Come ahead, Pinger; toddle,” said Bill Stiles.

“My legs are too tired,” grumbled Roy, seating himself on a stump. “Good thing we got grub in that farmhouse about ten miles back.”

In a few minutes Bob and his friends learned that the names of the other students were Grigsby, Cole, Dale and Andrews.

As they lolled around, the boys told him about their annual motor boat trip, and how on this occasion they had felt it their duty to look after the “poor Thornton chaps.”

“You’ll see ’em,” remarked Bill Stiles, “and meet a mighty cheeky fellow—Lon Bates is his name. Ready to skip now, Pinger?”

“Not yet,” answered Roy. “The charm of this moonlit scene holds me in its spell.”

“You mustn’t mind him,” said Stiles, with a laugh. “He’s been bitten by the writing bug, and practices on us; but his legs are weak.”

Many minutes passed and the boys still lingered, until a series of yells suddenly brought them to their feet.

“Those Thornton chaps, as sure as you live!” cried Roy Pinger, excitedly. “Listen!”

“Yelling again!” cried Stiles. “Wonder if anything’s up? We’ll soon find out.”

The way Roy Pinger’s legs immediately gained strength was quite remarkable. He quickly took the lead, and the others crashed after him, the shouts coming again serving to guide them in the right direction.

It was a long, hard tug, and all the boys were breathing heavily when they rushed out on the shore. Some distance away, they saw a group of shadowy figures surrounding one of the motor boats.

Bob Somers uttered an exclamation, and so did the others, for a single glance told them that the “Gray Gull” was not at her moorings; then, as a faint, but steady chug-chug broke upon their ears, all looked out on the river.

“Well, that’s another queer trick,” murmured Dave, puffing hard. “Sugar! This is a night of surprises, all right.”

But Bob Somers and the others were now far in the lead, and all his breath and endurance were needed to keep from being left behind.

As the Ripley boys neared the others, they uttered several yells, and the half-defiant calls of the Thornton boys, like an echo, floated back.

The party came to a halt just as the motor boat was slowly forging out into the river.

“What’s up with you fellows?” yelled Lon Bates, from the “Reindeer,” his tone indicating great astonishment.

“Gee whiz!” called Ralph Chickers. “Where did you chaps pick up that bunch? Are you fellows doing a Marathon?”

But Stiles made no answer to these questions. A peculiar light came into his eyes, as he turned quickly toward Roy Pinger.

“There’s that chaffer in the boat, sure as you live!” he exclaimed.

“I see him,” said Roy.

“And that must be George Clayton’s guardian,” chimed in Fred Winter, excitedly, as he caught a glimpse of the Colonel’s military figure in the bow.

“H’m; and we thought the chauffeur had come alone,” murmured Bob.

“Hurry up!” cried Stiles. “The ‘Dart’s’ a faster boat than theirs; we’ll find out what those duffers are up to.”

“You bet we will!” yelled Roy. “Quick, you chaps!”

Sarcastic calls came from the Thornton crowd as the “Reindeer” drew rapidly away.

“Good-bye, little boys,” came in Bates’ loud voice. “So sorry to leave you.”

“Oh, you won’t leave us, even if we have a big crowd aboard,” yelled Bill Stiles. “Don’t worry.”

With a rush, the lads made for the “Dart,” and Fred Winter, who was as excited as he ever got to be, tumbled in last.

“Up with the anchor,” commanded Stiles, tersely. “Fall all over yourself, Jim Dale,” he added, as the latter, in an effort to be of some assistance, tripped ingloriously.

“This is great sport, eh, my four Bills?”

Stiles gave the fly-wheel several quick revolutions; the engine responded almost instantly, and the “Dart” glided ahead. Soon, under full power, it was hastening after the “Reindeer.”

The moon shone from a cloudless sky, and a thousand sparkling ripples shot from the dark gray water. The distant shores were lost in haze, while the line of woods close at hand stood out in patches of impenetrable shadows and silvery lights.

With her throbbing engine sending forth a steady stream of pulsations, the “Dart” cut swiftly through the water. It was exhilarating sport, and, as Bob Somers leaned back, he thoroughly enjoyed the easy, gliding motion.

Far ahead, but a mere, uncertain patch of dark with two tiny specks of light, was the “Gray Gull.”

“I can’t understand it,” murmured Fred, in perplexity. “Wonder why those chaps put off; and what in the dickens George’s guardian is chasing them for?”

“We’ll soon know,” laughed Bob.

The faces of the Ripley boys shone with excitement, for this was a splendid opportunity to have some fun with their rivals.

“Those foolish Thornton chaps have been getting altogether too fresh lately,” commented Bill Stiles. “To-night, the Ripley seniors will teach ’em another lesson.”

“And one they won’t forget in a hurry,” chimed in Roy Pinger, bubbling over with glee. “Bates will think his old ‘Reindeer’ is moving backward.”

“That Colonel and the chaffer want to get on your house-boat, my four Bills,” remarked Stiles, presently. “And our job——”

“Is to show the Thornton chaps they can’t put him there,” laughed Sam Grigsby. “We’re gaining on ’em fast.”

“Only a few minutes more,” breathed Roy Pinger. “Keep her a bit out, Stiles—that’s it—steady! Remember, you chaps, that Ripley’s reputation is at stake.”

“My eye! Don’t fear—we’re not going to forget it,” grinned Harry Cole.

Steadily the swifter “Dart” gained on its rival. Already the dark forms of the “Reindeer’s” crew began to grow more distinct.

A loud, long and sarcastic call came over the intervening space. Lon Bates had a tremendous voice, and knew how to use it.

A rousing answer was immediately returned. Then, with eager eyes, the boys watched the space between the motor boats slowly lessening.

“We’re doing it now,” cried Bill Stiles, gleefully. “Get ready, fellows.”

“I say,” put in Fred Winter, nervously, “aren’t you chaps getting kind of reckless?”

“Wait and see, Bill number three,” said Stiles, dryly.

“Can you swim?” asked Roy Pinger, with a very wide grin.

“Of course,” said Fred, “but I don’t want to;” and he took off his glasses and looked apprehensively at the choppy little waves flowing swiftly by.

“Better get ready for anything,” counseled Harry Cole.

“For the fun will begin in a few minutes,” added Grigsby. “Sound the war-call, Andrews—won’t be the first time they’ve heard it.”

Owen Andrews, a tall, lanky lad, with a shock of sandy hair sweeping across his forehead, thrust his hand into a locker and drew forth a very long tin horn.

“Signal number three,” he remarked, solemnly, “meaning no quarter, eh, cap?”

“That’s it,” grinned Bill Stiles. “Let ’er go!”

Andrews placed the tin horn to his lips; immediately there followed an ear-splitting blast which fairly made Fred Winter jump to his feet. He had never known that a tin horn could be made to produce such a variety of unearthly sounds; and when Andrews, quite red in the face from his exertions, took it from his lips, he gave a sigh of relief.

“Did yourself proud that time,” commented Bill Stiles. “Finish it.”

And Andrews did. A perfect din again floated over the air; and then the sounder of war-calls sank back quite exhausted.

Before the last echoes had ceased, a series of tremendous yells came from the Thorntons. They rose in a crescendo and ended in a medley of long-drawn-out groans.

“The correct answer to signal number three,” remarked Stiles, with satisfaction. “But say, aren’t those fellows getting cheeky, though?”

The “Reindeer” was now rapidly approaching the house-boat, which had stopped its engine; and now the swift-flying “Dart” was so close to its rival that the faces of the boys could be clearly seen.

“Stop your engine!” commanded Stiles, fiercely.

“Stop nothing!” yelled Lon Bates, defiantly. “Keep off!”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“Yes! And this is our answer,” and again the war-call of the Thorntons broke forth.

Stiles smiled grimly, but made no response.

Gradually the “Dart” drew abreast, and, as the two motor boats raced side by side, Colonel Ellison and his chauffeur looked on in astonishment.

“Keep that boat away!” commanded the former, half rising in his seat.

“Ma foi, yes; it is one grand risk,” chimed in Pierre, with fear in his tone.

“Then make him stop his own engine!” shouted Bill Stiles. And he actually changed his course, so that the prow of the “Dart” began to swing slowly in toward the “Reindeer.”

The utter abandon and recklessness of the Ripley students brought forth a storm of stern protests from the now really alarmed Colonel.

“Look out!” he called; “you’ll be into us in another moment—look out!”

But Bill Stiles paid no heed to this warning. The “Gray Gull” was now but a short distance away, and both boats were headed directly toward it.

“What are you trying to do, you idiots?” yelled Lon Bates, alarmed and angry.

“Swing around, if you don’t like it; quick, now!”

“Great Cæsar!” groaned Fred Winter. “These reckless chaps will have us all in the water.”

“I insist—shut down your engine!” roared the Colonel, and, with an angry gesture, he reached over, as if to operate the lever himself.

Boiling over with anger, and seeing that his rivals had all the advantage, the captain of the “Reindeer” was forced to yield. The pounding of the motor suddenly ceased; he changed his course with an abruptness that sent Colonel Ellison lurching back in his seat.

As he did so, the Ripley boys gave a tremendous yell of triumph, and their war-call again sounded over the Hudson.

Then the “Dart” shot swiftly across the “Reindeer’s” bow.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE RED CAR

Bright and early on the following morning, George Clayton and Aleck Hunt were astir, and had their breakfast. Then they strolled leisurely around the town, taking in the sights.

Newburgh is charmingly situated, and has many points of interest.

About half-past nine, the boys reached the garage, took their places in the touring car, and, in a moment, were out on the busy street.

“Now for Poughkeepsie,” remarked George. “Weather doesn’t look very promising—all gray and cloudy.”

“And last night was such a dandy,” sighed Aleck. “Say, we’re awfully careless.”

“How?”

“Might have run plumb into that chauffeur.”

“Wouldn’t have bothered me in the least,” said George, calmly. “I made up my mind to see Poughkeepsie, and I’m going,” and again he spoke in a tone which indicated that he was accustomed to having his own way.

“Automobiling is a jolly fine sport, isn’t it?” said Aleck.

“Yes, when everything goes all right,” laughed George. “But I’ve seen times when I thought it pretty stupid.”

“In what way?”

“Well—a busted tire; or something the matter with the machinery, and nothing to keep you company but a lot of rocks and trees. Here’s the post-office; I’ll stop and scribble a line to Uncle Dan.”

