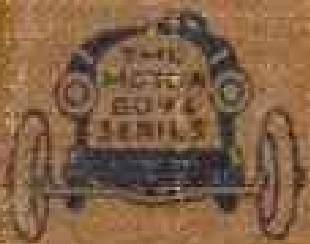


THE
MOTOR
BOYS
AFLOAT

THE MOTOR BOYS



CLARENCE
YOUNG

THE MOTOR BOYS
AFLOAT

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SENT THE DARTAWAY OVER THE LINE A WINNER.
[SENT THE DARTAWAY OVER THE LINE A WINNER.](#)

THE MOTOR BOYS AFLOAT

Or

The Stirring Cruise of the Dartaway

BY

CLARENCE YOUNG

AUTHOR OF

“THE RACER BOYS SERIES” AND “THE JACK RANGER SERIES.”

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

BOOKS BY CLARENCE YOUNG

THE MOTOR BOYS SERIES

(Trade Mark, Reg. U. S. Pat. Of.)

12mo. Illustrated

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Or Chums Through Thick and Thin

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THE MOTOR BOYS IN MEXICO

Or The Secret of the Buried City

THE MOTOR BOYS ACROSS THE PLAINS

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THE MOTOR BOYS AFLOAT

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THE MOTOR BOYS AFLOAT

CHAPTER I

WHAT THE POSTMAN BROUGHT

The shrill vibration of the postman's whistle brought Bob Baker to the front door on the run.

"Only a postal!" he exclaimed as the mail-man handed it to him. "It's for me though. Wonder what it is?"

He turned it over and glanced at what seemed to be only a printed form with, here and there, a word written in.

"What's it all about?" mused Bob.

Carefully he went through the lines of printing and writing. They resolved themselves into a notice that at the freight station of the Atlantic & Northern Railroad there was a piece of merchandise shipped from the International Gas Engine Company, which article could be had on application to the freight agent.

"It's our motor boat!" exclaimed Bob. "It's come! Hurrah! I must hurry over and tell Ned and Jerry! Whoop! I'm glad it's Saturday. We can put in the whole day getting the boat from the station. Hurrah!"

"Is anything the matter, Bob?" asked Mrs. Baker, coming to the head of the stairs and looking at her son, who, at that instant was standing on his head in the lower hall.

"Matter? I should say there was, mother!" he cried, jumping to an upright position. "Our motor boat's here!"

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Baker. "Now I suppose you'll be going off on cruises which will be worse than the automobile trips."

"Worse? Better you mean, mother," remarked Bob. "But I must run over to Ned's house. Where's my hat?"

"Where did you leave it?"

"I don't know," replied the boy, who seldom could keep track of the head covering. "Never mind, it's warm, I'll go without it."

He ran from the house into the pleasant spring sunshine, and soon was racing down the street toward the home of one of his chums, Ned Slade. Reaching there he gave a shrill whistle on his fingers.

“What is it?” asked Ned, poking his head out of a window.

“She’s here!” shouted Bob.

“What! Our boat?”

“Sure! Just got a postal from the freight office. Come on, we’ll get Jerry and have the boat taken to the river. Shiver my timbers, I can hardly wait! Hurry up, Ned!”

Ned needed no urging, and soon the two boys were at Jerry Hopkins’ house. He was not home, but his mother told his chums where they could find him, and they started off to a neighbor’s house, where Jerry had gone on an errand.

The three boys had gone into partnership in the purchase of a motor boat. They lived in Cresville, Mass. Bob Baker was the son of a rich banker, while Ned Slade’s father was the proprietor of a large department store. Jerry Hopkins was the son of a well-to-do widow.

The lads had been chums for a number of years, and had been closely associated in a series of adventures which began with the purchase of motor cycles and which were destined to be continued with the acquisition of the motor boat.

As told in the first volume of this series, “The Motor Boys,” the three took part in some bicycle races under the auspices of the Cresville Athletic Club. They won, but in doing so incurred the enmity of Noddy Nixon, a town bully, whose wealth had made him a spoiled son. One of the chums won a motor cycle as a prize and, soon after this the other boys also discarded their bicycles for the more rapid vehicles.

They had many adventures on the motor cycles, in some of which Noddy Nixon played a prominent, if a mean part. The boys entered a motor cycle race and were successful, winning the first prize, a big automobile touring car. Because of a robbery at a local mill Noddy Nixon had to flee from Cresville, running off one night in his father’s automobile.

In the second book, “The Motor Boys Overland,” I told of how Ned, Bob and Jerry started west. They had many exciting adventures, being put to considerable trouble by Noddy, who heard of their trip and followed them. The motor boys

got permission from their folks to search for an old mine which a prospector whom they befriended told them of. They found the mine with the help of Jim Nestor, and secured possession, though they had a close race with Nixon, and two of his cronies, Jack Pender and also Bill Berry, a Cresville ne'er-do-well.

The mine proved to be a rich one, and the shares the boys received were considerable. They arranged to have Jim Nestor work the claim for them, as he was the largest shareholder, because of having known of the mine previously.

But the finding of the mine did not end the adventures of the motor boys. They had picked up on their trip west an old professor, Uriah Snodgrass, who had heard of a buried city in Mexico. The boys resolved to start for that country and got permission to go.

On the way many things occurred, as related in the third book of the series, "The Motor Boys in Mexico." They had fights with Mexicans, and their old enemy Noddy Nixon turned up to bother them. There were fights with wild animals and reptiles, and by a plot between Noddy and some rascally Mexicans, Bob was captured, but later got away.

The buried city was found most unexpectedly by the auto sinking through the earth upon a concealed passageway. There were strange happenings in the long-lost city, and the professor discovered a valuable box of jewels.

The young travelers then resolved to make a trip across the prairies and in the fourth book of the series, called "The Motor Boys Across the Plains," I told of their exciting journey. An old hermit was found who proved to be the father of a boy that the three chums rescued from a desperate gang. Later the hermit was of much assistance to the motor boys, since the gang was trying to get possession of the mine. The hermit was one of the original owners of the claim, and through him the mine was kept in the power of the boys and Nestor. The claim was found to be paying better than ever; and, after defeating the gang that sought to get it, the motor boys came home, having been away a long time.

Their parents, no less than their friends and relatives in Cresville, were glad to see them, and it took the lads several days to tell of their adventures. The mine, the possession of which was kept in a sort of company formed by the boys, their parents and Jim Nestor, paid well, and it was with some of the proceeds that the boys bought a motor boat.

They still kept their automobile, but as they had arrived home in the fall, and as the winter, which soon came, was an unusually severe one, they had little chance to go out in the touring car.

They had resumed their studies, all three of them attending the Cresville Academy. It was now the close of May and in another month they would finish the term.

Ned and Bob hurried to where Mrs. Hopkins had said Jerry could be found. He was just leaving to come home.

“Hey!” called Bob, catching sight of him. “The boat’s come, Jerry!”

“Really?”

“Sure! Got a postal! Come on to the freight yard!”

The boys, whose spirits were bubbling over with excitement ran, rather than walked, to the freight house. They went up the platform steps by jumps and burst in on the agent, who was busy over waybills.

“Where is it, Mr. Hitter?” gasped Bob.

“Where’s what?” asked Mr. Hitter, peering over the tops of his glasses.

“Why our motor boat.”

“I don’t know nothin’ about no motor boats,” said the agent, preparing to go on with his work.

The hearts of the boys began to sink. Suppose the boat had been lost in shipment?

“But this postal says it has arrived,” persisted Bob showing what the letter carrier had given him.

“Oh that,” said Mr. Hitter. “Well, yes, there is a piece of freight as big as a house addressed to you. But I didn’t s’pose it was a boat. I took it for a specimen of a whale that I thought Professor Snodgrass had ketched while you an’ him was down in Mexico. It’s boxed up jest like a whale. I’ll bet it is a whale, Bob.”

“Where is it?” cried the boys in chorus.

“Down at th’ t’other end of th’ platform. But look out it don’t bite ye! I’ll bet it’s a shark if ’tain’t a whale,” and Mr. Hitter chuckled heartily.

The boys raced down the platform. At the end, where it had just been taken from a flat car, was a long box, measuring about twenty-seven by ten, by seven feet. Indeed it did look as if it contained the remains of some prehistoric monster.

“Hurrah! This is it!” cried Ned, as he read from a paper pasted on the big box:

“One motor boat. This side up with care.”

“Get a hammer and we’ll unpack it!” cried Bob. “Where’s an axe?”

“Now ye’d better go slow, boys,” cautioned Mr. Hitter, coming up at this juncture. “Was ye calalatin’ to sail right here from th’ depot down th’ main street?”

“That’s so, I forgot you have to have water for a boat,” spoke Bob, wiping the perspiration from his forehead, for he was quite fat, and the excitement made him warm.

“You’ll have to make haste slowly, Chunky,” said Ned, applying to him the nick-name Bob’s chums sometimes used.

“How are we going to get it home?” asked Jerry.

“Can’t ye carry it on yer shoulders?” asked Mr. Hitter with a laugh.

“I’ll bet it weighs a ton,” spoke Bob.

“Nearer two, accordin’ t’ th’ way bill,” chimed in the freight agent. “Now I tell ye what t’ do. Leave it right in th’ box. Go off an’ git Hen Jaegers, who’s got th’ biggest truck in town t’ cart it t’ the river for ye. Then ye won’t damage it. Jest come in an’ sign the receipt an’ let Hen do th’ rest. If ye carried it yerselves ye might drop it, an’ damage the spark plug or whatever it is makes it go,” and he laughed again at his joke.

The boys decided this would be the best to do. Bob, to whom the boat was consigned, put his signature to the receipt, and then the lads hurried to the office of the truckman.

“I wonder if we can try it to-night?” asked Jerry.

“Guess so,” put in Ned. “I’ve been reading the catalog and directions until I know ’em by heart.”

“Do you remember when we first got the motor cycles and how one got going and we couldn’t stop it?” asked Ned.

“Sure. And when we first got the auto,” chimed in Bob.

“That reminds me of something I almost forgot,” spoke Jerry. “Did you hear the news?”

“What news?” came from Ned and Bob.

“About Noddy Nixon. He’s coming back. His father has fixed everything up, I

understand.”

“You don’t say so!” exclaimed Ned. “Well, he’s got nerve after what he did to us, trying to rob us of the mine and putting those Mexicans up to kidnap Bob. I’d like to give him a good threshing.”

“I’ll bet he’ll make trouble for us,” said Bob. “I’ll be worried about our motor boat all the while it’s on the river, as long as Noddy Nixon is in town.”

“Nonsense, he’ll not interfere with us any more,” came from Jerry.

“Well, I’m no calamity howler,” put in Bob, “but I’ll bet we are going to have more trouble with Noddy.”

And after events showed that Bob had guessed rightly.



CHAPTER II

THE MOTOR BOAT

The boys found Mr. Jaeger so busy hauling all sorts of freight and merchandise from the depot and other parts of Cresville that he could not promise to go after the boat that day.

“Look here, Mr. Jaeger,” said Bob. “We’ve got to have that boat on the river to-night or we’ll lose all our sleep, and it will be your fault. We’ll come and stand under your window after dark and sing.”

“Oh my! Oh my!” exclaimed the truckman, throwing up his hands.

“Yes, we will!” insisted Bob. “We’ll sing ‘The Solder’s Farewell’ and ‘My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean’ if you don’t get that boat for us.”

“Don’t threaten any more!” cried Mr. Jaeger. “I’ll haul the boat for you if I have to disappoint every customer I’ve got. Only don’t sing. I can’t stand it. Never could,” and he laughed. Then he called his assistant and gave orders to have the boat taken from the freight station.

It was quite a job, for the boat was encased in a heavy box to prevent breakage, but eventually it was loaded upon the wagon. The boys climbed upon the truck and rode along, fearful to let the precious boat get out of their sight.

It was about a mile to the river and all along the way many persons stared at the big load, wondering what the motor boys were up to now, since their adventures were known all over Cresville. As the truck was passing Mr. Nixon’s house Jerry nudged Bob.

“What is it?” asked Chunky.

“There’s Noddy.”

“Where?”

“In the barn. He was just looking out. There he is now.”

Bob caught sight of Noddy’s head as he quickly dodged out of sight.

“Never mind,” said Bob, “we’ll be on the lookout for him after this.”

Noddy Nixon did not seem to care to be seen by the motor boys. As it developed, after the part he had played in the capture of Bob and in inducing the gang of Mexicans, Bill Berry and others to follow on the trail of the searchers after the lost city, the young rascal had kept pretty well under cover. But, being tired of a roving life and keeping so far away from home Noddy had written to his father.

Mr. Nixon had called on Mr. Baker, and had humbly apologized for Noddy's actions, promising to see that his son did no more mischief. On these conditions, of which Mr. Baker said nothing to his son or the other boys, Noddy was allowed to come home, it being agreed that he would not be prosecuted for his crimes. He had reached his house that very day, though the rumor of his coming had preceded him.

In anticipation of the arrival of the motor boat the boys had built a float and dock on the edge of the river fronting on a piece of land belonging to Mr. Baker. This plot adjoined one owned by Mr. Nixon, who had a small boathouse where were kept a rowboat and a small sailing craft.

The boys had hired a carpenter to erect for them a good sized shelter where their motor boat might be kept, but it was not quite finished. The big box was soon unloaded and opened.

"Ain't she just a dandy!" cried Ned.

"A regular beauty!" exploded Jerry.

"Finest thing in the country!" came from Bob, his desire to eat now forgotten. "It's worth every cent we paid for it. I only hope it will go all right."

"Of course it will go," answered Ned. "I wonder if we have any gasolene?"

"I sent some down last night on the chance that she would come to-day," said Jerry. "Now to launch the *Dartaway*!"