“And me for a postal card home,” said Aleck.

The writing was done in a remarkably short time, and the two were soon driving along the principal street.

“I’m tired of dodging cars and wagons,” said George, at length. “We’ll get out in the country and put on a bit of speed.”

“But don’t go so fast we can’t get a look at the scenery,” remarked Aleck, who seemed to have developed a wonderful fondness for nature during the last few hours.

George looked at him quizzically, but made no reply, and, within a short time, the red touring car was flying swiftly through a rather flat, open country dotted with farms.

The sky was dark and lowering; rain threatened to fall at any instant, and, as the morning progressed, a breeze sprang up and the ominous look of nature increased.

“We’re going to catch it,” grumbled George.

“In for a ducking, sure enough,” said Aleck. “It’s too bad.”

A few miles from Newburgh, a fine, steady drizzle set in and blew in their faces, and not being provided with goggles, the boys found it very unpleasant.

Now and then, they passed a village, and occasionally a farmer’s wagon rattled slowly by.

“This is one of the times when automobiling is pretty dull sport,” sighed George. “I wish now we were in the nice, comfortable cabin of the ‘Gray Gull.’”

The drizzle gradually increased to a steady rain. All nature was wet, and wore a dismal aspect.

As the rain beat relentlessly upon them, the boys’ spirits fell, and they lapsed into silence, while the red touring car rolled off mile after mile, passing farmhouses and small villages, where the ever-present small dog rushed out to bark and snarl and risk his life in front of the gliding monster.

On long, straight stretches, George drove as fast as he dared, and Aleck, who was getting used to the sensation, made no protest, but, wet and miserable, huddled back in an effort to protect himself from the pelting rain.

“Well, I certainly am disgusted,” declared George, at length. “I couldn’t be wetter—could you?”

“Not if the river was to roll up and spill all over me,” sighed Aleck, ruefully. “Nice looking messes we are to go to Poughkeepsie. What shall we do when we get there?”

“Leave the auto in a garage I know of; then wait for the ‘Gray Gull.’ She ought to be along by early evening.”

“Who’s going to take the auto back to Nyack?”

“Pierre, or myself. Remember, Aleck, it’s my machine.”

Another hour passed, and George uttered a sigh of satisfaction.

“Not much further, now,” he said. “See, there’s the Great Poughkeepsie railroad bridge.”

“Gee whiz, it’s high and it’s long,” said Aleck, with interest. “Looks pretty faint through the rain, doesn’t it?”

“Yes; and there’s a ferry-boat coming in. We’ll be just in time to get across.”

The car glided upon the ferry-boat with just an instant to spare and came to a stop behind a farmer’s wagon.

Had the day been pleasant, the two boys would have thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Close by was the great railroad bridge, behind them rose a line of picturesque hills, and across the river lay Poughkeepsie, at the present moment quite hidden by rain and mist.

In a few moments, the ferry-boat was under way. The wind had kicked up the surface of the gray, gloomy river into whitecapped waves, and the boys could not help wondering how the “Gray Gull” was faring amidst such a storm.

Gradually the buildings of the town became visible; then the ferry-boat entered her slip, and the red touring car slowly followed the farmer’s wagon into the street, and up the hill.

Main Street is a wide, pleasant thoroughfare lined on either side with good-sized buildings, and, in spite of the stormy weather, presented a busy appearance.

George kept to the side of the car track.

“Garage isn’t far,” he said. “And won’t I be glad to get there? If Pierre knew about our trip, he’d have the laugh on us.”

“Yes, he would,” said Aleck, dismally.

“We’ll swing right around this corner, and——”

“Better let the car back of us pass,” interrupted Aleck.

George glanced over his shoulder.

“I’m too good a chauffeur to lose so much time,” he laughed, as he turned the touring car and started to cross the track.

“Now I’ll——”

He stopped short and uttered an exclamation. With a suddenness that jarred both boys, the automobile came to an abrupt halt, and the car bearing down upon them was prevented from crashing into it only by the quick and timely efforts of the motorman.

“Hey there! What are you about?” he yelled.

“Another pretty mess,” murmured George, with a rather dismal expression. “I can’t make it budge.”

“Great Scott!” cried Aleck.

“Come now, get out of that!” continued the motorman, clanging his gong loudly.

George, without replying, continued his efforts to send the automobile ahead; but it stood across the track just as immovably as if its wheels had never revolved.

A crowd of curious onlookers began to collect.

“Get a horse!” shouted some one.

“Step out and push,” chimed in another.

“Don’t you know any better than to block the cars?” said a third.

Suggestions and bantering remarks flew thick and fast, while George, red in the face and fuming, jumped out and began to examine the machinery.

Another car rolled up; wagons began to stop, and, in a few minutes, the embarrassed boys began to think the whole population of Poughkeepsie had assembled at that particular point.

“Try an aeroplane next time, boys,” said a tall, grave-looking man.

“Speak gently, and coax it,” laughed his companion.

“We’re twenty minutes late now,” growled the disgusted motorman, approaching. “Things is comin’ to a pretty pass when youngsters is allowed to run them things by theirselves. Hurry up, bub. Hey, you in the car, why don’t you get out of that, and help your pard?”

“Fond of stayin’ out in de roin?” asked an urchin.

“I’m twenty minutes late now, an’——”

“It’ll be forty soon,” said the boy, in great glee.

“One—two—three cars back, and another coming,” said the motorman. “If Bill Watson was here, he’d make that thing go.”

Considerably flustered at the commotion, George worked and perspired, but not being an expert made no progress at all. With an obstinacy that defied all his efforts, the motor refused to work, and Aleck, who had jumped to the ground, looked at him in dismay.

“What’s to be done?” he whispered.

“I don’t know,” answered the other, blankly.

“Twenty-six and a half minutes late. I ain’t goin’ to stand this no longer,” growled the motorman.

“You ain’t standing it; the auto’s doing that,” remarked some one.

In spite of the rain, a great crowd jostled and surged around the stalled automobile. Seven cars stretched back in a line, and five wagons had stopped.

“Git your shoulders to the thing an’ push it over to the side,” commanded the motorman. “Never could see no sense in ’em, anyhow. Git out from under there, bub—I’m twenty-nine minutes late a’ready.”

“Make it thirty and be done with it,” grumbled the disgusted George, red in the face.

“No sass—I don’t take none.”

“Same here.”

“Jest listen at that, gents! He ain’t satisfied with tying up the whole car line; but he hands out sass. Can you beat it?” and, with a wave of his hand, the motorman appealed to the crowd.

“Quit your row, now,” broke in George, sharply.

“Me—makin’ a row? Well, did I ever hear sich talk? Thirty-one an’ a half minutes late! Any more of that sass comin’?”

“Do you think I stopped here on purpose?”

“Wal, you’ll git out on purpose. Now I——”

“What’s the trouble here?” exclaimed an authoritative voice.

A policeman pushed his way forward. Then, as his eyes rested on the number of the automobile, he uttered an exclamation.

“Just the one we’re looking for,” he said, eagerly. “Where are the fellows running it?”

“Right here,” said the motorman. “Cap, I’m thirty-four minutes late, an’ that there——”

“Hey! Nab those two chaps!” roared the policeman, ducking around the car.

But George Clayton had quickly taken in the situation.

The hot blood mounted to his face, as he thought of being actually detained, and he determined to outwit the authorities, regardless of his automobile and everything else.

With a hurried, “Come ahead, Aleck,” he dashed headlong out of the crowd, and made for a side street, while Aleck instantly followed.

The crowd seemed to melt, and the lusty shouts of the policeman urged the boys on.

Thoroughly aroused, George and Aleck put on a terrific burst of speed, and easily distanced the foremost of their pursuers. They were just as successful

in dodging several who tried to head them off.

Up one street and down another the boys raced, with several street curs barking and snapping at their heels.

When they came to a pause, it was by the side of a lumber yard. The high piles served as a protection from the rain, and the two, breathing hard, leaned against the fence, and looked anxiously for any signs of their pursuers.

“Some excitement, eh?” gasped George, when he had recovered his breath sufficiently to speak.

“I should say so,” panted Aleck, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “Whew! Maybe we haven’t had a time of it. But say, how about your auto?”

“That part of it doesn’t bother me,” answered George, with a calmness that surprised his companion. “The authorities are bound to take care of it. Gee whiz—it made my blood boil when I thought of being held in this place until Uncle Dan, or perhaps Pierre, should straighten things out. Just think of it.”

“I did think of it,” said Aleck. “That’s the reason I ran so fast. Don’t believe we’re safe in this place.”

“Nor I, either.”

“What shall we do?”

“Look out for the ‘Gray Gull’; and make Jack Lyons sail right away from Poughkeepsie.”

“We’ll have some hours to wait.”

“Well, we can go to some small restaurant and get a bite to eat. Jiminy, I’d like to know what they have done with the auto,” and George laughed.

“Wonder what was the matter with it?”

“Don’t know, I’m sure.”

“We’d better get along.”

“That’s right. And keep far away from Main Street. Gee! My little trip has certainly raised the dickens; and all on account of Pierre Dufour’s

stupidity.”

Slowly and cautiously the two walked to the corner, and seeing nothing but a deserted street, started briskly off, keeping a watchful eye open for any signs of danger. Half an hour later, they entered a small restaurant near the river front, and enjoyed the best in the house.

The meal and a long rest put them in better spirits again, and when they walked outside it was to see that the rain had stopped enough to allow a patch of blue sky to show between the slowly moving clouds.

“This is a bit better,” remarked George, with satisfaction; “but I wish it had stopped before it began. Where shall we go? Why, down by the river, I guess. Your legs tired? It’s a good thing you can’t feel mine—no Marathons for me.”

The boys continued their walk, never going very far from the river. On the outskirts of the city, they came across an old man sitting on a log, puffing contentedly away on a short pipe. Close by his side was a shaggy dog.

The old fellow looked up as the two approached. His face, bronzed a deep brown, was seamed with wrinkles, but his eyes were kindly and a smile curled his lips.

“Afternoon, youngsters,” he said, cheerfully.

“How are you?” replied George and Aleck, almost in a breath.

“Fair to middlin’. Me name’s Bill Hollback.”

“Glad to hear it,” said George, politely.