"The *Dartaway*? Is that her name?" asked Ned.

"Sure," replied Jerry. "I forgot to tell you when I wrote out the order that I told the manufacturers to give her that name. If you don't like it, we can change it."

"That's a fine name," came from Ned, and Bob said it suited him.

The boat was twenty-five feet long and about six feet beam. The engine was a four cylinder one, with all the latest improvements, arranged with three speeds forward and a reverse just as an automobile is, and the craft also steered with a

bright colored wheel in the front, similar to a touring car.

There was a little cockpit forward where there was room for six to sit comfortably and leave a place for the steersman. The engineer had a little place partitioned off for himself, and amidships were roomy lockers and an arrangement where a table could be set.

There was even a small galley with a stove which burned gasolene, and food could be cooked on board. There was a camping outfit of dishes and kitchen utensils, and the lockers could be made into fairly comfortable bunks in case one wanted to sleep on board.

There was a portable awning that could be put up to cover the whole of the craft and side curtains that could be fastened shut. The one in front was fitted with a celluloid window so that in stormy weather the boat could be worked and steered under shelter. Also, if the occupants desired they could pass a night on board and keep dry in the hardest rain.

A whistle worked by the exhaust of the gasolene explosions, a search lamp, similar to those on automobiles, a small anchor, a regular ship's compass, flags and a kit of repair tools, with some extra parts of the engine, completed the boat's equipment.

The truckmen, no less interested than the boys, surveyed the *Dartaway*. It was indeed a fine boat and the motor boys might well be proud of her. There was nothing like her on the river. She looked speedy, as if the name fitted her.

"Now to get her into the water," said Ned. "How are we going to do it? I never launched a boat before."

"I'll show ye," spoke the truck driver. "Come on men," and he motioned to his helpers.

They passed a heavy rope about the cradle, and ran one end of it to a windlass under the front seat of the big wagon. The vehicle had been backed down on the dock. The driver next placed some rollers under the bottom of the cradle, and the craft was soon in the water.

By bow and stern lines the craft was made fast to the float. Then the boys jumped in. The boat rocked gently to and fro. It bobbed up and down slightly and swung with the current of the river.

"Oh! This is something like!" cried Bob as he grasped the steering wheel, and gave it a few turns.

“That’s like you, taking the easy part the first thing!” exclaimed Ned. “Why don’t you crank up the engine?”

“What’s the use, there’s no gasolene,” came from Bob.

“We’ll soon remedy that,” replied Jerry, as he hurried into the boathouse.



CHAPTER III

AN ACCIDENT

Jerry came back with a large can and a funnel. With the help of the boys he filled the tank in the forward part of the boat.

“Now we’re ready to go,” he said.

“Hold on,” came from Ned, who had been reading a card of instructions that was attached to the engine. “This says it is best to let the boat rest in the water a few hours after launching to swell the seams before starting the engine, as they might strain open.”

“Oh I’m so glad you discovered that,” Bob said. “We might have gone out and been sunk! Let’s go to dinner first.”

“I guess that’s what you were thinking of all the while instead of any danger,” retorted Ned. “But I guess it’s just as well to let the boat rest a bit. Besides, we’ll have to oil the engine good before starting it.”

“Will we leave the boat here alone and all go to dinner?” asked Ned. “I think one of us ought to stay on guard. Bob can stay until you and I come back, Jerry,” and he winked the eye concealed from Chunky.

“Oh I say, fellows!” cried Bob. “I don’t believe any one will touch the boat.”

His friends burst out laughing at the woe-begone expression on his face, and the manner in which Bob placed his hands over the region of his stomach.

“I guess one of the carpenters will watch the *Dartaway* until we come back,” suggested Jerry, and the man who had the contract for the boat house agreed. He did not go home to dinner.

Bob seemed to hesitate on emerging from the dining room after the meal. Ned noticed it and asked:

“Didn’t you have enough of that chicken, Chunky?”

“Oh yes,” replied Bob with a sigh.

“Then what’s the matter?”

“I was thinking we might get stuck out in the river aboard the boat,” said the fleshy youth.

“Why you’re not afraid, are you? You can swim.”

“No, I’m not exactly afraid of that.”

“Then what?”

“Why I was thinking if we got stuck, you know there’s nothing aboard to eat, and—and—we might be hungry—so I was thinking—.”

“Well, what?” as Bob hesitated.

“We might take some of those chicken sandwiches along, if your mother didn’t object. They’d come in handy.”

“Well of all things!” gasped Ned. “I believe you’d take a lunch along if you were going to a banquet, for fear you’d be hungry on the road. Go ahead, Chunky. Take all you want of the sandwiches. Here’s a bag,” and he ran to the kitchen and came back with a flour sack.

Bob gravely emptied the plate and also put some pieces of cake and a few pickles into the sack. Then carefully tying it up he followed the others from the room.

It was agreed that Jerry, from having made a more careful study of the machinery than either of the others, should act as engineer on the initial trip. Accordingly Bob and Ned drew lots to see who should steer, and the choice fell to Ned.

With the carpenters watching them curiously the boys climbed aboard and prepared to start. Jerry looked over the machinery, adjusted the valves, saw that the wires leading from the batteries to the cylinder spark plugs were all right, and cranked up. Though the fly wheel was heavy it turned easily because well adjusted and oiled.

“Hurrah! We’re off!” cried Bob.

“Not yet,” said Jerry. “I haven’t thrown in the clutch yet. You forget this is a new style of boat.”

Letting the engine run a few minutes to warm up Jerry went over it all carefully and applied oil where it seemed to need it. He watched the feed cups on the cylinders and saw that they were working properly.

“I guess we can start off on the low gear,” he announced as he grasped the lever and advanced the spark a trifle to make the explosions come more rapidly.

The screw began to revolve and, at the stern of the *Dartaway* there came a swirl of foam as the blades beat the water.

“Here we go!” cried Bob. “This is something like! It’s got an automobile beat a mile!”

“Don’t say anything against automobiles,” cautioned Jerry. “Ours stood by us well.”

“So it did,” agreed Bob. “But this is simply immense!”

Up the river they went, and about a mile from the float they passed a rowboat containing two boys and two girls.

Toot! Toot! Toot!

A shrill whistle sent a blast out as Ned pulled the cord which operated it. The occupants of the rowboat looked up and waved their hands.

“Give us a ride!” they cried.

“It’s Andy Rush, Sam Morton, Alice Vines and Mollie Horton,” said Ned. “Shall we take ’em in, Jerry?”

“Sure,” was the reply. “I’ll slow down. Steer over toward ’em.”

The speed was lessened and Ned threw the wheel around until the *Dartaway* was headed toward the small craft.

“Look out! Don’t run us down! We’ll upset—I can’t swim—save the girls—don’t blow up the engine—throw us a life preserver—back water—back pedal—put on brakes!” cried one of the boys.

“Oh Andy Rush, you’re enough to give any one a headache!” exclaimed Alice Vines. “No wonder your name is Rush!”

“Stop rowing and we’ll come alongside. Pull in the oars!” cried Jerry, and Ned skillfully put the *Dartaway* close to the smaller boat. While Bob steadied it against the motor craft the occupants got into the cockpit.

“Shall we tow your boat?” asked Jerry, “or leave it tied up on shore?”

“Better tow it,” said Sam, “we hired it for the afternoon and have to return it.”

So the rowboat was fastened to the stern of the *Dartaway* and Jerry started the

motor up again.

“Isn’t this lovely!” exclaimed Mollie Horton. “Where did you ever get such a beautiful boat?”

“It’s a perfect dream!” came from Alice.

“You bet!” put in Andy. “Nightmare when you smell the gasoline—whoop! Crank her up—don’t explode—get mad—say all sorts of things—turn off the batteries—throw on the magneto—test the spark plugs—get a shock—get madder—then all of a sudden—off you go—whoop!”

“It’s the same old Andy,” said Jerry with a smile.

“I’m going to try her on full speed now,” said Jerry, when after several miles the boat was turned around. He threw the lever over as far as it would go and advanced the spark lever to the end of the ratchet.

The *Dartaway* sprang forward almost as if alive. The water fairly boiled under the stern and she shot down the river at top speed. The engine was purring, throbbing and humming as the explosions came faster and warmed the cylinders up.

“This is something like going!” cried Bob.

Suddenly there was a snap as if something had broken and with a cough and wheeze the engine came to a stop. Jerry sprang forward and shut off the gasoline to avoid flooding the cylinders with it. Then he threw out the clutch.

“Oh! Has something happened?” cried Alice.

“I’m afraid so,” replied Jerry.

“Is it an accident?” asked Mollie, turning pale. “Are we in danger?”

“It’s an accident, but I don’t believe we are in danger,” spoke Jerry. “We can get ashore at the worst. Just sit quietly until I make an investigation.”

The boat was drifting slowly on the current. Then it seemed to hit something and stop.

“We’re on the sand bar!” Ned cried. “I forgot it was right here.”



CHAPTER IV

A QUEER KIND OF RAT

“Oh, this is terrible!” cried Alice. “I’m going to jump out!”

“Put us ashore! We’ll sink!” screamed Mollie.

“Look here!” exclaimed Jerry sternly. “You girls are old enough to know better. There’s no danger, even if the boat has broken down, and we are stuck fast. If worst comes to worst we can row you ashore. Now, if you’ll keep quiet, I’ll see what’s the matter.”

As Ned had guessed, they were on a sand bar. The boat had been moving quite swiftly before the accident happened, and, what with the momentum and the drift of the current, had run well up on the obstruction.

“Well,” remarked Jerry when matters had quieted down somewhat, “I guess the first thing to do is to look and see what the trouble is with the motor.”

With the assistance of Ned and Bob, Jerry tested the engine to see if there was good compression, that is if there was the proper mixture of air with the vapor from the gasolene to produce the explosive gas which made the piston move. He found that there was no trouble from this source.

“How’s the spark?” asked Ned.

“I haven’t tried that yet,” said Jerry. “I will now.”

He detached one of the wires connected with the batteries and magneto or small dynamo from the binding post of one of the cylinder heads and adjusting the contact breaker, touched the end to the set screw. There was no answering spurt of greenish flame.

“That’s the trouble,” said Ned. “No spark. Wire must be broken.”

“Let’s see if it’s the faults of the batteries or the magneto,” spoke Bob, who was inclined to go slow.

By means of a small handle on the armature of the magneto it was whirled rapidly around. As soon as this was done there came a vicious spark from the end of the wire.

“Trouble is in the batteries,” said Ned.

The spark which exploded the gases in the cylinders of the *Dartaway* was produced in two ways. When the engine was first started it came from a series of dry cells and a spark coil. Once the fly wheel was revolving well, a switch could be turned to make the current come from the magneto, which was operated by it. But it was necessary that the fly wheel revolve swiftly before any current sufficient to operate the motor would be produced by the magneto.

Now the only way the fly wheel could be operated swiftly enough was to run the engine rapidly and this could not be done except by a spark from the batteries. So it will be seen that the motor boys were in trouble of a peculiar kind right at the start.

True, if one of them could have turned the fly wheel swiftly enough by hand to have made the magneto produce a spark, to get the explosions started the problem would have been solved, but it is doubtful if even a strong man could have performed that feat.

They tried it by turns, when Jerry had exhausted everything else he thought of, but for all their back-breaking efforts there was no result. The *Dartaway* belied its name.

The boys were hot and tired. The girls were nervous. It had been Jerry’s plan to get the engine started, reverse the screw, and see if he could not pull the boat from the bar. But she stuck fast.

“Shall we row the girls ashore?” asked Sammy. “It’s getting late and the folks may be worried.”

“Well, we’re sorry to lose your company,” said Jerry, “but we seem to be up against it. Maybe it would be the best thing to do. We’ll make up for this some day and give you all a better ride.”

The girls got up, preparing to leave.

“Well, here’s a fine pickle!” exclaimed Sammy.

“What’s happened?” cried Alice.

“Our rowboat’s gone!”

“Our boat?” asked Andy, shortening his remarks for another time.

“That’s what I said,” came from Sammy. “The rope got untied. She’s floated off. I guess you’ll have to entertain us a little longer, Jerry.”

“Make yourselves comfortable,” said the engineer of the *Dartaway*. “I’m going to find out what’s the trouble before I go home. We’ll get you back some time.”

“I hope it’s soon,” murmured Alice. “It will be dark in a little while.”

Spurred on by the plight of their guests the motor boys redoubled their efforts to discover the cause of the trouble and remedy it. That it was in the wires leading from the batteries to the cylinders was certain, but the conductors, when examined as far as possible, showed no sign of break.

“I’ll just have to run new wires, temporary ones of course,” said Jerry after a while. “It will take a little time, but it’s bound to do the trick.”

He overhauled the stores and extra parts in one of the lockers. “I hope we have a coil of wire,” he muttered. “I’m certain I saw some.”

But his search did not reveal any. The situation was getting serious. Already the sun was behind the trees, and the girls plainly showed their nervousness.

“Let Sammy and me get out, take the rope and try to pull the boat off the bar,” suggested Andy.

“It’s too risky,” said Ned. “This bottom is of the quick-sand variety, and you’d sink down. I guess we’re stuck here until the motor goes.”

Bob was rummaging about under one of the seats. He hauled out a package, exclaiming as he did so:

“I’ve got it!”

“What, the wire?” asked Jerry excitedly.

“No, that lunch I brought along! I’m glad it’s here. I’m hungry and I guess the rest of you can nibble at a chicken sandwich or two.”

“Can we?—well I guess yes!” cried Andy, and the others chimed in with him. Even Jerry, though much worried over the mishap, stopped tinkering with the engine long enough to munch some of the food.

“Call me all the names you want to,” said Chunky with a grin, “but you’ll have to admit I’m there with the goods.”

“Good for you, Chunky!” exclaimed Ned.

“Oh!” cried Alice suddenly. “Something bit me on the foot! I believe it’s a rat! Oh dear! Save me!”

She jumped up, much excited, Mollie following her example.

“Sit still!” cried Jerry. “There are no rats aboard!”

“But something bit me!” insisted the girl. “It had sharp teeth and I felt them in my ankle. I have low shoes on!”

She moved away from where she had been sitting. Mollie retreated toward the stern. Jerry got a lantern and lighted it, for it was now dusk, and dark down in the cockpit where the girls had been resting. He made a careful examination.

“I’ve got it!” he cried.

“What, the rat?” asked Alice.

“No; I’ve found the broken wire that caused all our trouble,” came from Jerry. “It was the end of it sticking up through a crack and touching you on the ankle that you felt. Now we’ll be off!”

It was indeed the break in the copper conductor that he had discovered. The ends of the wire came up through a space in the flooring of the boat. They ran from a compartment in the forecabin back to the motor. In less than a minute Jerry had twisted the broken ends together. Then he fastened the conductor back in the spark plug. Turning on the gasoline he gave the fly wheel a twist.

There came a welcome chug-chug and then a throb of the motor. Jerry threw in the reverse gear. The water at the stern was churned into foam as the screw revolved. Slowly the *Dartaway* backed off the sand bar and into a deeper channel. Then Jerry threw in the forward speed and the craft shot ahead.

“Hurrah!” cried the boys. “We’re off!”

“It’s lucky you discovered that rat,” said Jerry to Alice, “or we might have stayed there all night.”

Bob lighted the search lamp, as it had grown quite dark, and the shaft of glaring whiteness shone on the black river. Jerry speeded up the boat, and it went down the stream toward Cresville at a rapid pace.



CHAPTER V

PLANNING A CRUISE

Ned was steering, and, having passed two or three large craft he put the boat over to the Cresville side of the river, to gain the advantage of the better current. He was peering ahead into the darkness, lighted up by the slender pencil of fire from the search lantern, when he suddenly made an explanation, and threw the steering-wheel over so quickly that the *Dartaway* careened to one side.

“Look out!” cried Ned. “Slow her down, Jerry! There’s a boat ahead!”

Before Jerry could do this, however, the motor boat rushed past some dark object in the water. There was a crash and splintering of wood, and the occupants of the *Dartaway* dimly saw a man crouching in the bottom of a small boat as they rushed past.

“We only smashed one of his oars,” said Ned, as he turned the wheel back to avoid running the craft into the bank. “I just saw him in time. He wasn’t making a sound or I might have heard him. He should have shown a light.”

“Could you see who it was?” asked Bob, between bites at a chicken sandwich, for he had again attacked the lunch.

“Probably a lone fisherman after eels,” responded the steersman.

By this time the *Dartaway* was approaching Cresville, the lights of the town being visible.

The girls and boys from the rowboat were landed at the main dock and the motor boys started back for their own shelter.

“I wonder if we did much damage to that boat we hit,” mused Bob. “Whose was it any way?”

“I can’t tell you whose it was, but I think it was the one the girls were out in, and which floated away from us,” said Ned. “But I can tell you who was in it.”

“Who?” asked Jerry sharply.

“Bill Berry!” spoke Ned.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. I had a good glimpse of him just before I swung the wheel over. I’d know him anywhere. We have good reason to. I’d know him and Noddy Nixon, his bosom friend, wherever I met them.”

“Bill Berry, eh,” said Jerry softly. “Well if he and Noddy are in town together it means that some mischief is afoot. They never get together but something happens. We’ll have to be on our guard. They may try to pay us back for getting ahead of them as we did on several occasions. I wonder if Bill and Noddy have met since Noddy came home.”

“What do you suppose he was doing in that boat, if it was the one that floated away from us?” asked Bob.

“He was probably hanging around near the river bank and saw it when it floated down,” said Ned. “He thought it was a chance to earn money by selling it or by returning it to the dock, and he just got in it.”

A little later the boys had housed their boat and started for home.

“We ought to go off on a cruise somewhere,” suggested Ned. “It would be a fine thing to go down the river to Lake Cantoga, and spend three or four days camping there. We could hunt and fish and have a bully time.”

“Say, that would be sport!” agreed Bob. “We could take along a lot to eat in case the fish didn’t bite or we didn’t kill anything.”

“Say, Chunky,” spoke Jerry solemnly, “if you mention eating again to-night, after the way you devoured chicken sandwiches to-day, I—I’ll hit you, that’s what!”

“I can’t help it,” said Bob with a little sigh, “I guess I was born hungry.”

“Well if you weren’t, you certainly have acquired the habit since,” observed Ned dryly. “But that aside, what do you think of my plan, Jerry.”

“Nothing better, only I guess we’ll have to wait until the term closes. I don’t want to flunk in my exams, and I guess you don’t, either of you. I’m a little bit shaky on my algebra, and my Latin is none of the best.”

“Oh, of course we’ll wait until the academy closes,” agreed Ned. “That will only be three weeks now. In the meantime we can take short trips and get acquainted with our boat. If there are as many kinds of trouble that can happen as are down in the book, we will no more than have learned how to remedy them

by the time we want to start.”

The next day, Sunday, the boys went down to the dock for a look at the *Dartaway*. As they approached they saw some one peering through a side window into the house where the boat floated.

“Some one is nosing around,” observed Ned.

As they came closer the person did not move away, evidently not hearing their footsteps, as the wind was blowing in the opposite direction.

“It’s Noddy Nixon!” cried Bob, as the person turned with a start.



CHAPTER VI

AN ENCOUNTER WITH NODDY

At first it seemed as if Noddy was about to run away, like a child surprised in some mischief. But he saw that he could not escape without going past the motor boys, unless, indeed, he jumped into the river and swam across. So he decided to bluff it out. He turned aside and appeared to be gazing into the stream as the three comrades approached.

“What shall we do?” whispered Bob. “Speak to him or not notice him?”

“Leave it to me,” said Jerry. “I’ll see what he has been up to.”

Noddy stooped and picked up several stones which he idly tossed into the water.

“When did you get back?” asked Jerry, trying to speak politely to his old enemy.

“None of your business!” retorted Noddy. “And what’s more, if I find any of you fellers has been tellin’ tales about me I’ll make you smart for it! I’ll sue you for damages! I don’t want to have anything to do with you!”

“I guess that feeling is as much on our side as it is on yours,” spoke Ned.

“Exactly,” chimed in Jerry. “And what’s more, Noddy Nixon, if you feel that way about it you’d better get off this dock. It’s private property and we don’t allow any but our friends to come here and see our motor boat. You’re a trespasser and the sooner you move on the better we’ll like it.”

“I’ll go when I get good and ready!” fired back Noddy. “I came here because I have a claim against you, and I want it settled now or you’ll be the worse for it!”

“A claim against us?” asked Jerry. “What sort of a claim? Has it anything to do with the old mine that you didn’t get?”

“You think you’re mighty smart!” exclaimed Noddy, flushing as he thought of how the motor boys had outwitted him. “This is a claim I have against you for smashing one of my rowboats last night.”

“Your rowboat!” exclaimed Ned. “Since when have you owned any

rowboats?”

“There’s the bill for damages,” spoke Noddy, handing over a piece of paper.

The boys examined it curiously. It was a billhead on which was set forth that Noddy Nixon had succeeded to the business formerly conducted by James Lawrence of hiring out boats at Cresville. The bill was made out to the three chums, jointly and called for the payment of fifteen dollars for damage done to a rowboat.

“So you’ve been set up in business by your father, eh?” asked Jerry.

“My father has nothing to do with this. I’m my own boss,” snapped Noddy.

“Must have made the deal quite suddenly,” commented Ned. “Lawrence owned the business up to two nights ago, for I hired a boat from him then.”

“The deal was closed last night,” Noddy condescended to explain. “The boat Andy Rush and Sammy Morton hired and took the girls out in was the first one I let and you had to go and run it down in your old motor boat. It was a piece of spite work and you’ll have to pay for it.”

“Look here, Noddy Nixon!” exclaimed Ned. “You’ve got a lot of nerve to charge fifteen dollars for the little damage we did to your boat. It was an old one anyhow, for I know all Lawrence’s craft and he hasn’t a new one in the place. Besides I was steering and I saw what damage we did. We smashed an oar, and we’re willing to pay for that, or get you a new one.”

“You smashed my boat, and you’ll pay for it or go to jail!” fairly shouted Noddy.

“I can prove that we only broke an oar!” exclaimed Ned.

“How you going to do it?” asked Noddy in sneering tones. “It was a dark night, and I have the broken boat to show what damage was done.”

“If necessary we’ll fight this case,” spoke Ned quietly, “and we’ll call some one as a witness who can tell just how much the boat was damaged, for he was in it at the time.”

“Who’s that?” inquired Noddy, with a start.

“Your old pal Bill Berry! Bill may not relish being put on the witness stand, but he’ll have to go if you insist on pressing this bill.”

Noddy turned pale.

“Bill Berry isn’t within a hundred miles of here,” he said faintly.

“Maybe he skipped out of town over night,” spoke Ned, “but he was in that boat last night. Don’t try any more of your tricks on us, Noddy, or it may go hard with you!”

Ned crumpled up the bill into a ball and threw it at Noddy. He did not intend to do it, but the wad of paper struck the bully in the eye.

“I’ll pay you for that!” cried Noddy.

He sprang at Ned, who was so surprised at the result of his thoughtless act that he did not know what to do. Noddy’s fist shot out and struck Ned in the face.

With the instinct every boy has, when he is hit, to strike back, Ned doubled up his fists and assumed the attitude approved in the roped arena. Noddy’s rush had carried him past Ned, but the bully, enraged at the failure of his plans, came back with a jump straight at his antagonist. It looked as if there would be a fistic encounter that peaceful Sunday.

“Don’t fight him now!” cried Jerry rushing between the two. “Let it go, Ned. We don’t want any trouble with the blackguard. We can settle with him later!”

Deciding to obey his friend’s advice Ned dropped his arms and stepped to one side. Noddy was close upon him and, when Ned got out of the way so quickly the bully could not stop in time. Ned was standing near the edge of the dock, and, meeting with no resistance in his mad rush Noddy fairly flew over the string-piece and landed in the water with a resounding splash. He disappeared from sight as the river was quite deep there.

“Get a rope!” cried Jerry.

“Throw him a life preserver!” yelled Bob.

“I’ll get a boat hook!” exclaimed Ned, racing toward where the *Dartaway* was kept.

By this time Noddy had come to the surface. He was spluttering and gasping, for his sudden bath had caught him unawares and his mouth and nose were filled with water. He floundered around, handicapped by his clothes, and did not seem to know what to do.

Jerry was about to spring into the water when he was suddenly halted by hearing some one exclaim in a high pitched, sing-song voice:

“Never mind my lad, jumping after him. He’s a regular duck, and surely can

swim!”

The boys turned to behold a shabbily dressed though pleasant faced man sauntering down on the dock.

“If it isn’t Pete Bumps!” cried Bob, recognizing the odd character who used to work for his father, but who now did odd jobs about the town. “Can he really swim, Pete?”

“Swims like a feather in all kinds of weather,” replied Pete, one of his peculiarities being to talk in rhyme.

Noddy, seeing there was no likelihood now of any one coming in after him began to strike out for shore.

“I’ll give him a hand to reach the land,” recited Pete, and, taking a boat hook, which Bob had by this time found, Pete proceeded to stick the end into Noddy’s coat, just back of his neck.

“Leave me alone!” snapped Noddy, between gasps.

But Pete was not to be cheated of his rescue. He got a firm grip with the hook on Noddy’s clothing and then, walking along the side of the dock, towed the bully ashore. In the excess of his zeal, Pete moved him so fast that half the time Noddy’s head was under water, and he was in no amiable frame of mind when he staggered ashore, the water dripping from his Sunday suit.

“I’ll—I’ll have the law on you for this!” he cried.

“What? Because you took a notion to jump into the river?” asked Ned. “I guess it would be a queer jury that would award you anything. Will you come into the boat house and dry off?”

“I wouldn’t go in your boat house for a hundred dollars!” cried Noddy. “But I’ll get even with you!”

“He’s rather mad, for such a wet lad, but never mind that, I’ve got his hat,” said Pete, and, with a skillful motion he speared Noddy’s head-covering with the boat hook.

“Don’t you spoil that hat!” cried Noddy.

“Now Noddy don’t you worry, though I was in a hurry. It only has a little tear, it’s better than before to wear, because it lets in lots of air,” sung Pete, inspecting the hat, which had a small hole in it.

Noddy walked up on the dock, the water sloshing from his shoes at every step. He picked up his wet hat, jammed it down on his head, and, with an angry look at the other boys started off. As he did so a figure burst through the bushes and ran toward the group on the dock. At first the boys thought it was a tramp. They looked closely at the man.

“Why it’s Bill Berry!” exclaimed Jerry. “I thought you said he was a hundred miles from here, Noddy.”

“You old fool you, what did you want to come around for?” snarled Noddy at his notorious chum.

“I thought they were going to drown you, and I decided to take a hand and give them a wallop,” said Berry sullenly. “I owe them something on my own account.”

He advanced threateningly toward the motor boys.



CHAPTER VII

TO THE RESCUE

Bill Berry was a big burly fellow, pretty much of a brute in his ways, and, though the boys knew he was a coward at heart, they realized that he might prove an ugly customer in a fight. He could not be depended on to battle fairly, but would take any advantage that came his way. Nor would he hesitate to use a stick or stone, where others would rely on the weapons which nature had given them; their fists.

“We’d better get ready for trouble,” said Jerry in a low voice.

“Shall we tackle him?” asked Ned. “He and Noddy will be no more than a match for the three of us.”