“An’ me father’s name was Bill Hollback; his father’s name was Bill Hollback; an’ hisn, too, was Bill Hollback. Kinder curious, eh?”

“Very.”

“An’ that ain’t all; me son’s name is Bill Hollback.”

“I hope they are all well and happy,” said George.

“Hey?”

“That is—of course, I mean you and young Bill.”

“Oh, yes; fair to middlin’. This here dog’s name is Sailor.”

“That’s a nice name.”

“Yes—fair to middlin’. That there skiff ye see out there is mine; gived to me by the finest man you ever see—lives over to Ticketwood house.”

“A nice boat,” said Aleck. “The ‘Lottie,’ eh?”

“Yes—fair to middlin’ name. I’ve sailed a bit in me life. What’s that—will I hire me boat? Say that again, youngster—will I hire me boat?”

“That’s what I asked,” said George, smilingly. “Eh, Aleck, we’ll go back to meet the ‘Gray Gull.’ Say, why can’t we?”

“Suits me to a dot.”

“Then let’s start right off. Come on, Mr. Hollback; we’ll have a jolly nice sail,” and George walked over to the edge of a rickety wharf.

Old Bill and his dog arose.

“You have spoke the cheerfulest words I’ve hearn fur a long spell,” he said. “‘Will I hire me boat?’ Them words don’t sound nateral. Would ye mind sayin’ them again?” and Old Bill chuckled mirthfully, as George complied.

Old Bill Hollback was a good sailor and knew how to get the benefit of all the breeze that was stirring, and the “Lottie” was soon standing out from the wharf.

Vivid patches of blue sky showed in many places, and the sunlight streamed through the openings. The afternoon and evening promised to be delightful.

The “Lottie” was a speedy boat, and the stiff breeze filled out her sail; and, now and then, her bow, plunging into the whitecapped waves, sent a sheet of spray flying over the gunwale.

“Yes,” said Old Bill, “I spent many a year on the water; once made a voyage to China. All the Hollbacks was sailors. Me father’s name was Bill, and his father’s name——”

“Did you like China?” interrupted George, hastily.

“Fair to middlin’. Somebody hailin’ us, ain’t there?”

“Yes, over on that wharf.”

“We’ll p’int her in a bit, an’ see what he wants.”

“Hello, Bill Hollback!” came a loud voice. “Hello!”

“Me eyes ain’t so good; but I knows his voice,” said Old Bill. “He belongs to the perlice.”

George and Aleck exchanged swift glances.

“I’ve done bits o’ work fur ’im; onct helped ’im run down a gang o’ river thieves——”

“Hello, Bill Hollback!” yelled the man on the wharf again. “Keep your eyes skinned for a house-boat with a parcel of boys aboard. It’s coming up the river.”

“Ye see,” chuckled Old Bill, “them perlice needs me ag’in.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE COLONEL IS ANGRY

“What do you mean by such conduct, you young rascals?” thundered Colonel Ellison, wrathfully.

Bill Stiles had manœuvred in such a manner that the “Dart” now rested between the “Reindeer” and house-boat.

“Well,” answered Bill, calmly, “those Thornton chaps have been too fresh lately, and we’re just showing them for about the hundredth time that it doesn’t pay to buck up against Ripley.”

“Oh, you are, eh?” sneered Lon Bates. “If it hadn’t been for this gentleman and his choofer, I wouldn’t have given you an inch.”

“Of course not,” chimed in Ralph Chickens, no less disgusted than his chief.

“That will do from you, ‘Chickens,’” observed Bill Stiles.

Colonel Ellison moved uneasily in his seat.

“I shall report your utterly reckless and disgraceful conduct to the school authorities,” he went on. “You narrowly escaped upsetting us. Such a lot of children should never be entrusted with a motor boat.”

“Quite correct, sir,” said Lon Bates.

“And I demand that you immediately stand out of our way, as I wish to be put aboard that house-boat. Redfern,” he shouted, “is my nephew there?”

“No, Colonel Ellison, he is not.”

“I intend to see for myself.”

“You are quite welcome to do so.”

“Get out of our way, Bill Stiles,” commanded Lon Bates. “You heard what this gentleman said.”

“My ears are good, Bates. Colonel, we shall run up alongside; and if you will kindly step into our boat, you shall be transferred in something less than a minute.”

“Not on your life!” cried Bates, indignantly.

“The idea,” said Tom Allen.

“Stop your wrangling, boys,” exclaimed the exasperated Colonel. “I can’t stay out here all night.”

Norman Redfern interposed.

“See here, fellows,” he said, addressing the Ripleys, “I’m a graduate of Ripley. I ask that you withdraw, as a favor to me.”

This remark caused an immense sensation.

Owen Andrews picked up the tin horn, and blew another tremendous blast, and a salvo of cheers arose on the air.

“That’s the way we always salute our graduates,” said Bill Stiles, when the frantic din had subsided.

“Being skipper of a log hut is doing pretty well for a graduate of Ripley,” said Bates.

This remark caused a hearty burst of laughter, in which Redfern joined.

“Ma foi—he speaks well,” exclaimed Pierre. “But, oh, how much of it we hear. Is it all night that we have ze grand talk?”

“Apparently so,” said Colonel Ellison, with a faint touch of amusement in his voice.

“Ripley has won another victory,” remarked Bill Stiles, “and is satisfied. We are the ultra-personification of grandiloquent magnanimity.”

A faint “oh” came from Pierre; then silence fell upon the scene, only to be broken a moment later by the sound of the “Dart’s” engine.

“Look alive, Bill on the house-boat,” went on Stiles, addressing Jack Lyons. “Catch this line.”

He threw it; then stopped his motor, and, with considerable skill, navigated the “Dart” so that she swung easily up to the “Gray Gull.”

Jack Lyons and Joe Preston uttered exclamations as Bob Somers, who had been seated far back, rose to his feet.

“Where in the dickens did all you fellows come from, old boy?” began Jack.

Bob gave a warning gesture.

“I’ll tell you in a few minutes. Much obliged, you Ripley chaps. We’ve had a lively race.”

“Why, where in the world is George? And where’s Aleck?” burst out Joe.

“Sh-h-h! Wait a minute,” whispered Bob, who had now jumped aboard the house-boat. “Can’t talk for a minute—here comes his guardian.”

The “Reindeer” presently landed its distinguished passenger. Colonel Ellison stepped forward and favored the former tutor with a tremendous frown.

“Redfern,” he said, sternly, “what is the meaning of this? What business had you to run away?”

“He didn’t,” interposed Jack Lyons, calmly.

“Explain yourself, young man.”

“Well, it was this way,” said Jack. “Won’t you have a seat, sir?”

“No!” said Colonel Ellison, sharply.

“I took the ‘Gray Gull’ out myself.”

“Thought the river was free; the air is,” said Joe, cheerfully.

“You attempted to run away. Answer me—did you not expect to pick up my ward and have him continue with you, in spite of my express wish to the contrary?”

“No, sir—not exactly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let me explain, Colonel,” interposed Redfern, with a slight flush.

“I’m talking to this young man.”

“Well, sir,” said Jack, calmly, “the honest fact is I wanted to see George before he ran into you; and——”

“What?” cried Colonel Ellison.

“And I knew that if he saw the ‘Gray Gull’ out on the river he’d suspect something and keep out of sight. You see——”

“I never listened to such impudence in my life,” stormed the angry Colonel. “You heard that, Norman Redfern?”

“Oh, my, oh, my!” gulped Joe.

“Sh-sh,” said Fred; “be more polite.”

“You haven’t heard quite all, Colonel,” interrupted Redfern.

“Oh, there is more to come, eh?”

“Yes, sir,” went on Jack, calmly facing the angry gentleman.

“Tickets to the show, ten cents,” came from the irrepressible Bates; “three for a quarter. Children admitted free.”

“It’s an honest fact—we were going to try and make George return home; but we thought he ought to have a chance, and not be dragged back for that silly chauffeur to have the laugh on him.”

“George is a high-spirited boy,” said Redfern; “but we hoped to appeal to his reason.”

“And head off a fierce row,” added Bates. “Say, what wouldn’t have happened in the word-throwing line?”

“So you have constituted yourselves into a committee, as it were, to decide questions between myself and my ward? Very well, Redfern; I wish you to understand one thing—let my ward alone, or I shall place the matter in the hands of the authorities.”

Turning abruptly, Colonel Ellison hailed the Thornton students.

“Young gentlemen,” he said, “will you kindly put me ashore?”

“Certainly,” answered Lon Bates. “Start the engine, ‘Chickens,’—only about five thumps. That will do. Hang on to the post there, until the gentleman gets in.”

When Colonel Ellison was seated safely, he turned toward the boys from Ripley.

“Young men,” he said, “your conduct will be reported to the proper authorities.”

But when, a moment later, the “Reindeer” was set in motion, the “Dart” immediately followed.

A chorus of cheery “good-nights” floated over the air, and the house-boat was again alone.

“Talk about a racket,” laughed Jack, as they watched the rapidly receding boats. “It was pretty lively, eh? Now, Bob Somers, what’s all this mystery? Where are Aleck and George?”

Bob Somers’ story produced a great sensation.

Jack whistled and thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and whistled again, while Joe burst out laughing.

Redfern looked very grave indeed.

“Things are getting worse and worse,” he said. “Bob, don’t you think you should have told all this to Colonel Ellison?”

“I didn’t care to act in too great a rush,” answered Bob, calmly. “It’s easy to see that George’s guardian is in a very unreasonable frame of mind.”

“We can’t figure out what he is going to do,” returned Redfern. “He may continue; or go back; or notify the authorities. It is only right that we should make an effort to let him know the facts at once.”

“Small chance to catch him, unless he lands at the nearest point,” observed Dave.

“Maybe the painful way in which the automobile disappeared will take the pair kiting back to the spot where it was last seen,” said Joe, with a tremendous grin.

“We’ll head for that section of the earth,” said Jack.

Under full power, the “Gray Gull” was soon forging ahead. The changing position of the tiny specks of light in the distance indicated that the motor

boats were still in motion, but their course did not seem to be toward the shore.

“Say, Jack,” remarked Fred, solemnly, a few moments later, “if you were so anxious George shouldn’t run into his guardian, why didn’t one of you wait somewhere on the road for him, or in the woods?”