“Don’t fight if we can avoid it,” counseled Jerry.

Bill Berry, with anger in his eyes continued to advance. Noddy, who had started to go away, came back, emboldened by the attitude of his crony.

“I’ve been wanting to get my hands on you fresh lads for some time!” exclaimed Bill. “Now I’ve got a chance.”

“You might have stopped off last night, just before we ran you down,” said Jerry. “We could have accommodated you then.”

“Was that you, last night?” asked Bill, suddenly. “Did you see me? Did you see the Blue—”

Then Bill seemed to remember that he was talking too much. He came to a sudden stop, and looked over at Noddy, who was detected in the act of shaking his fist at his former ally.

“We didn’t see anything blue, green or red,” put in Ned. “It was too dark to see anything but you.”

“Yes, and you’ll pay for what you did!” exclaimed Berry. “I’ll have the law on you for smashing my boat!”

“So Noddy has said,” came from Bob. “It’s getting to be an old story.”

“See here, you young whelps!” cried Bill in sudden anger. “I’ll show you what it means to make fun of me!”

He made a sudden dash toward the three boys, who stood close to the edge of the dock.

“Stand ready!” spoke Jerry in low tones. “If he tries any of his tricks you two jump to one side and I’ll tackle him. If he gets the best of me, you can jump in and lend a hand.”

Bill, with clenched fists, sprang at the three boys. Bob and Ned moved a little to one side to give Jerry plenty of room. It looked as if there was going to be trouble.

“List to the song of the whip-poor-will. He threw in the river poor old Bill!” came in sing-song tones from the rear. There was a sudden rush. Two figures mingled on the dock. There was a struggle, a smothered exclamation, and then a mighty splash in the water.

“There he goes, over his toes!” cried old Pete Bumps, jumping excitedly about.

Below the dock Bill Berry was struggling in the water. He spluttered and thrashed about and then struck out for shore.

“Quite a little swim, while the evening light grows dim,” recited Pete solemnly.

“Good for you, Pete!” cried Ned. “You came in the nick of time!”

“Do you think so?” asked Pete anxiously. “I was afraid I’d be a little late. However I saw he meant business so I sailed in. I couldn’t have him fighting you boys Sunday night, so I just thought a little bath would cool him off. I took hold of him and—.”

“He fell in, that’s all,” finished Ned. “You’re all right, Pete.”

Bill reached shore and he and Noddy slunk away.

“Well, we’re well rid of them,” observed Jerry. “I’m glad we didn’t get to fighting, though I wouldn’t run away from it if it had to be. Pete did us a good turn.”

“I’m always on hand to beat the band,” put in the odd character. “To be with you boys fills me with joys. That ain’t a very good rhyme, but I’ve been making a lot of ’em to-day, and I’m kind ’a tired,” he added.

“I guess you’d better go home and go to bed, Pete,” advised Bob. “It will do you good.”

“Just as you say, I’m on my way,” replied the old man solemnly, as he turned to go.

“Did anything strike you as peculiar?” asked Jerry of his chums.

“How do you mean?” asked Ned.

“I mean the way Bill Berry acted,” replied Jerry. “He seemed to fear we had discovered something. Then there was his remark about something blue.”

“Do you know, that occurred to me,” put in Bob. “But I didn’t like to say anything for fear you’d laugh at me. It seemed as if he was afraid we had discovered something.”

“That’s the way I took it,” spoke Ned. “I wonder what it could have been.”

“Whatever it was, you can depend on it there was something crooked back of it,” commented Jerry. “Those two never got together but they were up to some mischief. I only hope we have no further trouble with them.”

The boys were again at the boat house the next afternoon. Ned had asked to run the engine, and, as it was decided that all three should take turns at managing the different parts, Bob went to the wheel while Jerry played he was a passenger.

“Down or up?” asked Bob, as he threw in the clutch and backed the *Dartaway* out of the house.

“Let’s go down,” suggested Jerry. “Then we can try her up against the current and see how she behaves.”

The boat was making good progress, the engine was purring like a contented cat, and the boys were beginning to enjoy the run, when Bob suddenly shut off the power and cried:

“There, I forgot all about ’em!”

“What?” asked Jerry anxiously. “There’s plenty of gasolene, I hope.”

“It’s the sandwiches,” spoke Bob in sorrowful tones. “I told our girl to put up a lot of ’em so we could have ’em this afternoon in case we got stuck again. Now I’ve come off without ’em. I guess I’ll go back.”

“You’ll do nothing of the kind!” exclaimed Jerry. “This is no picnic party. We’re not going to get stuck. If we do we’ll make you wade ashore and get the

grub. You're captain this trip. Ned and I are passengers."

"Oh if you're going to act that way about it, why I've got nothin' more to say," said Bob, in rather an aggrieved tone. "I only thought—"

"You only thought of getting something to eat," put in Ned. "Now start her off, Chunky, and forget you have a stomach."

"I'll never be able to do that," replied Bob with a sigh, as he threw the lever forward.

The *Dartaway* answered promptly and spurted ahead at a good pace. The boys had reached the next town below Cresville, running on second speed, since the current aided them.

"Look out for that rowboat ahead," cautioned Jerry to Bob. "They act as if they didn't know how to get along."

He pointed to a boat containing two girls who seemed to be trying to row across the stream at a particularly wide part. They were both at the oars, but were making little progress.

One girl in the boat looked up and caught sight of the motor craft. It seemed to give her a fright for she screamed and began pulling frantically at the oars. Her companion was likewise affected, and the two, in their eagerness to reach shore were rocking the small boat violently by their endeavors.

"They'll have an upset if they're not careful," said Jerry, who was intently watching the girls.

Hardly had he spoken that one of the rowers "caught a crab." Her oar, dipped into the water only a little distance, had, when she pulled strongly on it, given way suddenly. She fell backward and her companion trying to catch her, leaned to one side.

This was too much for the frail craft. It careened far over, water ran over the gunwale, and, an instant later the two girls were floundering about in the water.

"To the rescue!" cried Ned, standing up in the motor boat, and proceeding to take off his shoes and coat.



CHAPTER VIII

PLOTTING

With a turn of the steering wheel Bob sent the *Dartaway* toward where the girls were making frantic efforts to reach their overturned craft.

“Slow down, Chunky!” called Jerry. “You stand by and Ned and I will get the girls. Watch out you don’t run us down. There, they’ve both sunk! We’ll have to dive for ’em!”

Jerry had followed Ned’s example in divesting himself of his heaviest clothing. The two boys stood on the gunwale of the motor boat, and, as the craft slowly circled to where the girls had disappeared, guided by Bob, Ned and Jerry leaped overboard.

As they sank beneath the surface Bob swung the *Dartaway* in a half curve to avoid the possibility of striking the rescuers or the girls. He watched the surface of the water with anxious eyes as he made a big circle about the place.

Though it seemed several minutes it was only a few seconds before Jerry came up. In one arm he held the unconscious form of a girl, and he struck out for the *Dartaway*. Bob headed for him, taking care to steer so that he could come broadside on. A few seconds later Ned appeared, but he had not found the second girl.

“I can’t—find—her—” he gasped, blowing the water from his mouth. “I’m going—down—again.”

Jerry swam to the motor boat, and, still keeping the engine going, but throwing out the clutch, Bob helped lift the unconscious girl over the side.

As she was placed on the cushions she opened her eyes.

“She’s all right,” said Jerry. “I’m going back to help Ned find the other one. Stand by, Bob.”

Plunging over the side once more Jerry struck out for the swirling eddies that indicated where Ned had gone down again in his search.

Ducking his head under the water, and opening his eyes, Jerry peered down on

the bottom of the river to see if he could discern where the body was. He saw it in a tangle of weeds.

At the same instant Ned caught sight of it, and made another dive, having come to the surface to breathe. Ned was the first to reach the girl. He brought her to the surface, though it was hard work, as she was much heavier than her companion.

Between them Ned and Jerry swam with the girl to the motor boat, and lifted her over the side. Then they climbed in themselves.

“Now speed her up, Bob!” cried Jerry as he donned some of his clothes. “We’ll have to get to a doctor mighty quick with this last one. She’s pretty far gone.”

“Shall we head straight for shore?” he asked.

“No; down to that dock,” replied Jerry, indicating one quite a distance down the river, from which it was evident the girls had come in their boat. There was quite a crowd on the wharf, and several small craft were putting out toward the scene of the accident.

In a few minutes the *Dartaway* was lying alongside the dock, and willing hands helped the boys to lift the unconscious girl out, while the one Jerry had rescued assisted herself.

There was a scene of confusion. Scores of people demanded to know what had happened, when, where and all the particulars.

“Look here!” exclaimed Jerry. “You can hear all about it later. The main thing is to get this girl to a doctor and see if we can’t save her life.”

“That’s right!” exclaimed the proprietor of the boat pavilion. “Get out the way there, you folks that are so anxious to know what’s going on. Here’s a doctor now.”

A tall man, carrying a small valise, shouldered his way through the crowd.

“Let me pass, I am a physician,” he said.

Taking off his coat he began working over the unconscious girl. He was assisted by several women, and in a few minutes the boys, who had been looking on, saw the maiden open her eyes.

“I guess she’s all right,” said Jerry. “Come on, let’s get out of this. I don’t want to answer a lot of questions. We’ve got a good chance to skip while the

crowd is all in a bunch.”

The boys, after talking the matter over as the boat sped away decided they would say nothing to their folks about the rescue.

“If we do they’ll get all excited and think an accident happens every time we take the boat out,” said Jerry.

“Suppose they ask us what makes us so wet?” asked Ned.

“Well, we’ll not lie about it, of course,” said Jerry. “Only I hate to have a fuss made.”

There was no need to answer questions about their wet clothes. It was dusk when the boys got back to Cresville, and they were able to get into their homes unobserved.

But if they hoped to have the incident go unnoticed they were doomed to disappointment. Two days later, when they were preparing for a spin one afternoon, Andy Rush came leaping down to the dock, waving a paper aloft.

“So that’s how you do it!” he exclaimed. “Brave rescuers—save lives—right on the job—dive under water—rush ashore—rush away again—say nothing—modest—but it’s all found out!”

“What’s the matter now, Andy?” asked Jerry.

“Nothing at all—everything—lots of things—look there!” and Andy held out a copy of the copy of the Cresville weekly.

There, on the first page, under big headlines the boys saw an account of their rescue of the two girls. The reporter had spared no language. It was a chance that seldom came to the little paper and it was made the most of.

“Well if that isn’t the limit,” said Ned. “I wonder they didn’t want personal interviews with us, and all our pictures, besides a story of our experiences under water.”

“Say, you’re heroes all right—all right!” exclaimed Andy. “Everybody in Cresville is talking about it. The paper is selling like hot cakes—million copies—all talking about you—Gee Whiz! I wish I was you fellers! You can get a job in a dime museum now!”

“Oh, dry up!” said Jerry in a good-natured voice. “Here, jump in Andy and we’ll give you a ride. That will make you forget all about the rescues and the hero business. Mind, if you ever refer to it again, you’ll never go on another

trip.”

“I’ll keep quiet, but it’s bound to be talked about,” said Andy.

They kept on up the river for several miles to a little summer resort, where there was an ice cream stand. Bob proposed they go ashore and have something to eat.

The boys found seats in a quiet corner and were soon enjoying their refreshments. After the first plate of cream had vanished Bob proposed more.

For some minutes past the boys had been hearing the low sound of voices in the room back of them, where it seemed, were more chairs and tables.

At first the boys paid no attention to the conversation. But finally it grew louder and they could hear two voices in dispute.

“If that isn’t Noddy Nixon I’ll eat my hat,” said Ned in a whisper. “I’d know his voice anywhere. But who’s the other?”

“Let’s see what it’s all about?” suggested Bob. “It isn’t spying on them. They are talking so loud they can’t help being heard all over.”

“Hush!” cautioned Jerry.

A second later there came to the ears of the boys these words:

“I’ve given you all the cash I can afford to. You must think I’m a millionaire, Bill.”

“Pretty near it, I guess,” was the answer in a low rumble. “All I know is, I’ve got to have money.”

“I tell you I’m broke,” persisted the one whom the boys had decided was Noddy. “I might allow you a little something if you helped me out.”

“What is it now? Some more of your tricks on those motor boys?”

“Hush!” exclaimed Noddy. “Not so loud. Do you want to have the police after us? Now I’ll tell you what I want you to do.” His voice sunk to a whisper, but the walls were so thin that the boys could distinguish a word here and there.

“Motor boat—do ’em brown—fix ’em for me—I’ll pay you well,” were some expressions overheard.

“I wonder if he’s referring to us,” said Jerry. “I’d like to hear a little more of this.”

The next words came more distinctly though the sentence was broken here and there by intervening silences.

“Make it hot—pay you—have a good time soon,” was what came to their ears.

“Well, it’s a good thing to know this in advance, that is if it’s us they’re referring to,” said Ned. “We can be on the watch.”

Having finished their cream, even Bob voting he had enough, the boys started to leave. As they walked past the room whence the voices had come, the door opened and two figures emerged. They were Bill Berry and Noddy Nixon.



CHAPTER IX

A TEST OF SPEED

At the sight of the motor boys, Noddy started and seemed to turn back. Bill Berry, however, was troubled by no such timidity. He pushed forward while his companion hung back.

“What do you fellows want here?” asked Bill in no gentle tones. “Are you spying on us? If you are you’d better look out, that’s all!”

“We’re not ‘spying’ on you as you call it,” said Jerry. “As for being here, I guess we have as much right to come here after a plate of cream as you have. And we didn’t see anything blue either,” he added.

“What do you mean by that?” demanded Bill Berry in excited tones.

“Just what I said,” replied Jerry in a calm voice. “The last time you saw us you wanted to know whether we had seen anything blue. I thought I’d tell you now that we did not see anything of such a shade, to save you asking a question. But we may see it any day. When we do we’ll let you know.”

The effect of this talk seemed greatly to excite Bill. He turned first pale, then red. He tried to speak but the words failed him.

“Look here!” he finally exclaimed. “I’d like to know what you mean. If the Blue—”

“Keep still!” exclaimed Noddy. “Come on Bill. Don’t have anything to do with the sneaks.”

“Look here!” burst out Ned. “You keep your names to yourself, Noddy Nixon, and speak civilly of us or you’ll find yourself in deeper water than the day that you fell into the river!”

Noddy’s face became red at the recollection of his humiliation at the hands of the motor boys.

“I’ll pay you for that yet!” he exclaimed. “I’m not likely to forget it. You’d better look out. Me and Bill—”

“Keep quiet, you lunk-head!” exclaimed Bill in a hoarse whisper. “Who’s

talking too much now? Do you want them to—” and then, fearing that he might say too much Bill fairly dragged Noddy out of the door with him.

For a few moments the boys stood in silence. They could hear Noddy and Bill walking down the path that led to the river, their feet crunching the gravel.

“I wonder how they came here,” said Bob.

“Let’s watch ’em and see how they leave,” said Jerry. “We’ll get a line on ’em then.”

Going to the door of the pavilion they saw Noddy and Bill get in a motor boat that was tied at the edge of the float. It was a little craft, hardly more than a rowboat with a small “kicker” gas engine in it. Noddy got in the bow to steer, and Bill cranked up. After a number of loud wheezes and chugs the boat started down the river.

“Little one cylindered affair,” said Bob in contemptuous tones.

“Never mind, they may make trouble enough for us with it, even if it has only one cylinder,” put in Jerry. “It don’t move very fast, to be sure,” as he watched the craft glide slowly down the stream, “but you can bet Noddy has some object in having such a poor boat when he could afford a better one. He’s up to some game, I haven’t the least doubt. I wish I could get on to it.”

“Do you think he has any plan for making trouble for us?” asked Ned.

“Judging from what we overheard a little while ago, I would say he has,” spoke Jerry.

“Well, I think Jerry’s right,” agreed Ned. “It seems that Bill has something to hide. I wonder what he’s always talking about something blue for?”

“Did you notice he always gets as far as the word ‘blue’?” asked Jerry. “Then he stops as if he was going to mention something more, but catches himself just in time.”

“I wonder if it’s blue diamonds, blue moon, or blue feelings,” spoke Bob.

“Maybe it’s a blue bird,” put in Ned with a laugh. Though he spoke off-hand the time was coming when his words were destined to be remembered with peculiar significance.

As the *Dartaway* was chugging along towards home on second speed the boys heard, from behind, the exhaust of another boat, that, to judge by the explosions, was coming along at a rapid clip.

“Hello!” exclaimed Jerry who was steering. “I didn’t know there were any other motor boats around here but ours and Noddy’s.”

“That’s a dandy, all right,” spoke Ned, as he looked the approaching craft over from bow to stern. “She is going some. I wonder if we could beat her. Try, Jerry.”

Jerry was not unwilling to have a little test of speed with the stranger craft. It came on steadily, the explosions making almost a continuous roar. In the boat which was soon opposite the *Dartaway*, were two men. The boat was new, and, in the gathering dusk the boys could read the name on the bow, *Terror*.

“Rather piratical,” said Ned in a low voice.

The men in the *Terror* glanced curiously at the *Dartaway* as the two craft came opposite. One of them spoke to the other in a low voice. Then the one at the wheel adjusted the engine and the *Terror* leaped ahead. The two boats were now on even terms.

The two men could be seen smiling slightly as they glanced across at the craft the boys were in. Jerry settled himself at the wheel, and telling Ned to see to the engine, and keep it well oiled, he prepared for the race, which had been tacitly agreed to.

For a few minutes the two boats were running so nearly alike that, looking from one to the other, both seemed to be standing still. Then slowly, very slowly, the *Terror* began to creep away. Jerry opened the throttle a trifle, and the *Dartaway* edged up on her rival.

“They needn’t think they can leave us behind in that way,” spoke Ned. “We haven’t begun to go yet.”

Nor, did it appear, had the *Terror*, either. From time to time the steersman glanced at the *Dartaway*, and, as he saw her keeping even with him he speeded up his motor a trifle. But Jerry was not to be outdone, and he did not let the other boat gain an advantage.

“Do you think we can beat him?” asked Andy in a low tone, too impressed by the race to talk at his usual rate.

“It’s a question of engines now,” said Jerry. “Ours is at the limit.”

So, it appeared, was the *Terror*’s. For some time the two men had been content with merely keeping a straight course, and oiling their motor.

But now, aided either by having gotten into a place where the current was a little swifter, or her motor making a few more explosions a minute, the *Dartaway* began to forge ahead. At first it was only by the closest observation that it could be seen. But, in a little while, the nose of the boys' boat was three inches past the *Terror*'s. Then this increased to ten, to twenty, until, about a mile above Cresville, the *Dartaway* was a length ahead of her rival.

"We're beating 'em!" cried Ned in his exultation.

"I think so. We certainly are shooting along," agreed Jerry.

An instant later the motor of the *Dartaway*, with a wheezing cough, began to slow up. Then with a final explosion, as if in protest, it stopped altogether. The craft at once lost headway, and the *Terror* sprang forward and passed her, winning the impromptu speed contest.

"Well, if this isn't the limit!" exclaimed Jerry. "I wonder what's the trouble now."

Ned was frantically trying to get the motor to start again.

"Seems as if there was no gasolene," he said.

Jerry quickly opened the forward tank, and thrust a measuring stick down.

"That's what's the trouble!" he exclaimed. "Not a drop in the tank. We forgot all about filling it."

The *Terror*, after continuing on for about an eighth of a mile had turned and was coming swiftly toward the *Dartaway*. When she was alongside, the steersman quickly reversed his motor and the craft, trembling like a frightened thoroughbred, came to a stop.

"In trouble?" asked the man at the wheel pleasantly. "You have a mighty fine boat there. I hope she hasn't broken down. You had us beaten."

"The gasolene has given out," said Jerry.

"Shall we give you a tow to Cresville?" the steersman went on. "That's as far as we're going."

"We'd be much obliged if you would," spoke Jerry. "Does your boat belong there?"

"I think it will after to-night, boys," said the man at the motor. "How are you? Came near beating us," and he took off the cap that had shaded his face.

“Why it’s Chief Dalton!” exclaimed Ned, as he and the others recognized the head of the Cresville police force. “What in the world are you doing here, chief?”



CHAPTER X

SAVED FROM THE FALLS

“Why, I was racing you boys,” replied the officer.

“I see you were. But I never knew you went in for motor boats,” said Ned. “Is that your craft?”

“Not exactly, though I have an interest in her,” the chief went on. “You see the Police Commissioners a few meetings ago decided to purchase a motor boat. We have quite a river frontage in Cresville, and lately there have been a number of robberies of boats and places along the stream. So it was voted to get a swift craft in which some of our officers could patrol the river. This is the boat, and Commissioner Jones, here, and I, were out giving her a trial spin. We only got her yesterday.”

“She certainly is well named,” put in Jerry.

“Well, we hope she’ll prove a ‘terror’ by nature as well as by name,” the chief went on. “She certainly is speedy enough.”

By this time Commissioner Jones had thrown a rope to the motor boys. It was made fast to a cleat on the *Dartaway*, and then, the *Terror* being speeded up, the disabled craft was quickly towed down the river. Casting off the line at the *Dartaway*’s dock the *Terror* shot on down the river, the chief and commissioner calling back farewells.

“I want you to do us a favor, Andy,” said Jerry as the lads were about to separate.

“Sure—what is it? Anything—half my kingdom—always willing to oblige—name it!” exclaimed Andy.

“That’s the trouble, you’re too willing,” said Jerry with a smile. “What I want is something very simple—that is it would be from any one else. I don’t know how it will hit you.”

“What is it?” asked Andy.

“Just don’t say anything about what you heard this afternoon,” said Jerry.

“That is, I mean, about Noddy and Bill Berry. I believe they are up to some game. If we lay low we may discover what it is. If he finds we are talking about everything connected with him, we may not get at anything.”

“I’ll promise,” said Andy eagerly. He was only too ready to do whatever the other boys wanted him to, as he had hopes of more rides in the *Dartaway*.

“That’s a bargain,” went on Jerry. “None of us will say nothing about the occurrence.”

The next few days the boys studied hard in readiness for examinations.

“Don’t you think it rather strange that the Cresville authorities should buy a motor boat?” asked Jerry of Ned, one evening as they were returning from a short run down the river.

“Queer; how do you mean?”

“Well, we’ve always got along without a craft like that before. There’s never been any river stealing to speak of. I wonder what’s in the wind.”

“Now that you speak of it, there is something out of the ordinary in it,” agreed Ned. “I never thought of it before. What do you think it means? Has Noddy anything to do with it?”

“I don’t believe he has; yet,” replied Jerry. “I’ll tell you something I heard the other day. There are some extra detectives in town.”

“Are you sure?”

“Andy Rush says so,” went on Jerry. “You know he’s always hanging around police headquarters. He wants to be a newspaper reporter some day.”

“I would think he’d make a good one,” said Ned. “He’s always finding out things.”

“Well, when he was down to headquarters the other afternoon,” went on Jerry, “he says he overheard the chief tell the sergeant in charge to tell the special detectives about some happening. This made Andy suspicious, as he had read about the big private detective agency which supplies officers. He says he saw a couple of strange men go into the chief’s office a short time afterward, and stay for some time.”

“Oh, Andy’s always imagining things,” said Ned, sending the motor boat closer in toward the shore.

“But I think he’s right this time,” spoke Jerry. “He showed me the men he had reference to, and I think they are detectives of some kind.”

“What do you suppose it’s all about?” asked Bob, getting his mind off something to eat for a few minutes.

“Oh, you’ve woke up, have you, Chunky?” asked Jerry. “Well,” he went on, “there’s some connection between the police boat, the strange detectives and robberies along the river, that’s certain. What it is I haven’t found out. But I’m going to. It may be that Noddy and Bill are mixed up in it, and if they are, it may concern us. Noddy seems to have a habit of getting us into trouble along with himself and his cronies.”

“But I haven’t heard of any robberies,” spoke Ned.

“Of course not,” said Jerry. “They’re keeping them quiet, that’s why. But I happen to know that the grist mill, down near Tiverton falls was entered the other night, and quite a sum of money stolen.”

“You don’t mean it!” Ned exclaimed. “Why didn’t you tell us before?”

“Because I only heard it from Andy Rush a little while ago,” Jerry replied. “It seems he was in police headquarters and overheard the chief talking to one of the men about it. So you see there’s something going on in this old town after all.”

The Saturday afternoon following this trip the boys made an early start on a journey down the river. They were in need of some lubricating oil, and though they could have bought it in Cresville they decided to combine business with pleasure and make a little longer jaunt than usual.

They went to a town called Newton, about twenty miles below Cresville. On the way they passed the mill at Tiverton falls.

“There’s the place that was robbed,” said Jerry.

“Don’t seem as if it put them out of business,” remarked Ned as the sound of the machinery came to the ears of the boys.

“They’ve been making some improvements,” observed Jerry, who was at the wheel. “They’ve built a new dam and flume. Rather dangerous too. If a boat got caught in that current it would be all up with it.”

He pointed to where the mill owners had constructed a new wall to hold back the water. It was higher than the old one, and the manner in which the stream poured over the edge showed there was much power back of it.

The river was somewhat divided at this point. While the main stream continued in the regular course there was an arm that shot off above a small island, and it was this which was dammed. Just above the dam the flume took what water was needed to run the mill. Falling over the dam the water dashed down on some sharp rocks.

Arriving at Newton the boys spent a little time viewing the town. Then, having purchased the oil they started back up the river.

“Hark! What’s that?” suddenly asked Bob, who was at the wheel.

“Sounds like another boat coming up the river,” said Jerry. “Maybe it’s the *Terror*.”

“No, it’s the noise of the falls you hear,” put in Ned. “We are almost at the grist mill.”

“Oh sure enough, so we are,” said Jerry.

Swinging around a bend in the river the boys came in sight of the dam, over which the water was pouring in a large volume as the mill had shut down and none was being diverted into the big flume. At the same time the occupants of the *Dartaway* caught sight of something that caused them to exclaim in terror.

In the grasp of the powerful current was a small rowboat, in which were two girls. They were struggling frantically at the oars, but, in spite of their efforts to stem the stream, and get beyond the pull of the waterfall they were slowly drifting nearer and nearer the edge.

“Put her over there! We’ve got to save ’em!” cried Ned to Bob. “Put her over!”

“Wait a minute!” came from Jerry. “If you steer over there we’ll be caught in the current too! Let me take the wheel, Bob. Ned you look after the engine! Bob you go to the stern and stand ready to toss ’em a line. I only hope they’ll know enough to keep hold of it or tie it to their boat.”

Having issued his orders, Jerry hurried to the wheel, while the others took the positions designated. Jerry at once threw the engine to full speed ahead, and the *Dartaway* shot forward.

“You’re not going to leave ’em, are you?” called Ned.

“I guess not!” said Jerry. “I’ve got to back down to ’em, and stand ready to start ahead suddenly!”

“Save us!” the girls in the boat cried.

One of them had lost an oar, and the other was too frightened to do anything, even had she the strength to stem the flow of water. Nearer and nearer to the dam drifted the boat.

“Sit still! We’ll save you!” cried Jerry.

By this time the motor boat was some distance above the small craft. Jerry sent it toward the left shore in a long curve. This placed the *Dartaway* just above the rowboat. Then he reversed the engine, and the motor boat began to back down the stream.