“Couldn’t tell from what direction George might come. Besides, we thought the Colonel wouldn’t hang around any longer if the house-boat pulled out.”

“Big surprise when those two launches began scooting after us,” chimed in Joe.

Dave raised the telescope and swept the surface of the river.

“Still on the move, and going right up stream,” he declared.

“Are you sure?” asked Redfern, with a frown.

“Yes; no doubt of it. Take a look if you like.”

“Never mind; I’ll accept your statement as a fact. But we’d better continue the chase until we can no longer trace their movements.”

CHAPTER XIX

GEORGE IS WANTED

“Well, this is a nice state of affairs, isn’t it?” whispered George, when he had recovered sufficiently from his astonishment to speak. “Looks as if we had jumped from the frying-pan into the fire.”

“Yes,” remarked Old Bill, “I’ve done lots of work fur them perlice. Ye see, I always hang out on the river—can’t get away from the smell o’ the water. All the Hollbacks was sailors. Me father’s name was——”

“You told us before,” said George, hastily.

“So I did. Wal, I’ve done fair to middlin’, an’——”

“Going to watch out for this house-boat?” asked George, carelessly.

“Sure as me father’s name was Bill Hollback. It ain’t nuthin’ to me what they’s done. The perlice says to Bill Hollback, ‘Look out fur a house-boat,’ an’ I says to the perlice, ‘There she be,’ leastwise if they don’t up an’ skip afore the perlice git here.”

The water-front of Poughkeepsie presented a variety of picturesque and interesting sights. The “Lottie” sailed under the railroad bridge, and the boys greatly admired the immense structure. Then they went by the ferry slips, where one of the boats was just swinging out, and finally Old Bill headed out toward a slim, white-hulled yacht anchored near the opposite shore.

“Belongs to a New York feller,” he explained. “I know the cap’n.”

When the “Lottie” had sailed across the river, and circled around the handsome yacht, George declined an invitation from the good-natured mate to “step aboard,” and the skiff began her return voyage.

George was indeed sorry that their prospective trip to meet the house-boat had been so unexpectedly cut short.

“Bill,” he said, as they stood on the wharf and he handed the old sailor a two-dollar note, “does this pay you?”

“All fur me?” queried the other, arching his eyebrows in surprise.

“Every cent.”

“Wal, as sure as me father’s name was Bill Hollback and hisn was too, I’m surprised. Youngsters, I’m a friend of yourn fur life.”

“Good,” laughed George. “Now, Bill, I’m kind of curious about that house-boat—I’d like to know something about it. May we see you to-night?”

“You certainly kin. I lives near the wharf; an’ will sartinly be proud to hev ye come,” and Old Bill named a street and told the boys how to reach it.

It was about half-past six when the two set out in search of Old Bill’s house. They easily found the street. It was a narrow, winding thoroughfare with rickety dwellings and large storehouses. The surroundings seemed to suggest water, and boats, and Bill Hollbacks.

Crushed between two larger buildings was the old riverman’s home; and the two found both himself and Bill Junior waiting to receive them.

“Come right in, youngsters,” he said, heartily. “You’re as welcome as the flowers in May. Fetch chairs, you Bill—that’s it.”

George and Aleck looked about them with interest. The old-fashioned, dingy room and old-fashioned furniture seemed so apart from the present age that they would not have been surprised to learn that the long line of Bill Hollbacks, from the dim and misty past to the present, had spent their lives within its walls.

“Wal, youngsters, I ain’t got much to tell ye,” said Old Bill, reflectively.

“Didn’t you see that house-boat, after all?” asked George, carelessly.

“Sartinly did; and with me own eyes. A crowd o’ lively chaps aboard, too. But it didn’t do no good.”

“How’s that?”

“Wal, some youngster they was lookin’ fur weren’t there.”

“Oh!” said Aleck, also in a very indifferent tone.

Old Bill's quaint and original views were so entertaining that the boys stayed much longer than they had intended.

Suddenly a loud, peremptory knock on the door startled them.

"Must be Dexter," said Old Bill. "He's the man what called to me from the wharf this afternoon. Drops in 'most every night fur a cup of coffee, Dexter does. Open the door, lad."

A tall, thin man entered. He had an aquiline nose, keen gray eyes, and an air of authority.

"Hello, Bill," he said, familiarly. "Company—don't often happen, eh? Sit still, lads. How's the world treating you, Bill?"

"Fair to middlin'. These youngsters was out with me this arternoon in the 'Lottie.' They was kinder curious about that there house-boat, and dropped in to ask about it."

Dexter fixed his keen, gray eyes on George Clayton's face, and a rather peculiar expression flashed across his own. He leaned forward, and the boy noted, with sudden apprehension, that the look he received was more than one of idle curiosity.

"Brown hair, blue eyes, straight features, gray suit, soft hat."

Dexter, checking off this enumeration on his fingers, paused, and smiled grimly.

"Stop—stop!" he yelled, an instant later.

George had been thinking quickly, and was already on his feet. Springing forward, he overturned his chair, reached the front door, and flung it wide open. Aleck was scarcely a yard behind him.

"Stop—stop!" commanded Dexter, again.

But his words fell upon deaf ears. The two boys pounded along the pavement, which was almost deserted, and were soon around a corner.

Bill Junior was on their trail. Bill was long of limb and fleet of foot. The pursuing Dexter was soon left far behind; but Bill Junior kept close at their heels, unshakable as their own shadows.

"Stop, you fellows, stop!" he panted. "Stop—I want to speak with ye."

Looking over his shoulder, George saw how near their pursuer was. He gritted his teeth; his breath was almost spent; one more desperate effort, and he was obliged to halt.

Panting, George Clayton backed up against a high fence. It was a deserted locality. Close by, a lone gas lamp cast a pale, flickering glare on a row of posters; across the way was a line of tenements, deep in shadow; beyond, were fields. It seemed on the edge of nowhere—a dismal, forbidding place.

Aleck stopped close by. For several moments, none of the three boys spoke. A variety of feelings coursed through George Clayton's breast. He looked at Bill Junior's strong, loosely-put-together frame, his big, bony hands; and gazed at the grinning face with its tousled hair, and then—

Bill Junior extended his hand.

"You're a couple o' smart ones," he cried. "My, oh, my! An' pop talkin' the way he did! Ha, ha—I can't get over it—ha, ha!" and Bill Junior, having recovered his breath, immediately lost it again in a paroxysm of mirth. "Oh, my, oh, my, but ain't I glad that old Dexter got left! It's the richest thing out; an' pop talkin' the way he did! Ha, ha!"

"And you mean," gasped George, scarcely believing his ears, "that you didn't come after us to——"

"I'm awful tickled that ye got away—that's what!" cried Bill Junior, heartily; "an' I come after ye to tell ye. Ha, ha, but won't I jist laugh at pop an' old Dexter? Shake—ye're a couple o' smart ones."

"Bill," remarked George Clayton, with a sigh of relief, "you're a regular brick."

"I should say so," chimed in Aleck. "Gee, but if I had only known before I broke the quarter mile record. Do you think Dexter will look for us?"

"Sure! That fellow would spend a week lookin' fur an alley cat, if it got away from him," said Bill Junior, forcibly.

"Then," said George, with some alarm, "we'd better get along."

"I know whar' the house-boat is, an' I'm goin' to tell them fellers to watch out fur ye."

The three held a brief consultation, and Bill gave them a bit of advice which the boys agreed to accept.

“Well,” said George, with a long breath, as Bill’s figure disappeared around a corner, “did you ever hear of anything to beat it? To think of running right into the very fellow who was looking for me.”

The two soon reached the river front. The great bridge and hills rising on the opposite shore formed a pleasing picture; but the street close at hand, with its pools of water and dismal surroundings, did not.

They struck off briskly, and soon were leaving the city behind.

In about half an hour, they saw a lone, frame house standing back from the road.

“This must be the deserted building that Bill Junior told us about,” remarked George, with a laugh. “Nice place for a millionaire boy to spend the night.”

The house, with its gabled ends and peaked roof, wore a mysterious air in the moonlight. Over its pillared door vines grew in profusion and thick masses climbed across the front of the house.

There was no door to impede their progress. In spite of himself, Aleck found creepy feelings stealing over him. But it would never do to back out now. With a cheery whistle, he stepped boldly into the hall, then through a doorway, to find himself in a large room.

But he had no sooner set foot inside than a series of strange sounds suddenly started up, and, with an exclamation of alarm, he stepped back.

Before Aleck could make another move, an object struck him violently on the back of the head, sending him against the wall.

CHAPTER XX

TWO NIGHTS

For an instant, Aleck Hunt was too terrified to move. The weird sound of flapping wings filled the room. A black object flashed close to his head; then another, and Aleck, with a stifled cry, dodged hastily through the doorway, and collided with George Clayton.

“Good gracious! What’s the matter?” gasped the latter, in alarm.

“Bats,” answered Aleck, laconically.

George peered cautiously in.

“Jiminy, the room is full of them!” he cried. “Never saw so many in my life.”

“I got an awful crack on the head,” said Aleck, ruefully. “Nearly knocked me over.”

“Moral: never go into a perfectly dark and deserted place without looking,” laughed George.

The moonlight streaming through the broken panes revealed a number of the creatures wildly circling around and around, sometimes skimming close to the wall.

“Look out!” yelled Aleck, suddenly.

One of the bats veered sharply, flew through the doorway directly over their heads, and disappeared into the next room. Another followed its lead, and the boys hastily moved away.

“Regular Batville,” remarked Aleck, rubbing his head. “And Bill Junior said it was just the place for us to spend the night.”

“Don’t suppose he ever saw these tenants,” laughed George. “What shall we do now?”

“Take a look up-stairs.”

This time, the other boy offered no objection, and, with Aleck in the lead, they started up. The rickety steps creaked and groaned dismally beneath their feet, and a cloud of dust arose. It was dark in the passageway and both moved with great caution, each instant expecting to hear the sound of flapping wings above their heads.

But the upper rooms were deserted, and the two breathed a sigh of relief as they entered the largest, their footsteps echoing strangely throughout the house.

“Well,” remarked Aleck.

“Well,” said George.

They looked at each other and laughed.

“Roughing it with a vengeance,” said George, walking toward the window. “A bit more than I bargained for; still, I guess we’ll have to stand it.”

“Just what we don’t want to do,” said Aleck, with a grin. “If we only had some straw, and a blanket, and——”

“Why not say a feather bed, nice, clean sheets, wash-stand and electric lights?”

“That’s so,” laughed Aleck. “What we can’t get, there’s no use kicking about, eh? Philosophy with a big P, old boy.”

Using their coats as pillows, the boys finally lay down.

It was a long, uncomfortable night, and never had they so welcomed the glimmer of early dawn. When George arose and looked out of the window, he saw in the eastern sky a line of purplish clouds edged underneath with a rosy glow, but all else was gray and cheerless.

“Aleck!” he called. “Wake up! I declare, how can that chap sleep so well?”

The other aroused with a start.

“Hello,” he cried. “Oh, my, but I’m sore and stiff,” and, as he arose, Aleck groaned and grumbled, and rubbed his aching bones.

“So am I,” said George, cheerfully. “But let’s be off. We’ll have breakfast at some farmhouse, and then for the ‘Gray Gull’ again.”

The day promised to be warm. As the sun rose higher and higher and the birds caroled and chirped, and squirrels scrambled frantically to places of safety and peered down with their bright, beady eyes, the boys forgot their pains and aches, in the enjoyment of nature.

A good-hearted farmer gave the two a ride, and, on turning off at a fork, told them where a meal could be had.

The people at the farmhouse welcomed them heartily, and the boys enjoyed a bountiful repast with some of the “men folks.”

An hour later, Aleck and George were lying in the shade of some fine old willows, watching eagerly for the house-boat.

The heat gradually increased; scarcely a breath of air seemed stirring.

Another hour passed, and George, who was lazily fanning his face with his handkerchief, started up.

“Hello, I’ll bet the ‘Gray Gull’ is coming,” he said. “See it?”

“Believe you’re right,” said Aleck, gleefully. “Won’t I be glad to see those chaps again?”

Eagerly, the two watched the dark spot gradually growing larger. It seemed to the boys as if the “Gray Gull” had never moved so slowly. Impatiently they ran along the beach toward it, giving several lusty yells and waving their arms.

“Hello, hello!” came faintly over the air, in Jack Lyons’ familiar voice.

Aleck put his fingers to his lips and whistled shrilly, while George shouted again.

The figures on the boat began to assume definite shape; then she was headed inshore. Enthusiastic greetings flew back and forth over the water, as though the boys had not seen each other for a month; and the boat had scarcely come to a stop before Jack Lyons leaped to the shore.

“Hello, Jack! Hello, Bob Somers!”

“Hello, George!”

“There’s Aleck!”

For several moments, questions flew from one to another, with bewildering rapidity, and George Clayton presently heard a piece of news which made him whistle and open his eyes wide with astonishment.

“What!” he gasped, scarcely believing his ears, “you saw Uncle Dan—he was on that automobile? Jehoshophat! Well, well!” and George thrust his hands deep in his pockets and whistled again.

“Big surprise, eh?” laughed Bob Somers.

“Surprise?” echoed George. “Surprise is no name for it. Whew! I don’t wonder he was angry. Sailed into you, Norman—of course?”

“It was an unfortunate combination of circumstances that led you to run away with the machine,” said Redfern. “I am sorry you were so thoughtless.”

George studied the ground an instant before replying.

“So am I, Norman,” he said, frankly. “But it can’t be helped now.”

“For goodness’ sake, tell us about that chase,” interrupted Aleck. “Must have had an exciting time, all right.”

Jack Lyons quickly gratified his curiosity, and both listeners smiled broadly at the recital.

“Those school chaps are still having lively times, aren’t they?” said George. “Mighty glad the Ripleys won out. I certainly should like to know where the other crowd landed Uncle Dan.”

“Maybe ‘Pouf’ wasn’t wild,” said Joe; “ha, ha!”

The rich boy soon completed his tale, and many “oh’s” and “ah’s” escaped from the lips of his deeply interested listeners.

“Yes, we saw the two Bill Hollbacks—father and son,” laughed Jack. “Great fellows, eh?”

Then, in a few words, he told how the “Gray Gull” had been visited by the authorities in response to a telegram sent by Colonel Ellison.

“And I know well enough that it was watched all night,” he went on, with a laugh. “But Bill Hollback Junior managed to tell us your plans—a regular brick—that fellow. So you slept in a deserted house, eh?”

“Yes, we did,” and Aleck rubbed the back of his head, reflectively.

Redfern again tried to induce his former pupil to return home.

But George shook his head.

“No, Redfern,” he said, quietly, “I won’t give that silly Pierre the least satisfaction. Unless Captain Jack puts me ashore, and it would be a mighty big scrap while it lasted, I’m going to keep on.”

“I give it up, then,” said Redfern, with a sigh.

“If a fleet o’ war vessels doesn’t come after us before I get started, I’ll put that remark in my history,” said Joe. “It will have to be a work in two volumes, quarto size, illustrated from life and otherwise by old Cap Lyons.”

“How I wish you’d begin. I do like to read funny things,” remarked Fred, with a very solemn face.

“It will be full of wit and pathos, also ginger, kind sir,” said Joe.

Jack kept the “Gray Gull” about fifty yards from shore. The atmosphere seemed to quiver with heat. The landscape was bathed in a yellow light, and the glare in the water was hard to look upon.

Jack tied the steering gear, and they retired within, each taking a turn at the window to see that the way was clear.

During the afternoon, the heat increased, the faint breeze entirely disappeared, and not a cloud spotted the sky.

Poor Confuse-us lay panting in a corner, gazing pitifully from one to another, scarcely able to enjoy his customary nap.

And so the day passed, and night came on.

Close inshore, the boys were attacked by an army of mosquitoes and flies, and, Joe declared, by every species of insect that ever existed. They swarmed around the lanterns, and filled the interior, and buzzed around their heads, and the more they fought and slapped the worse the marauders seemed to become.

“Awful,” said George. “Let’s go straight across the river. We never could get a look at the stars over here.” And this piece of advice was acted upon.

The boys found conditions much better on the other side. No sooner was the “Gray Gull” anchored than Fred brought out the telescope and stand. The former tutor’s handiwork was much admired. The three legs were fastened by means of hinges to an upright piece of wood supporting another that turned horizontally; to the latter was fastened a V-shaped trough capable of a vertical motion, and in this the telescope was secured by means of a strap.

The boys spent an enjoyable evening, studying the stars, even Joe becoming quite enthusiastic as he took his turn at the glass.

Aleck and George were very tired; so they decided to retire rather early. All were good sleepers, and before long quietness reigned in the house-boat.

Bob Somers dreamed that Confuse-us, grown into a great big dog, had seized the fly-wheel in his teeth and set the engine in motion. And the pulsation had a strangely double sound; and he vaguely puzzled over it in his sleep, and seemed to hear the water gurgling against the side of the boat.

Finally Bob awoke with a start, sat bolt upright, and uttered an exclamation of wonder.

The dream was only half a dream. The “Gray Gull’s” engine was silent; but the strange sound of double pulsations reached his ears plainly; and the boat actually seemed to be in motion.

“Gracious goodness! What does this mean?” he murmured.

Then, still scarcely believing that he heard aright, he jumped up hastily.

Yes, there was no doubt about it now.

With a loud, “Wake up, fellows!” Bob Somers was at the door.

CHAPTER XXI

A MIDNIGHT TOW

Bob's yell and the sound of the opening door caused the utmost confusion. Jack, half-awakened, almost fell out of his bunk; Dave Brandon and Tommy were up in an instant, while the others scrambled to a standing position almost in unison. Then, their senses taking in the extraordinary situation, all followed Bob, Joe stumbling over the terrified Confuse-us and going down on hands and knees.

The "Gray Gull," without any effort on its own part, was cutting through the water at a speed which it had never before attained.

Jack Lyons and Bob had disappeared around the side of the boat.

"Well, well!" exclaimed the latter. "Did you ever! The Ripley and Thornton boys again—and—and towing us to beat the band!"

A terrific din suddenly filled the air; above the shrill blasts from a horn rose a chorus of loud yells. It was quite the most inharmonious combination of sounds they had ever heard, and Owen Andrews and his tin horn, as a sound producer, were voted an enormous success.

The "Reindeer" and "Dart" could be plainly seen in the moonlight. The house-boat boys, having groped their way around to the front of the boat, responded to the others' shouts with loud cheers.

"Rah, rah—boom!
Oh, we're on the way to Albany,
The prettiest town you'll ever see.
Rah, rah—boom!
And we're going to have a rush
That won't do a thing but hush
Poor Ripley. Rah, rah—boom!"

After about two seconds of silence, the Ripleys were heard voicing a refrain that ran as follows:

“And they’ll know there’s been a muss,
And they’ll try to make a fuss;
But you’ll never hear of Thornton any more.”

The rival students sang these lines with the greatest gusto, Owen Andrews and his tin horn again taking a prominent part.

Bill Stiles yelled to Lon Bates, and, in a moment, the “Reindeer” and “Dart” had come to a stop. Then the two skippers brought their boats alongside the “Gray Gull.”

“Well,” said Lon Bates, “guess you fellows had a frightful scare, all right.”

“Scare?” answered Jack. “Scare?—what does that word mean?”

“I see,” chuckled Bates, “you are just as chipper as ever.”

“Oh, yes; it doesn’t wear off,” laughed Jack.

“You’re mighty good sleepers,” went on Bates. “Never even heard us pull up the anchor, and didn’t awake till we’d towed you about five miles.”

“I suppose you boys are going back now, and are ready for a winter’s grind?” said Redfern.

“Right—about the first part,” said Roy Pinger. “Just now, we’re showing these Thornton chaps the way home. They might stray off the river.”

“Ha, ha!” laughed Lon Bates. “They keep close to us because they’re afraid of the dark. We feel so sorry for ’em.”

“How we wonder what’s the matter
When those children make a clatter!
Poor, poor Ripley.”

“Do you hear them tremble?” inquired Owen Andrews.

“Want to know how to get the best of them?” shouted Joe.

“We have a hundred rules for it, but you may add one more.”

“Stay up all night and bail out the river.”

“At last we have met some one who knows how to talk sense,” exclaimed Bill Stiles, amidst a ripple of laughter. “It’s me for the shore now, and a bit of sleep.”

And this sentiment met with unanimous approval.