“Stand ready to heave the line!” called Jerry to Bob. “Now girls!” he went on, “you catch the rope when he throws it! Wind it around an oar lock, and hold on to it!”

Bob sent the coils spinning through the air. They straightened out and several twists fell over the bow of the small drifting boat.

“Catch hold!” cried Jerry.

The girl forward obeyed. Quickly she wound the coils about one of the oar locks, and held the loose end tightly.

“Hold on!” sung out Jerry.

With a quick motion he set the clutch for the first speed forward. The water at the stern of the *Dartaway* was churned into foam.

“We’re drifting back!” cried Bob from the stern. “We’ll go over the dam!”

“Here’s for full speed ahead!” cried Jerry as he threw the lever over to the last notch, and swung the gasoline and spark handles well forward.

The foam at the stern became thicker and whiter. The *Dartaway* trembled from bow to rudder. The rope creaked with the strain.

“Hurrah! We’re gaining!” cried Ned. “We’re moving!”

The powerful motor boat had triumphed over the current and was pulling the occupants in the small craft out of danger.



CHAPTER XI

BILL BERRY'S THREATS

Slowly but surely the rowboat was pulled away from the dangerous brink of the falls. The two girls, who were pale with fear, regained their courage, and ventured to get up from the bottom of the craft, where they were crouched, to peer over the side.

A few minutes later the *Dartaway* was steaming ahead at full speed, pulling the tiny craft after it. Seeing there was no more danger Jerry slackened the engine and steered over toward shore.

Just then a white-faced woman ran from a cottage toward the river.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Are my little girls drowned?"

"Not exactly," replied Jerry with a smile, as he pointed to the two children in the boat.

"But we near was, mommer!" cried the smaller of the two. "Gertrude and I went out in the boat, and lost an oar, and we drifted toward the falls. The boys come along and pulled us back or we'd got all wet."

"I guess you'd have gotten a little more than wet," observed Ned.

"Oh how terrible!" exclaimed the woman. "If you ever go out in a boat alone again I'll make your father move away from this horrible river."

Jerry with the aid of Ned and Bob was casting off the rowboat from the *Dartaway*, and tying it to the small dock which extended into the river.

"Will you boys come in a little while and rest?" asked the girls' mother. "I'm sure I can't begin to thank you for what you did. You saved the children's lives."

"I'm sure we didn't do any more than any one would have done under the circumstances," said Jerry, who, like most boys hated to have a fuss made over him or what he did. "I'm afraid we haven't time."

"It's getting late, I guess we'd better be going," added Ned, who likewise was not fond of praise, and so, bidding the girls and their mother good-bye the boys started away.

The search light, which was set going as soon as it was dark, gave a brilliant path of illumination up the center of the stream, though on either side was gloom. Suddenly the gas lamp, which burned in the bow, went out.

“There, I meant to fill the carbide tank to-day,” said Ned, “but I forgot all about it.”

“Never mind, we can go along just as well in the dark,” said Jerry. “We have the side lights going and we’re not liable to meet any other boats. Better go a little slower, though.”

Ned, accordingly slowed down, and, with scarcely a sound, so well was the engine muffled and so smoothly did it work, the *Dartaway* glided along. Ned steered over toward the left bank, to be out of the way of any boats that might be on the river.

It was getting quite damp, and a fog was obscuring the view.

“It’s a good thing there are not many motor boats on the river, or we might run into one, or be run into,” said Ned. “I wonder if the police boat is in commission yet.”

“I heard she’d be here next week for good,” spoke Bob.

As every one knows who has been on the water, or for that matter, out in a fog, sounds carry much farther and with much more distinctness under such conditions than ordinarily. It was because of this that the boys heard, borne down the river to them, the sound of voices.

“Now I won’t take any of your threats, Bill Berry!” they heard some one say.

With a quick but noiseless motion Ned slowed the motor down to first speed. The craft made scarcely a sound and glided through the water like a ghost, with one red and one green eye.

“Did you hear that?” asked Bob.

“Keep quiet!” commanded Jerry. “It sounded like Noddy’s voice. If it was we must find out what he’s up to.”

They listened intently, and heard a confused murmur. The words borne to them must have been exceptionally loud or else an echo carried them. Then, again, they heard plainly.

“You needn’t try to scare me, Bill,” spoke the voice, which all three now recognized as Noddy’s. “You’re as deep in this thing as I am, and if you try to

give me away I can do the same for you.”

Then came the low tones of some one evidently pleading with Noddy.

“Steer close up, under those overhanging trees,” said Jerry to Ned. At the same time he threw the edge of a tarpaulin over the red and green side lights.

Silently the *Dartaway* glided into a regular bower under the trees. It was dark, and made an excellent hiding place. Ned threw out the gear, but the engine was allowed to run slowly.

In their hiding place the motor boys could hear the voices more plainly now. They knew Noddy and Bill were plotting together over something. From the direction of the sound of the voices Noddy and Bill appeared to be upon a small hill overlooking the river.

“I’ve got to have that money,” Bill could be heard to say. “I need it, and if you don’t get it for me I’ll—!”

“It won’t do a bit of good to threaten,” interrupted Noddy. “I’m not afraid of you. You were just as bad as I was in the mine and the kidnapping business. You don’t want to go to jail any more than I do.”

“Maybe not,” sneered Bill, “but I’ve got to have money to live. I could do that in jail without any money, but I can’t outside, which is a curious thing. But I need some cash and you’ve got to get it for me.”

“Where can I get any money?” asked Noddy.

“I don’t care where you get it,” said Bill in no gentle tones. “You can beg it or borrow it—or steal it for all I care. You get some, that’s all, or I’ll go to the police and tell them all I know.”

“You’re trying to blackmail me!” exclaimed Noddy, who, from his voice seemed almost ready to burst into tears. “You’re threatening me.”

“It’s the only way to make you do anything,” growled Bill. “Now I tell you what; if I don’t have some cash inside of two weeks there’s going to be trouble for you.”

“I’m not afraid of you!” cried Noddy, stung to sudden anger by the helplessness of his position.

“I’ll make you!” exclaimed Bill.

It sounded as though there was a scuffle between the two in the bushes. Now

and then muffled cries could be heard.

“We’d better go and help Noddy!” exclaimed Ned. “He’s no friend of ours, but I don’t want to see that Bill Berry get the best of him.”

The three boys were so excited they forgot to maintain the caution they had observed at first. In moving about in the boat, as the struggle continued, the tarpaulins were knocked from the lamps and the red and green rays glowed out.

All at once the sounds of the struggle ceased. It became very quiet. But, through the darkness came the hoarse whisper from Noddy:

“There’s the police boat! They’re after us! Come on Bill.”



CHAPTER XII

AN ALARM OF FIRE

An instant later the motor boys could hear a crashing of bushes and underbrush that told them Noddy and Bill were in flight.

“Shall we take after them?” asked Bob.

“What’s the use?” inquired Jerry. “We don’t want to leave our boat. Besides, if we did catch them, which is doubtful, owing to the darkness, what would we say?”

“We might ask them what they were talking about,” said Bob.

The retreating footsteps of Bill and Noddy were becoming fainter and fainter. Now they ceased altogether.

“Well, I guess we may as well start for home,” said Jerry. “We can’t gain anything by staying here.”

It was rather late when the motor boys got home after locking up the *Dartaway*. They did not go out again until Friday afternoon when they started for a park resort up stream.

The *Dartaway* was running to perfection, having been overhauled by the boys, the engine well oiled and some adjustments made. The motor was “finding itself” and was working more smoothly with every revolution. Obedient to helm and throttle the craft went spinning up the stream like some big river horse.

As the boys in the boat swung around a sharp bend, the turn being hidden by thick trees, they almost ran into a small schooner that was beating up against the wind.

“Look out!” cried Ned to Bob, who was steering.

Bob swung the wheel well around and started to reverse the engine, when Jerry sprang forward from the stern, where he had been sitting.

“Keep on, full speed ahead!” he called. “It’s the only way to avoid hitting him!”

At the same time he moved the gasoline and sparking levers forward, and, as the *Dartaway* leaped ahead under the quickening impulse, Jerry steered to the left of the schooner.

His quick action saved a collision. As it was, the motor boat barely grazed the side of the other craft, and then shot out into the middle of the stream.

“What’s the matter with you fresh kids?” called a voice from the schooner, and the boys looked over to see a ragged man shaking his fist at them.

“I’ll have the law on you!” the skipper went on. “You’ve got no right to make a turn like that at full speed without blowing a whistle.”

“I guess he’s got us right,” spoke Jerry in low tones. “It’s our fault. Sailing vessels have the right of way.”

The man appeared to be all alone on the craft for he remained at the wheel, and no one else came on deck.

“You’d ought to have kept a little more in shore,” said Jerry. “Unloaded vessels are supposed to at this point as it’s deeper farther out, and the loaded ones take that channel.”

“I don’t care a hang about the channel!” cried the man. “You nearly run me down, and you didn’t blow any warning. If I catch you at it again I’ll sink your tin-pan of a boat if I get a chance.”

“You’ll not get the chance!” fired back Ned, turning to look at the schooner which was disappearing around the bend. As he did so the boy gave a cry of alarm.

“What’s the matter?” asked Jerry.

“Look at the stern of that boat!” cried Ned.

Bob and Jerry looked. Under the overhanging ornamental work was the name:

BLUEBIRD

“Nothing remarkable about that,” said Bob. “It could just as well have been redbird, or yellowbird or blackbird.”

“I see what you mean,” put in Jerry excitedly. “It may have been the ‘blue’ thing that Bill Berry referred to when he quarreled with us.”

“I’m sure it is,” said Ned. “There’s something queer going on along this river, and we’ll find it out sooner or later.”

They ran along for several miles, and were approaching a small village called Westville, when, as they came around a bend that hid from sight a straight stretch of water which led past the town, they heard shouts of excitement.

“I wonder what we’ve run into now,” said Jerry.

“Looks like a fire,” said Bob.

“It is a fire!” exclaimed Ned. “See, that barn upon the hill is all ablaze!”

Looking to where he pointed Bob and Jerry saw the stable structure, near a handsome country residence was spouting flames. About it a crowd was gathered, and the boys could see men leading out horses and running out wagons, carriages and farm machinery.

“I wonder where the fire department is,” said Jerry. “I heard they had a cracker-jack one here.”

“There they come!” cried Ned pointing to where a crowd of men and boys could be seen hurrying down a hill over which led the road into the village. In the midst of the throng was some sort of machine which was being pulled by long ropes.

“It’s an old hand engine!” cried Bob. “I thought they had a steamer here.”

“Come on; let’s go up and see it work!” cried Jerry.

The motor boat was run close to the bank, and, having been tied to an overhanging tree the boys raced up the slope toward the burning barn.

By this time the hand engine had arrived. It was one of the old-fashioned kind. Two long handles worked a pump mounted on a tank. Into this tank water had to be poured by pails, and from the bottom ran two lines of hose connected to the pumps. The hose was carried on a separate reel. In a few minutes the volunteer firemen, having gotten in each other’s way as many times as was possible, had the hose attached. One little man with a bald head and a fuzz of white whiskers on his chin was giving all sorts of orders.

Then two lines of men and boys were formed, each person with a bucket in hand, the files leading to a small brook which ran near the barn. From one to another the buckets were passed, going down empty on one side and going along filled on the other. As fast as possible the pails were emptied into the tank.

The men at the handles or “brakes” as they were called were pumping away for dear life, and soon a feeble stream came from one hose nozzle.

“Hurrah!” cried the crowd, and half a score of willing hands grabbed the line and started toward the burning barn with it. A little later, the pump having gotten in its stride, so to speak, sent a stream from the other hose.

Again there was a shout of approval, and the two streams were soon playing on the flames. But the fire had gained too much headway to succumb to anything short of the efforts of a regular department. The blaze mounted higher and higher.

“The house is on fire! The house is on fire!” a score of voices yelled.

Sure enough, some sparks from the barn had fallen on the shingled roof of the residence and there were several tiny spurts of flame.

“Let the barn go, boys!” called the chief. “Let’s save the house.”

Willing hands dragged the clumsy machine nearer the residence while the men at the nozzles ran back, and prepared to squirt water on the roof. Once more the buckets passed along the line.

Clank! Clank! went the handles.

“What’s the matter?” cried the chief. “There’s no water coming from the hose!”

The nozzle-men had climbed up on two ladders which were hastily reared against the side of the house. They turned the hose toward the spurts of flame, but no water came. The trouble was the pump was not powerful enough to force the fluid to so great a height.

“Pump! Pump!” cried the chief.

The men at the handles redoubled their efforts. For a minute or so a feeble stream trickled from the nozzles. Then, with a cough and a wheeze the pump gave out. It had broken under the unusual pressure, not being in the best of repair at any time.

“What are we going to do?” cried the chief. “The house will go!”

“Form a chain gang!” cried the owner of the residence. “Have the men stand in line from the brook to the ladder and pass the buckets along and up to the roof!”

“Good idea!” yelled the chief. “Hurry men!”

It was easy to plan but hard to put into operation. The buckets were full when

they left the hands of the men nearest the stream, but when they got to those on the roof there was barely a quarter pail-full of the fluid left, so much had spilled out.

The volunteer fire fighters did the best with what they had, but the flames were gaining on them. The roof was afire in a dozen places. As fast as one spot was put out another would ignite.

Jerry ran to the disabled engine. He seemed to be examining the hose. Then he hurried back to the chief.

“How many feet of hose have you?” he asked of that excited official.

“About four hundred. But don’t bother me! What good is hose when you haven’t a pump? Look out the way!”

“I’ll tell you what good it is!” exclaimed Jerry. “Uncouple it from the engine and run it down to our boat!” and he pointed to where the *Dartaway* was tied at the shore.



CHAPTER XIII

THE QUEER TRAMP

“What good will that do?” cried the chief. “Haven’t I got troubles enough without you bothering me? This whole place is going up in smoke!”

“No it won’t if you do as I say,” insisted Jerry. “Have your men run that hose down to our boat!”

“Have you got a force pump there?” demanded the chief halting in his intention of shouting some new order through his trumpet.

“That’s what we have, and a powerful one too,” cried Jerry.

“Good!” exclaimed the chief. “Here boys! Run the line down to the motor boat!”

Wondering whether their chief had taken leave of his senses the men obeyed. A curious crowd gathered to see what was going on. Some even deserted the bucket brigade lines.

“Don’t leave my house to burn up!” cried the distracted owner.

“Do you think you can attach the hose to the engine?” asked Bob, as he ran along beside Jerry.

“Not to the engine but to the pump; the auxiliary pump,” said Jerry. “I guess you forgot we have a regular force pump which is worked by the engine. Not the one that pumps up water to cool the cylinders, but the one in the stern that is intended for a hose to be attached to. It’s for use in case the boat gets afire, or to wash it off when it’s dirty. It’s a fine pump, double acting, but we never had occasion to use it, and we haven’t any hose for it. I measured the fire hose, and it will just fit on the pump nozzle.”

By this time the men dragging the hose were at the *Dartaway*. They stared in wonder at the trim craft, for it was the first time many of them had ever seen a motor boat.

“Fasten the line on there!” cried Jerry showing the men where the pump was. “I’ll start the engine!”

He threw out the gear, and started the motor, which, running free, soon attained a terrific speed. Then Jerry threw in the clutch connecting with the pump. In an instant the machine began to suck up water from the river.

A few seconds later there came a shout from the other end of the hose, where some men were holding it ready to play a stream on the roof, which was now blazing furiously.

“By Hook! You’ve done the trick!” exclaimed the chief. “I didn’t think your little machine would force water so far.”

The chief ran back to direct his men, while quite a crowd stayed to watch the motor boys in their unexpected role of firemen.

In a few minutes the firemen had the blaze under control. It had just begun to eat through the shingles, but, so well did the volunteers play the water on, and, thanks to the *Dartaway’s* pump, so much was there of the fluid, that the fire soon got discouraged and, save for a few little tongues of flame, it was out five minutes later.

The house was saved, but the barn was a total loss. Seeing that there was no further need of a stream on the roof, the chief directed the men to play on the burning embers of the stable, which had collapsed into a huge bon-fire.

“Well, I reckon I can call off my men now,” said the chief some time later, when there was only a little smoke to show where the barn had stood. “I guess the danger’s over. One of you men take a look upon the house roof to see there are no sparks left.”

A volunteer fireman scrambled up and reported that the roof-fire was out completely.

“Then we’ll pull up and go home,” went on the chief. “I’m sure we’re much obliged to you boys. I don’t know what we’d ’a done only for you.”

“That’s all right,” spoke Jerry. “Glad we happened along in time to be of service.”

The hose was uncoupled from the boat pump, and coiled on the reel, while the hand engine was dragged out into the road in preparation for being taken back to quarters.

The motor boys prepared to continue on their trip. Just as Jerry was adjusting the engine in readiness to start off, a man came running down the bank to the river.

“Hi; you boys!” he called.

“Well, what is it; more fire?” asked Ned.

“No, but Mr. Dudley wants to know if you won’t come up and stay to supper. He wants to thank you, and he’s asked the other fire department also.”

“The other fire department, eh?” remarked Jerry in a low voice. “They must count us as one. Shall we go up, boys?”

“If you leave it to me I say yes every time,” put in Bob.

“Oh we knew that,” said Jerry. “What do you say, Ned?”

“Oh I could toy with a bit of food if it isn’t too heavy,” said Ned with a smile.

“Tell Mr. Dudley we’re much obliged to him, and we’ll be right up,” said Jerry, and the man, who seemed to be a helper about the place, ran back to the house.

Mrs. Dudley and several of the servants had set a table in the big dining room. The members of the volunteer fire department were standing awkwardly around discussing the events of the last few hours, and Mr. Dudley was going about from one to the other thanking them for what they had done.

“Here comes the real heroes of the day!” cried the fire chief as the boys entered. “They are the ones who jumped right into the breach and pulled us out of the hole.”

“That’s so!” cried Mr. Dudley, hurrying over and shaking hands with the boys. “I don’t know your names yet,” he went on, “but I’m a thousand times obliged to you.”

Jerry introduced himself and his comrades, and soon every one was at his ease, the volunteers firing question after question at Bob, Ned and Jerry as to how their “machine” worked.

“Now, never mind the fire, but sit down and eat,” cried Mr. Dudley. “I’m sure you’re hungry and that you all deserve better than we have here. You must make allowances for the meal. It was gotten ready in a hurry, and we’re a little upset.”

“I should think you would be,” said the chief. “Good land, we ain’t had as much excitement as this, no sir, not in ten years.”

The meal was a good one in spite of the adverse circumstances under which it was prepared, and the boys and every one else ate heartily.

During a lull in the serving of the victuals, the chief arose at his place.

“Members of the Towanda Fire Department,” he said, “I have a motion to make. I know this ain’t a regular meeting, but I ask for a suspension of the rules.”

“Hurrah! You’re all right! Go ahead chief! Make a dozen motions if you want to!” were some of the cries that greeted the head of the volunteers.

“Then I move you that we elect these three boys, who helped us so well today, honorary members of our department!” exclaimed the chief.

“Second the motion!” cried every member of the volunteers.

“I guess there’s no use to take a vote on that proposition,” the chief went on. “You’re elected unanimously!”

“Thank you, very much,” said Jerry, speaking for himself and his chums.

There was a cheer for the boys, and congratulations on every side. Mrs. Dudley came up, shook hands with the boys, and with tears in her eyes thanked them for their aid in saving her home.

“I don’t know what I would have done if it had burned down,” she said. “I’ve lived here so long I don’t believe I ever could live in a new place. I must write and tell you boys’ mothers what you did for me.”

As soon as they could, the boys made an excuse for leaving. Shaking hands with their host and hostess, they went down to the motor boat, followed by about half the members of the fire department. Amid cheers from the men the boys started off.

“I guess we’d better cut out the trip to the park,” said Jerry. “How about going straight home?”

“Suits me,” came from Ned and Bob.

Accordingly, after the side lamps and the search lantern had been lighted, the *Dartaway* was swung down the river.

Suddenly from the gloom in front of them, there sounded a loud crash. Then a bumping noise, followed by confused shouts.

“Trouble of some kind!” exclaimed Jerry. He swung the search lamp in the direction from which the noise had come. In the white blinding glare of the gas lamp the boys saw the outlines of a schooner, partially hidden behind some big

black object.

“That’s the *Bluebird!*” exclaimed Ned.

“And something has run into her!” cried Jerry. “I wonder what it is. Put us over that way, Ned.”

Ned shifted the wheel. As the *Dartaway* came nearer, and the black object was illuminated more by the search lamp, the boys could see that it was a barge loaded with hay which had drifted upon the schooner.

“Help! Help! Save me! The schooner is sinking!” cried a voice from the darkness.

“You’d better jump!” another voice answered. “I can’t pull the barge back!”

The boys were now near enough to see what was happening. The barge was broadside on to the current. It was so big that the force of the river was bearing it hard against the side of the schooner, which was careening badly.

“Is there anyone on the barge?” called Jerry.

“Yes!” came back the answer. “Can you throw me a line and pull me back? I don’t want to sink the vessel!”

“Stand by to catch!” cried Jerry.

He stood up in the bow and cast a line to a dark figure that ran out to the end of the barge, nearest the motor boat. The man skillfully caught the line, and fastened it to a cleat.

Then, under Jerry’s direction, Ned swung the *Dartaway* about in a big circle, taking care not to foul the tow line. The rope was fastened to the stern of the motor boat, and, when the latter was pointed up stream it tautened suddenly.

Ned put the engine at full speed, and slowly, very slowly, for the weight was considerable, the hay barge was pulled away from the schooner. The latter, relieved of the pressure, began to right.

“That’s the stuff!” cried the man on the barge. He was in the full glare of the search lamp, which Jerry had reversed to play on the barge, and the boys saw that he was a tramp. His clothes hung in rags about him, and his face looked as if it had not felt a razor in months.

“Pull her up the river a way and tie her to the bank, if you will,” the tramp said, stepping out of the glare of the light suddenly. “She drifted down stream with me,” he went on.

“Who does it belong to?” asked Jerry.

There was no answer. Then, all at once, there came a splash in the water.

“Some one has fallen overboard!” cried Bob.

Jerry flashed the light down on the surface of the river. In the white glare the tramp could be seen striking out for shore. He was swimming well, and seemed in no need of assistance so Jerry did not stop the towing of the barge to put over to him.

“Well of all the queer tramps he’s the limit,” said Bob. “He don’t seem to

mind getting a bath. Wonder how he came to fall in.”

“He didn’t fall in, he jumped,” said Jerry. “There’s something queer behind this.”



CHAPTER XIV

CAMPING OUT

“Hurry up, run the barge ashore and let’s see what he’s up to,” suggested Ned.

“All right,” agreed Jerry. “We might as well see this thing through while we’re at it.”

The barge, with its load of hay was no light weight to tow, but the boys were satisfied to get it out of the way of the schooner. They steered over toward the bank, and, as Ned slowed up the engine, Jerry and Bob leaped ashore and tied the line to a tree.

“We can come and get the rope to-morrow,” said Jerry. “Now to find our queer tramp.”

The hay barge was now securely tied, and, as the boys could see in the light of the search lantern, the schooner had righted. There seemed to be no movement on board, and the boys concluded that whoever had been afraid of losing his life in the accident had quieted down.

“Everybody listen,” said Jerry. “I want to see if we can hear the tramp moving on shore.”

The engine had been stopped and there was no sound to disturb the stillness of the night. Suddenly, from the bush that lined the bank of the river, there came a crackling that betokened some person was moving through them.

“Maybe this is our tramp,” said Bob.

With a quick movement Ned, who was standing in the bow of the boat, turned the search light on shore. As he did so there emerged from the underbrush a figure that was dripping with water. One glance showed the boys it was the tramp of the hay barge.

“Oh!” exclaimed the tramp. “You’re here, are you?”

“Just about,” said Jerry. “Here’s your load of hay,” and he motioned to the barge tied to the bank.

“Oh that’s not mine,” the tramp said pleasantly. “You see the way it was I

went to sleep on that barge. It was tied to the bank, some where along here. The first thing I knew there was a collision and I heard some one on the schooner shouting that I was sinking him.”

“I guess you came pretty near it,” put in Ned.

“Yes; well maybe I did, but it wasn’t my fault. The barge must have drifted down stream while I was asleep. Then you boys came along in the nick of time, and—well you know the rest.”

“Are you stopping around here?” asked Jerry.

“Well, not so’s you could notice it,” the tramp replied. “I’m a sort of wandering minstrel you might say, here to-day and gone to-morrow.”

“Can we do anything for you?” asked Jerry, taking pity on the man’s rather forlorn appearance. “Give you a ride down to the town, or anything like that?”

“No, thanks just the same,” replied the tramp. “It’s going to be a warm night, and my clothes will soon dry. Besides I’m a nature lover and a student of the stars. I like to sleep out of doors, so I’ll just curl up here under a bush and sleep the sleep of the just. In the morning I will hie me on my way again, fair sirs.”

“Then we can’t help you?” asked Ned, who, with the other boys, was somewhat puzzled by the man’s queer manner and rather high-flown talk.

“Well, to tell you the truth the only thing you could do for me would be to hand over a chicken sandwich or two,” the tramp said. “And I don’t suppose you carry such luxuries with you on your cruises.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t mind roast beef, corned beef and cheese sandwiches,” suggested Bob.

“Don’t make fun of him,” spoke Jerry in a low voice.

“I’m not,” replied Chunky. “I’ve got some here.”

He fumbled in a side locker of the boat and drew out a bulky package. Then he put his hand in again and brought forth a bottle of ginger ale.

“Where in the world did you get that stuff?” asked Ned.

“I saved it from the dinner at Mr. Dudley’s,” answered Bob.

“Well, you are the limit!” exclaimed Jerry, while Ned joined in the laugh at Chunky.

“Here you go,” said Bob to the tramp, extending some of the food and a bottle

of ginger ale. "It will last until you can get something more."

"You are too generous," spoke the tramp, but though his tone was bantering as his previous speech had been, the boys could see he was in earnest.

He came close to the boat and accepted the sandwiches and bottle which Bob held out. Then, making his way up the bank again, he was soon lost to sight in the shadows, while he called back a friendly "good-night."

"I guess we can go home now," spoke Jerry. "We've had adventures enough for one night."

"Yes, and if I'm not mistaken this one will lead to others," Ned put in.

"What do you mean?" asked Jerry, with sudden interest.

"Did you notice the tramp's face?"

"Not particularly; why?"

"Well, you remember how much he looked as if he needed a shave when he came in the glare of the light as he stood on the barge?"

"I sure do."

"Well, he didn't look so when he took the sandwiches from Bob, did he?"

"No, he didn't," put in Bob. "He was as clean as if he'd just been to the barber's."

"You don't s'pose he got shaved in the woods, after his bath, do you?" asked Ned.

"You mean we must have been mistaken in thinking he needed one?" asked Jerry.

"No, I mean his appearance changed after he fell or jumped into the water. His 'whiskers' came off."

"Then he was disguised!" exclaimed Jerry.

"That's what I believe," Ned replied. "And what with a disguised tramp on a hay barge, a mysterious schooner named *Bluebird*, and Bill Berry's curious reference to something 'blue' I shouldn't wonder but what there was something strange going on around these parts. And we're liable to get mixed up in it at any time."