So Jack Lyons anchored the “Gray Gull” once more, while the “Reindeer” and “Dart” slowly moved toward the shore.

The house-boat boys lay down again, and when they awoke in the morning their midnight visitors had gone.

The heat was somewhat less oppressive, and a pleasant air rippled the water.

About noon they caught a glimpse of the Catskill Mountains to the west, a faint gray line against a pile of whitish clouds. But the telescope brought this wooded range into closer view and the charm and beauty of the scenery appealed to all.

Later in the afternoon, the “Gray Gull” was approaching a section of the river in which there are a number of islands. As they slowly continued along, some of these were found to be small, wooded hills, while others were flat and marshy.

“Fellows,” remarked Jack Lyons, “let’s camp out to-night for a change.”

“Select your island, cap,” said Joe.

“That one with rocks and trees suits me. Plenty of shade—just the place for a camp.”

“And must be a lot of nice plants to study,” added Dave. “Let’s go there by all means.”

To this sentiment Fred Winter heartily agreed.

The house-boat was soon anchored in the shade of the island, its pleasant wooded heights rising above them. One by one they scrambled ashore and began to explore it with interest.

In portions it was rocky and barren, while in others masses of underbrush grew in a wild tangle which effectually prevented their passage.

But the boys quickly found a way to the top, although in some places they risked a fall over the steep, rocky ledges.

Bob Somers climbed a tree, and, perched comfortably among the branches, had a good view of the landscape. When he came down, the eight, for Redfern had stayed by the shore, took seats on a grassy knoll on the other side of the island, and idly watched one of the powerful Albany steamers passing on its way to that city.

After supper a fire was kindled, and, as the boys piled on brush and the flames mounted higher and higher, they cast a bright glow on the sturdy form of the "Gray Gull" and far out over the dark water. Confuse-us, too, joined the circle, and seemed quite mystified and uneasy.

A steady breeze made the tree tops rustle with a soft, musical whispering. The woods outside the flaring glare looked black and forbidding. The New York boys were surprised to find how far the firelight carried. An island some distance off sprang into view against the blackness, its rocks and trees weirdly illuminated.

That night the boys rested on beds made of fragrant cedar boughs, and although the insects were quite annoying, managed to sleep most of the time.

Bright and early next morning the voyage was resumed.

Had they so desired, Albany might have been reached late that night. But Jack and his chums decided to halt and wait for daylight.

"Besides," said Tom, "we might give the whole city an awful scare if we took 'em unaware in the night."

Once more, at dusk, the "Gray Gull" was anchored near shore. An uneventful night was passed, and about 9 A. M. on the following day the "Gray Gull," Jack Lyons, master, had actually reached its destination—the city of Albany.

The capital of New York State is built on a succession of hills, and in the clear, bright sunlight presented a beautiful sight. The imposing capitol

building loomed up prominently, and several other handsome edifices were pointed out by Redfern.

“Bet the governor is looking at us through a spy-glass right now,” said Joe.

Boats of all description crowded the water-front. There were saucy little skiffs, excursion steamers, and clumsy barges, some of them just in from their long trip through the Erie Canal. Puffing, panting tugs were going up and down the river. It was a picturesque and lively scene, and the boys crowding the deck of the house-boat gazed at the sights with much enjoyment.

All of Jack Lyons’ faculties were on the alert. Out in mid-stream, he was obliged to navigate with the greatest care, and often the “Gray Gull” wobbled violently on the swells sent forth by passing boats.

Norman Redfern looked rather grave. His trip on the house-boat had only placed him in a worse light than ever in Colonel Ellison’s eyes; and now that the journey was about over, and he thought of leaving the jolly company of boys, he could not shake off a feeling of sadness.

“It’s fine around here,” remarked Tom Clifton, his eyes sparkling with pleasure.

“There’s a good place to tie up,” declared Bob Somers, presently.

He pointed toward an old pier close at hand.

Quite a crowd collected, as the “Gray Gull” swung slowly in. A boy with a fishing pole kindly seized the rope that Jack Lyons threw him, and wrapped it around a post.

Within a few minutes, the house-boat boys were ashore. Jack answered questions from the curious in his usual free and easy manner; then all began moving away from the wharf.

“I certainly feel pleased,” declared George Clayton, with a sigh of satisfaction. “Got to Albany, in spite of Pierre; and now I don’t care if Uncle Dan orders me right back home.”

“Yes, you won out, old boy,” said Bob, slapping him on the back. “And —— Good gracious alive!”

From behind a small shanty, a slight figure suddenly stepped into view and confronted the runaway.

One glance into the excited face that looked into his own, and George Clayton gave a start.

“Pierre Dufour!” he exclaimed, in astonishment.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PUSH-BALL CONTEST

“Ah, ha, Monsieur George, I would speak with you von leetle minute!” exclaimed the chauffeur, in a voice that trembled. “Ah, you have not know what you do—ma foi. No! Monsieur the Colonel, he—— Saire, I speak not to you,” and Pierre’s black eyes flashed with anger, as Norman Redfern stepped forward.

“Keep cool, ‘Pouf,’” said Joe, with a grin. “It pays.”

“Von leetle minute, Monsieur George. I stay here last night; I stay here this morning; and ma foi, you come! You leave these scamps now—you——”

“Cut it out, Pierre,” broke in George, with an amused glance at the others. “Is my uncle in town?”

“Yes, Monsieur George—at a hotel. You come?”

“Better go,” counseled Redfern.

“Saire, you say nothing to him. I call you von scamp. I no afraid of you. In la belle France, I would my glove throw in your face—so!” And Pierre waved his arm threateningly.

“Cool off,” advised Joe.

“Listen, Pierre”—George spoke in an emphatic tone—“you have made a mess of things by your stupid meddling. Not another word. We’re all of us going to see Uncle Dan right now.”

George abruptly turned on his heel, and started off in the direction of the hotel, while Pierre, with a look of amazement, promptly fell in the rear of the little group.

When they arrived at the hotel they found that Colonel Ellison was out.

“Let’s go over to Ripley Academy,” proposed George, paying no heed to the chauffeur’s earnest efforts to attract his attention.

“That’s my idea,” agreed Jack.

“Take my advice, and wait for your uncle,” said Norman.

“No use, when I can see him to-night,” answered George, with a shake of his head. “I’m going.”

“Wait—wait,” pleaded Pierre Dufour. “Monsieur the Colonel, he say——”

But George pushed promptly by, and, in a moment, was on the street.

Redfern and George both knew the city well, and soon they were standing before the capitol. It is a very massive building of handsome design.

Joe’s proposition to go in and see the governor was promptly vetoed.

“Don’t see why not,” grumbled Joe. “He has to go to New York once in a while, and might like to take the trip with us.”

Up one street and down another they went, admiring the neat houses surrounded by pretty lawns and the rows of substantial dwellings; then back to the business section, where Jack sent off a dozen picture postals to little Bobby.

After lunch, it was decided to visit Ripley Academy at once.

Norman Redfern explained that the schools were separated by only half a mile, and that Ripley, the nearer, was about a mile from town.

The day was pleasant, with a sky full of flying clouds, the country charming, and the boys, in spite of the thought of meeting the fiery Colonel, were in high spirits.

Ripley was an older institution than its rival. The building was a plain, almost austere structure, with a columned entrance and a portico from which the Hudson was seen between stately elms.

The building occupied by Thornton Preparatory School was of a graceful modern design, from the polished knob on the front door to the high, battlemented tower.

Almost midway between the schools was a level field. And it was on this that many exciting contests for athletic supremacy took place.

When the boys arrived on the Ripley campus, they found it occupied by a lively crowd of students. An air of excitement prevailed; evidently some event of great importance was about to take place. Groups had collected; songs were being sung; and most of these referred to the unfortunate Thorntons.

“Well, well—my gracious! All the Bills together!” cried a hearty voice.

Bill Stiles, his face flushed with excitement, rushed forward, shook each of their hands in turn, slapped “Bill number three,” otherwise Fred Winter, on the back, and called loudly for Roy Pinger.

“Gee whiz! You’re just in time,” cried the latter. “There’s going to be something doing. Poor Thornton—don’t laugh too hard at ’em. Come on, Bill; it’s time to skip.” And the two Ripley seniors were off.

“Hello, what are you chaps going to do?” yelled Bob.

“Follow us, and see,” answered Bill.

Crowds of students were now leaving the grounds, and the nine followed in the rear. As they walked along a wide, shady road, glimpses of the river and hills beyond were here and there seen.

The Ripley students continued to sing their lively songs, varying the performance by occasional yells and blasts from Andrews’ tin horn. And it was not long before other sounds, which they recognized as coming from the Thorntons, reached their ears.

When the boys arrived at the athletic field, a great crowd had assembled. In the center was a huge, leather-covered ball.

“Gee whiz!” said Jack. “A push ball.”

“And a Jim-dandy, too; must be six feet high,” put in Aleck Hunt. “Now I see the scheme. Great, isn’t it?”

“This must be something new,” laughed Redfern. “There goes a signal—probably the first. They are lining up now—listen to Lon Bates.”

“You could hear his voice a mile off,” said Bob. “Wonder where the goal lines are. Ought to be a nice, lively tussle. Wish to goodness we were in it, eh, Redfern?”

But the latter shook his head.

“Not in my line, Bob,” he answered, dryly.

The boys surveyed the rival groups with interest. The motor boat crews were apparently the leaders in their respective schools, and each had a crowd of sturdy followers anxious for the fray.

“All ready, you chaps?” sang out Bates.

“Ready, here!” shouted the Ripleys, in chorus.

The referee raised his megaphone.

“One—two”—it was a tense moment—“three—go!”

“They’re at it,” breathed Jack. “Yell for the Ripleys, fellows!”

The two groups brought up against the huge push ball at the same instant. It wobbled and shook, and ambled sideways, while defiant shouts were hurled from camp to camp.

It was a battle full of interest and humor. The erratic movements of the ball, which was sometimes raised high off the ground, brought forth peals of laughter.

Suddenly the Thorntons made a combined onslaught, and the ball was pushed several yards toward the Ripley line.

“There’s nothing back of it,” yelled Bates.

“Oh, my, but this is easy!” cried Ralph Chickens. “Once more!”

“We’ll run ’em right through their own front door!” shouted another.

But the Ripleys hurled themselves against the sphere, pushed, struggled and panted, a compact mass of determined lads.

Lon Bates, in his eagerness, stumbled, and the huge ball rose awkwardly over his prostrate form, amidst a storm of laughter from the onlookers.

“Shove it sideways, Bill Stiles,” yelled Bob Somers.

“Strategy versus strength,” remarked Dave Brandon. “Great Scott!”

The Ripleys had followed Bob’s advice with a suddenness that took their opponents literally off their feet. Before the Thorntons could recover

themselves, the Ripleys had carried the ball five yards to the side, then pushed it forward and regained all they had lost.

“Hooray!” yelled Jack. “Keep it up, Ripley!”

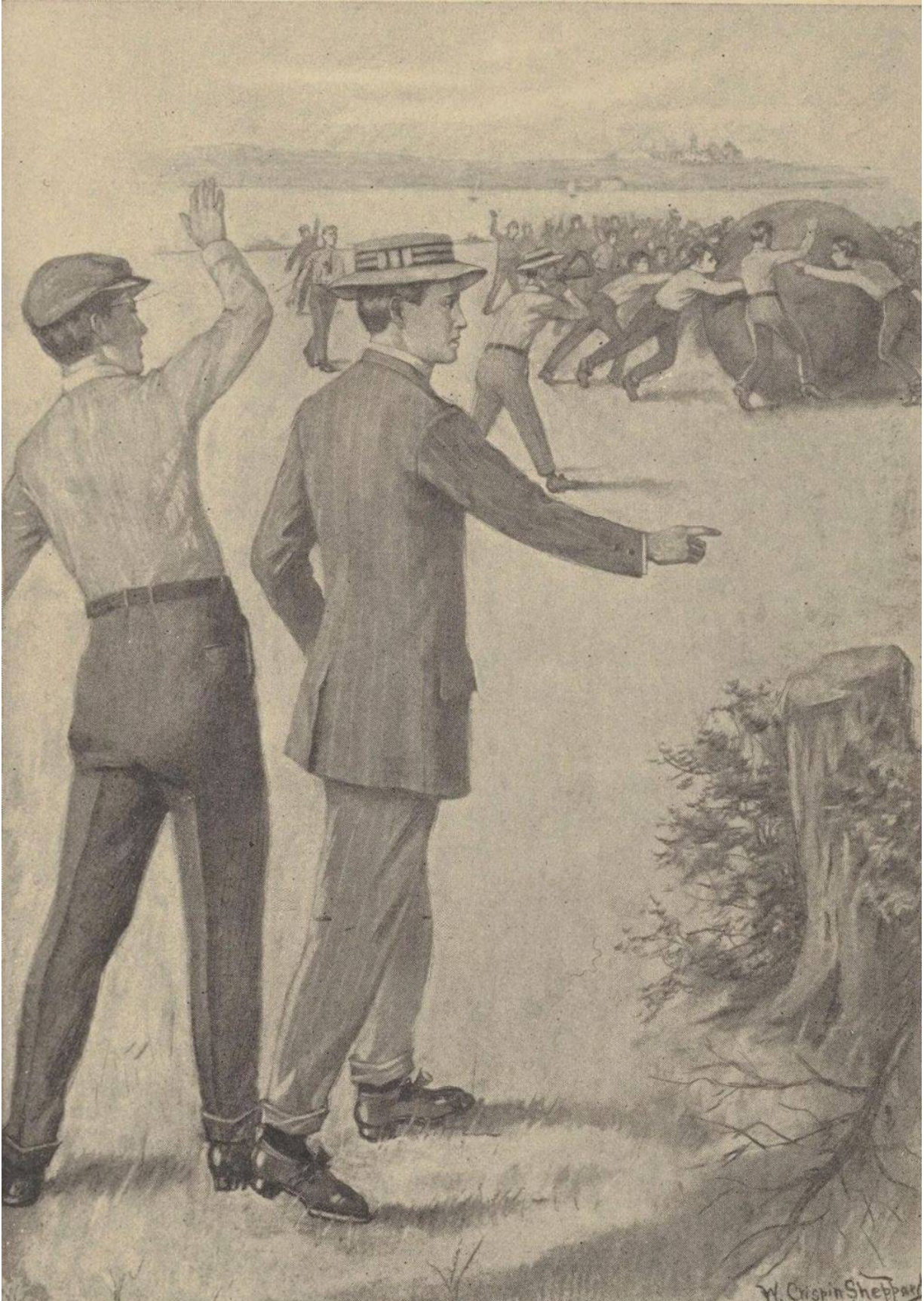
Cheers, shouts, blasts from the tin horn and megaphone raised a terrific din, and while the excitement was at its height, George Clayton touched Bob Somers lightly on the arm.

“See who’s coming,” he said.

Bob turned quickly, murmured, “Well, well,” and nudged Norman Redfern.

In a moment, all were staring at two figures rapidly approaching. One was Colonel Ellison, and close by his side trotted his faithful chauffeur.

“Think how this affair must look to your guardian,” observed Redfern, with an air of great regret.



“SEE WHO’S COMING”

“Ha, ha!” laughed Joe. “The storm’s coming. Hello! Those Ripley chaps are gaining again. Hi, hi! Push it right over ’em! Flatten out the whole crowd, you fellows!”

“Hold on, Joe Preston,” remonstrated Fred Winter. “The Colonel will have a fine opinion of you.”

Colonel Ellison had never appeared more dignified and stern. His brow was wrinkled; and he glared over the rim of his glasses at his ward and nephew in a truly terrible manner.

“Ah, ha, young man!” he began; “so I see you at last, eh? What have you to say for yourself?”

“Plenty, Uncle Dan,” answered George, calmly and in a respectful manner. “But I would prefer to talk somewhere else, sir.”

“Ma foi, what sang froid,” murmured Pierre.

“Norman Redfern,” exclaimed the Colonel, paying no heed to the attention his appearance and words attracted, “you and I must have an accounting. You deliberately defied me. Through you, my nephew’s name has appeared in the papers as a scapegrace. Your misguided influence has made him recklessly disregard my wishes and actually defy the authorities; and yet you still seek to——”

“Stop, Colonel Ellison!” interrupted Redfern. His look of embarrassment was succeeded by a flush of anger; his voice trembled, but not from nervousness. “Stop—you are going too far.”

“Sir?” thundered Colonel Ellison.

“Ma foi, ma foi! I hope it is not the fight that has come,” muttered Pierre.

“You must hear me,” went on Redfern, resolutely. “I shall stand no further accusations. George Clayton,” he added, turning toward the rich boy, “did I ever influence you——”

“Look out—look out!”

So absorbed had the participants in this conversation become that they failed to notice how events were going on the battle-field.

Up to this time, neither side had gained any especial advantage; but Thornton, by clever strategy, suddenly sent the ball off at an angle. The crowd melted away, but the Colonel and Redfern heard the warning cry too late.

A mass of struggling boys bore furiously down upon them, and Uncle Dan, taken altogether by surprise, toppled unceremoniously over, while the lighter Redfern sprawled full length on the sward.

“The young scamps—the——”

But the remainder of the Colonel’s sentence was lost in a roar of sound. A wave of shouts had arisen; the boy with the megaphone used it with the utmost abandon; and Owen Andrews again succeeded in proving the superior nature of his treasured tin horn.

In the general excitement, the Colonel’s mishap had attracted but little attention. Bob Somers and the astounded chauffeur jumped to his assistance, but were waved unceremoniously aside.

When the others again looked around, they saw Colonel Ellison standing erect, his tall form towering above Redfern, who had also regained his feet. Close to him stood the excited Pierre and George Clayton.

The latter seemed more interested in the finish of the game than anything else, and the boys didn’t wonder at it. They saw immediately that the Colonel and Redfern had not been hurt.

It was a moment of the utmost confusion, and the Ripleys, quick as a flash, saw their advantage. The push ball, like a thing of life, whirled off at right angles, then forward again. Ralph Chickers slipped, and several other Thornton lads fell over him.

With an irresistible rush, the Ripleys once more hurled themselves upon the ball.

The Thorntons fought desperately, but the attempt was as useless as trying to stop the tides. Lon Bates frantically commanded and stormed, only to find that his followers could not be rallied.

Fifteen feet from the goal—ten.

With their eyes fixed on the white line, the Ripleys, inspired by that spirit of determination and aggressiveness which victory almost won carries with it, continued the battle. Only five feet now separated them from the coveted goal.

In a voice that was strong and clear, Bill Stiles commanded:

“All together—Ripley forever!”

And the others chimed in loudly:

“Ripley forever—now all together!”

Before an irresistible rush, the discouraged Thorntons fell back, and the big ball rolled over the line.

As the cheers from Ripley and their adherents rang out, a flag was run up on the pole at the end of the field, and, as it fluttered out on the breeze, “Ripley,” in big blue letters, appeared on the silken surface.

The house-boat boys yelled loud and long.

“That old rag will come down yet,” grumbled the disconsolate Bates. “I can tell you that!”

Just at this juncture, and quite unnoticed, a slight man of dignified bearing briskly approached.

As his eyes lighted on the ex-tutor, he rushed with outstretched arms toward him.

“Norman Redfern!” he exclaimed, in a tone of surprise and pleasure.

CHAPTER XXIII

GOOD NEWS FOR REDFERN

Redfern turned sharply.

“Mosley!” he cried, seizing the other’s hand, and shaking it warmly. “I was intending to stop in and see you. This is indeed a pleasure.”

“I’ve been searching a month for you, Redfern; but excuse me a moment—are you Colonel Ellison, sir? I was out when you called, but was told I might find you here.”

“That is my name, sir,” said Uncle Dan. “You are the president of Ripley Academy, I believe?”

Redfern seemed astounded.

“What!” he cried. “Mosley, is it possible? Where is Professor Blackwell?”

“Resigned three months ago. And I was elected in his place. Congratulate me, old man!”

“With all my heart; this is splendid news.” And Redfern again seized the other’s hand. “Mosley and I were classmates here at Ripley,” he added, to the others.

“Let me add my congratulations, too,” said Colonel Ellison, stiffly, “and express the hope that the majority of visitors will not be obliged to come, as I have, with complaints against the actions of your students.”

“Ah,” said the new president, “what is it? I am sorry if they have misbehaved themselves.”

“Some effort should be made to prevent such occurrences in the future.”

“What is the nature of your complaint? But perhaps we had better withdraw to another place,” added the president, noting that his visitor spoke in a tone which carried a long distance.

As they walked slowly along the road, President Mosley listened intently to Colonel Ellison's complaint against Bill Stiles and his motor boat crew, and promised to look into the matter thoroughly.

"And now," he said, "if you will permit me, Colonel, we will change the subject. I was on the point of communicating with you on a matter of the utmost importance, both to yourself and Norman Redfern."

"Eh?" said the Colonel.

"What is that, Mosley?" asked Redfern, quickly.

"As I told you, I have been hunting for you for a month, but could find no trace of your whereabouts. All letters addressed to you were returned. Where in the world did you stop?"

"At a place where postmen never come," replied Norman, with a faint smile. "But what has happened—why should you wish to see me so particularly? To speak frankly, I know that Professor Blackwell expressed a wish that I should keep away."

"I must remind you, Redfern, that the wishes of President Blackwell are not those of President Mosley."

"Good for you," put in Joe Preston.

"What does all this rigmarole mean?" demanded Colonel Ellison, looking from one to the other, in surprise.

"Simply this: by a bit of detective work, an unfortunate situation has been cleared up—the name of a certain person entirely freed from blame, and _____"

"What is that?" cried Redfern, his voice trembling with excitement and hope. "You mean——"

"Just what I say. But, as it is a private matter, I would respectfully ask that these young gentlemen retire for a short time."

"Not so far as I am concerned," put in Redfern, with a flush. "I have nothing to conceal; speak freely."

"Something great coming, I'm sure," said George, with interest.

“Ma foi, but what ees this?” muttered Pierre, scratching his head. “I no understand it—ze talk ees so fast.”

Colonel Ellison merely nodded, to show that the arrangement suited him.

“Well,” proceeded President Mosley, hesitatingly, “I suppose we shall have to briefly review the whole matter.”

“Yes, yes!” said Redfern, eagerly.

“It seems, then, that one day last spring, your employer, Colonel Ellison, sent you to a bank to collect a certain sum of money. Unfortunately, you placed this in your overcoat pocket?”

Redfern nodded.

“And when you went to a restaurant, absent-mindedly hung the garment on a rack?”

“Yes, yes!”

“And on leaving rather hastily, took what you thought to be your own overcoat, and were on the train to Nyack before discovering that this was not the case?”

“Correct again,” said Redfern, his tone indicating suppressed excitement.

“On returning to the restaurant, you found your overcoat gone?”

“Yes.”

During this conversation a very strange expression came over Colonel Ellison’s face. He looked decidedly uncomfortable; and his glance shifted uneasily from the president to Redfern and back again.

It was plain that the similarity between the overcoats had been the means of losing the Colonel’s money.

After a short pause, Mr. Mosley continued:

“You made every effort to find the money which had been in your keeping, and failed?”

“Yes, yes—but tell me—has it been recovered?” asked Redfern, eagerly.

“Yes, I’m glad I can say that it has.”

Norman Redfern gave an exclamation of relief; his eyes sparkled with pleasure, while Colonel Ellison stopped abruptly in his walk, and stared down at him.

“Bully for you, Redfern!” cried Jack Lyons, enthusiastically. And George Clayton slapped his former tutor on the shoulder, and shook his hand warmly.

Pierre Dufour looked on in amazement, and murmured, “Ma foi, what ees this?”

For an instant, Colonel Ellison remained silent. Then, clearing his throat, he held out his hand.

“Redfern,” he said, frankly, “a man should always be willing to acknowledge his mistakes. I ask your pardon for having wrongly suspected you.”

“And I freely give it,” exclaimed the happy Redfern. “I will admit that appearances were against me. But, Mosley, how in the world did all this come about?”

“Well, to continue our story: I was, at the time, a professor at Ripley and expected you, also, to join the staff. Unfortunately, President Blackwell considered you—shall I say it?—guilty. And that ended your chances.”

“Yes,” said Redfern, “I have been only too well aware of that.”

“But I had confidence in you; and was determined to prove that it was well placed. I advertised freely, and——”

“You did?”

“Yes, sir! And in my spare time investigated to the best of my ability. Nothing resulted, and I got a bit discouraged. But I don’t believe in giving up easily. Several times, at intervals, I went back to the restaurant, made inquiries and kept the matter fresh in their minds. Then what should happen? A few days ago, I got a letter; and it made me jump.”

“How can I ever thank you enough?” murmured Redfern.

“The man was a traveling salesman—only occasionally visited New York—and did not again have a chance to go to the restaurant until quite recently.

But he was honest, and wished to find the owner of the money. The proprietor told him to communicate with me.”

Redfern seized the other’s hand.

“Mosley,” he said, “I’ll never forget you for this.”

The president smiled.

“Well, my story is almost finished. I was about to write to Colonel Ellison, in order that he might meet the gentleman and have his money restored. The visit is most opportune, though I regret his errand.”

“Think no more about it,” said Uncle Dan, hastily. “I was once a boy myself; circumstances had a great deal to do with my feelings.”

“Uncle Dan,” put in George Clayton, “may I speak a word to you?”

“Well, young man, what is it?”

Briefly, George explained the whole story of his connection with the house-boat expedition, and this time his guardian, in the light of recent developments, listened and believed.

“You must understand, George,” he said, “though Redfern is not to blame in the matter, you have acted in a most reckless and self-willed fashion. We shall talk about it later.”

“I no comprehend, monsieur the Colonel,” exclaimed Pierre. “Ees nobody any scamps, eh? Ma foi!”

“Shake Mr. Redfern by the hand, Pierre,” commanded the Colonel. “It was all a misunderstanding.”

“If it hadn’t been for Pierre’s meddling, a great deal of trouble might have been saved,” said George, half-resentfully. “He butted in, and——”

“George—George!” cried Uncle Dan, “I must protest against the use of such slang—such a lack of courtesy. Affairs have turned out happily for all concerned; and this is no time for ill-feeling.”

“I guess you are right, uncle,” admitted George, frankly; and then turning toward the chauffeur, he added, “Everything is all right.”

“All one grand mistake? Ma foi!” said the Frenchman, with the corners of his mouth beginning to curve upward. Then, with a sly glance at Colonel Ellison, whose stern countenance still showed a trace of discomfiture, he extended his hand toward the former tutor. “We shake hand, Monsieur Redfern,” he exclaimed. “I’m sorry I say I would your face smack.”

“It’s all forgotten, Pierre,” laughed Redfern, cordially.

The Frenchman smiled broadly.

“A la bonne heure, Monsieur George!” he cried. “We are friends again. But nevaire you say ‘fired’—‘fired’ to me.” And this time, Pierre Dufour showed that his resentfulness was a thing of the past.

Norman Redfern presently slapped Jack Lyons on the back.

“Jack,” he said, “your house-boat trip has certainly resulted in making a great change in the feelings of one young man.”

“And it will have a more substantial result than that,” put in Uncle Dan, quickly. “I hope you will become George’s tutor again.”

Redfern’s features lighted up.

“Certainly—I shall be only too glad,” he began.

But President Mosley hastily interposed.

“One minute, Redfern,” he exclaimed. “Colonel Ellison’s offer is very kind; but it might interfere with your professorship at Ripley Academy.”

And when the true significance of his words was realized, a tremendous volley of cheers rose on the air.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE END OF THE CRUISE

President Mosley, accompanied by Uncle Dan, Redfern and Pierre Dufour, entered the Academy building, while the boys wandered off to the athletic field. The events, rapid and unexpected, and the happy termination of the house-boat trip, had put everybody in the best of humor.

The Ripley flag still floated proudly from the top of the pole. Bill Stiles and his followers, hot, victorious, husky-voiced and tired, marched around the field. They had won the second event, and Ripley was crowned with glory.

Owen Andrews picked up his tin horn. It was now a battered and twisted wreck.

Andrews looked at it sadly, put it to his lips, and, with a tremendous effort, managed to draw forth a thin, dismal groan.

“Too bad it didn’t last for just one more blow,” put in George Clayton.

“Why, Bill number one?” demanded Stiles.

“Because I intend to enter Ripley,” answered George, calmly.

The hoots, yells and jeers which this remark brought forth from the Thorntons filled the hearts of the Ripleys with pure, unalloyed joy.

“I say, Joe Preston,” remarked Fred Winter, abruptly, “I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“That you wouldn’t do a stroke of work on the history of our trip.”

“But I have; I wrote the heading. When I get home, I’ll finish it sure,” laughed Joe. “Anyway, I have an idea.”

“What is it?”

“We’ll try to get the governor to put a bill through the legislature for the state to buy the ‘Gray Gull’ and place it in a museum.”

“You silly thing! Do be serious.”

“Let’s see: there was the ‘Half-moon,’ the ‘Clermont,’ and now the ‘Gray Gull.’ I’m going to put that in my history, too.”

“One thing we came near forgetting, fellows,” put in Jack Lyons. He seized Aleck Hunt by the shoulder. “How about that story of yours?”

“That’s so,” chorused the others.

“What story?”

“What story? Why, about Joe Archer and Battery Park, of course.”

“Oh, yes! Do you fellows really think I’m going to tell it now?”

“You bet we do.”

“Well, I put it in pickle some time ago; and the jar’s been left on the house-boat. It won’t be taken out before I get a bite to eat—no siree.” And Aleck backed away.

Joe Preston winked at the others; his grin grew to positively enormous dimensions. Then he burst into a loud, long laugh.

“I wonder what we’re going to do next, Bob?”

It was Tom that asked the question.

“Well, Ramblers,” spoke up Jack Lyons, heartily, “we’ve had such a jolly good time on this trip I should say we’d all better take another.”

“Hooray!” shouted his hearers. “That’s what we’ll do.”

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Transcriber's note

Minor punctuation errors have been changed without notice. Spelling has been retained as published.

The following printer errors have been changed.

CHANGED	FROM	TO
Table of Contents :	"XXIII. THE COLONEL IS"	"XVIII. THE COLONEL IS"
Page 105 :	"there was no reponse"	"there was no response"
Page 150 :	"could gee together"	"could get together"
Page 172 :	"assuming definate shape"	"assuming definite shape"
Page 208 :	"became a confused blurr"	"became a confused blur"
Page 302 :	"took their opponant"	"took their opponents"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RAMBLER
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