"Not any more to-night, if you please," spoke Jerry. "I'm dead tired, and I

want to go to bed. If there are going to be any more adventures I'm going to duck."

"Well, I don't s'pose we can find out anything more to-night," admitted Ned. "So let's head for home." And they did.

The next day the boys made a trip up the river to where they had tied the hay barge. They found several men on the craft, discussing how it had happened the boat had moved from the place where they had tied it. The boys moored their craft and went on the barge to get their rope.

"So this is your tow line, eh?" asked a man who seemed to be in charge of the barge.

"That's what," replied Jerry, and he related what happened the night previous.

"Wa'al, I might have knowed suthin' would break loose if I let th' men have a night off," the farmer, for such he was, went on. "We was bringin' this load of fodder down stream, an' we had t' tie up as it was gittin' dusk. Some of th' boys wanted t' go off t' town t' a dance, an' I let 'em, as we don't have many amusements on th' farm. When we come back we couldn't find th' boat, an' we thought some one had stole her. We went back t' town an' stayed all night an' come trampin' down t' th' river this mornin'. Lucky we found th' craft, an' the hay not stole. I'm sure I'm much obliged t' you boys."

"I'm sure you're welcome," replied Jerry, not saying anything about the tramp, who, it appeared, had had no hand in the boat drifting away.

Securing their line the boys went back to their boat.

"Where shall we go?" asked Ned. "I'd like to get off in the woods somewhere and camp out. I wish vacation was here and we could take our cruise."

"Let's take a little one now," suggested Jerry. "We don't need to bother with a tent. We can go off somewhere, and stay over Sunday, and sleep on board."

Things were soon in readiness and the start was made about six o'clock that evening. They went some miles, and when ten o'clock came the boys lighted the gasoline stove and made coffee, for the night was quite chilly. They set the small table amidships, and, with the food they had brought along, they made a good meal. They were so tired, with the good healthy exhaustion of exercise in the open air, that it was not long after this before they were all sound asleep.

It must have been past midnight when Jerry, who was sleeping forward, was awakened by feeling the boat careen to one side.

“What’s the matter?” he cried, sitting up on the bunk.



CHAPTER XV

THE MOTOR BOAT MISSING

There was no sound save the ripple of water past the side of the craft, and the distant gurgle where the stream flowed over a stony place that formed miniature rapids.

“Who’s there?” asked Jerry again.

This time he heard a splash in the water as if a big fish was moving about.

Jerry knew the river did not boast of sufficiently large finny specimens to careen a boat the size of the *Dartaway*. Nevertheless something had shifted her.

Jerry was wide awake now. He stepped out into the enclosed space between the bunks that formed a sort of cabin. As he did so he felt the boat rock again; this time so violently as to almost cause him to lose his balance.

To avoid falling Jerry thrust out his hand, and it hit Bob, who was sleeping on the other side of the boat.

“All right! All right! I’m goin’ to get right up!” exclaimed Bob, turning over but evincing no other desire to do as he said he would. He evidently imagined himself in his bed at home, and with his father calling him to get up, for Bob was no light slumberer.

“What’s the matter?” asked Ned, sitting up suddenly. He was easily awakened, and the sound of Bob’s voice, with the movement of Jerry served to arouse him. “What’s the matter?” he repeated. “Are they after us? Is Noddy up to his old tricks?”

“I don’t know what’s the matter,” replied Jerry in a low voice. “I was awakened by feeling the boat rock, and I got up to see what the trouble was. I haven’t found out yet.”

“Maybe we’re adrift,” suggested Ned. “We may have swung down stream and hit the bank.”

Jerry reached for a swinging lantern, and, parting the canvas side awnings, held the light over the rail. By the gleam the boys could see that they were still

tyed to the shore trees by bow and stern lines.

“The boat hasn’t drifted,” said Jerry. “Something moved it. I heard a noise in the water as if there was a big fish, but who ever heard of whales or sharks in the river, and it must have been something as big as that to cause us to careen so.”

“Maybe it was a log that hit us,” suggested Ned.

“I think not; I would know the bump of a log,” said Jerry. “Hark! What’s that?”

Both boys listened intently. Off toward the farther bank could be heard a faint splashing, as if a large body was moving in the water.

“Light the search lantern, and we’ll throw a beam over in that direction,” said Ned. Jerry crept forward and soon had the big illuminator kindled. Then he suddenly turned the beams full on in the direction of the splashing sound.

For a moment nothing could be distinguished save the green bank that bordered the river. Then, as Jerry swung the search light in a half circle he “picked up” a dark figure that was crawling up the sloping shore.

“It’s a man!” exclaimed Ned. “It’s a man with ragged clothes on! I’ll bet it’s the same tramp that was on the hay barge!”

Jerry was gazing intently through the opened canvas sides of the boat at the figure. Sure enough it was that of a man, and, he seemed to have just swam across the river. He climbed the bank, and, turning to take a look at the motor boat, placed himself full in the glare of the gas lamp.

“It’s our queer tramp all right!” exclaimed Jerry. “I wonder if it was he who moved the boat.”

“Must have been,” decided Ned, after a moment’s thought.

The next instant the figure, turning as if to take a last look at the boat, plunged into the underbrush and was lost to view.

The morning came without further adventures and after breakfast they walked for a mile or more through the woods, and emerged into a big field. There were no houses in sight and the boys did not know what settlement they might be near, for they were about twenty miles from home, in a part of the country they seldom visited.

“Looks like some sort of habitation over there,” said Bob, pointing to the left.

“I don’t see anything,” replied Jerry. “Where do you see a house?”

“I don’t see any house, but I see smoke,” replied Bob. “Where there’s smoke there’s fire, and where there’s fire there’s sure to be some one living.”

As they came nearer to whence the smoke arose they could see half hidden in the bushes a sort of log cabin. It was almost in ruins, and the one window was devoid of glass.

In front of the hut there smouldered the remains of a fire, and, from some old pots and pans lying about, as well as odds and ends of food scattered around, it was evident that some one had been dining in rough and ready fashion.

“Looks like a camping-out party had been here,” said Jerry. “They weren’t very particular where they stayed though. That hut seems to have seen its best days.”

“More like it’s a tramps’ shack,” observed Ned. “Maybe our friend of the hay barge hangs out here.”

The boys went closer to the fire. There were chickens’ feathers and bones on the ground.

“They lived high, at any rate,” said Bob. “I wouldn’t mind a bit of broiled fowl myself.”

“Whoever was here left their knife behind,” said Bob, stooping over and picking up an expensive one. “Doesn’t look like the kind tramps usually carry.” He turned it over in his hand, and uttered an exclamation.

“Cut yourself?” asked Jerry.

“Look there!” cried Bob, pointing to the silver plate on one side of the handle. On it was carved: “N. Nixon.”

“Noddy’s knife!” came from Ned. “I wonder what he could have been doing here.”

“It’s like a good many other things connected with Noddy,” said Jerry. “No telling what he’s up to until it’s too late.”

“Shall we take it along or leave it?” asked Bob.

“Better take it,” suggested Jerry. “It might come in handy for evidence some time, and if we leave it some one might come along and steal it. Put it in your pocket, Chunky.”

Strolling leisurely they retraced their steps, and soon were on the rude path they had followed in coming from the river.

Jerry was in the lead. When he came to the bank of the stream he suddenly stopped.

“What’s the matter? Snake?” called out Ned.

“We must have come the wrong road,” said Jerry. “The boat isn’t here.”

The other boys hurried forward and stood beside him. There was no sign of the *Dartaway*.

“That’s queer,” said Bob. “I thought we were on the right path coming back. It was just like the one we went over on.”

“It was the same,” insisted Ned. “There’s where the *Dartaway* was tied up. I know that willow tree. See, I left my sweater on it, and it’s there yet,” and he pointed to where the red garment fluttered in the wind.

“Then where’s the boat?” asked Jerry. “Has it floated away?”

“It couldn’t have,” insisted Ned. “It was tied too securely.”

“Then she’s been stolen!” exclaimed Jerry, and he ran down to the edge of the river, the others following.

There was no doubt about it, the *Dartaway* was gone. There was not a sign of the craft up stream or down.

“Some one’s been here all right,” said Jerry. “See those are not our tracks,” and he pointed to the soft mud in which were several prints of large feet which had worn hob-nailed shoes. In the middle of the sole was a design of an arrow, which the maker of the shoes had put on them in big nails, and this device was plainly visible in the soil.

“Well, this is tough luck!” exclaimed Bob. “I’d like to find the man with the arrow shoes.”

“I’d rather find the boat,” said Jerry in a dejected voice. “I wonder what in the world we’re going to do,” and he sat down on the grassy bank. The others, looking sadly at where their beloved boat had been moored, took places beside Jerry.



CHAPTER XVI

THE SEARCH

For a while no one felt like speaking. The shock was too much for them. They could hardly realize that their craft was gone. Finally Jerry spoke.

“We’ve got to find her!” he exclaimed. “She’s somewhere on the river, up or down, and we’ve got to go after her. She can’t have been taken very far, for we’ve not been gone more than three hours.”

“If she was run at full speed she could get a good way off in that time,” observed Bob.

“Well, what’s to be done?” asked Ned.

“I think the best plan will be to start up or down the river,” said Jerry. “Chances are who ever took the boat went up, as they wouldn’t risk cruising past Cresville with it. So we’ll start up I think.”

“You mean walk?” asked Bob who was not inclined to any exertion when he could help it.

“Well I don’t see any one coming along with a launch or a water automobile, Chunky,” said Jerry. “I guess we’ll have to walk, a way at any rate. We’ll inquire of every one who lives along the river if they have seen the boat. We may get a line on her that way. So let’s start.”

“I wish we’d taken some of the grub out of her before we went away,” said Bob with a sigh.

“If they’ll give us back the boat they can have all the victuals and welcome,” spoke Ned.

“I guess you’re not as hungry as I am,” said Bob.

“Well, there’s no use worrying over that part of it,” Jerry said. “We’ll start out. Maybe we can find a hotel or a farm house where we can buy some lunch.”

Tired and discouraged, hungry and thirsty, the boys started off to tramp up along the river bank. It was in strange contrast to the manner in which they had arrived the evening before.

Their course lay partly through meadow land and partly through the woods, for the river was winding in its course. The sun beamed down hot and the journey was anything but a pleasant one. But the boys with grim determination did not mind the discomforts. They wanted to find their boat and they were willing to make any sacrifices to get her.

They had walked for an hour without seeing a sign of habitation or meeting a person. But, about noon, as they came around a sharp turn, where the river flowed between two rather high hills, they spied a farm house, which, from the extent of land surrounding it, and the number of out buildings seemed to belong to a man of means.

“Well, that looks as if there was something to eat there, at any rate,” spoke Bob. “Hurry up, fellows, I’m nearly starved. Have any of you got any money? I’m broke.”

Ned had only a little change, but, fortunately Jerry had several bills in his pocket.

“We don’t look very presentable to go up to a man’s house on Sunday,” said Ned. “But beggars can’t be choosers.”

The boys had on old suits which they donned as they expected to tramp through the woods. Their good clothes were on the boat. Then too, the jaunt along the river had not improved their appearance as they were rather begrimed.

“Let’s scrub up a bit before we make an appeal for help,” suggested Ned.

“Good idea,” agreed Bob, and all three went down to the edge of the river. They washed the mud off their shoes, scrubbed their faces and hands, drying them on their pocket handkerchiefs, to the detriment of the linen, and then they brushed the dirt and cobwebs from their clothes with bunches of grass.

“There!” exclaimed Jerry when the toilets were completed. “We’re not exactly dressed for a party, but I guess it’s some better than we were.”

They approached the farm house from the front. Bob had suggested going in the back way, but Ned insisted they were not tramps, but travelers willing and able to pay for a meal, so it was decided to approach in style.

Jerry rang the bell. In a little while an aged colored man answered. He was all smiles as he came along, but, as he opened the glass paneled portal the boys could see a frown appear on his face.

“Marse Johnson done give p’ticklar orders that all tramps an’ beggars done

got t' go t' th' back part this establishment!" said the negro.

"Well, what's that got to do with us?" asked Jerry. "Tell Mr. Johnson we wish to see him at once."

"Well I mus' say you's th' most imperterlitest—"

"Never mind!" exclaimed Jerry. "Just tell Mr. Johnson that we are from Cresville. He'll understand."

The colored man hesitated a moment. Clearly he was puzzled by Jerry's confident manner.

"Sit down," said Jerry to Bob and Ned, waving his hand toward some porch chairs.

That seemed to settle it in the negro's mind. Any one who assumed so much must be an expected guest he reasoned even though the clothing of the boys betokened them to be unlike the usual run of visitors.

Somewhat apprehensive of what their reception might be the boys waited. They heard the footsteps of the colored man go echoing down the hall. The big dog, seemingly satisfied that all was right, had resumed his sleep.

The boys heard someone coming along the gravel on the walk at the side of the porch. They looked up, expecting to see the master of the house approaching. They beheld a little man with a round shining bald head, and a fuzz of white whiskers around his chin. Though long past middle age, he came along with sprightly steps. No sooner had he caught sight of the boys than his walk became a run, and he fairly bounded up on the porch.

"Well of all things!" he exclaimed. "Who would have thought to see you here. My but I'm glad to see you. Welcome, fellow fire-fighters!"

The boys rose from their chairs, rather puzzled over the little man's words and actions. He began shaking hands with them, though, as Bob afterward confessed he was doubtful about engaging in the operation, as he thought the man was a mild lunatic.

"Well, well, but I am glad to see you!" the little man went on. "I'm awfully glad you came. You're just in time for dinner. Come right in."

"Oh, friends of yours, Henry?" asked a voice from the doorway, and the boys turned to see a tall stately gentleman coming out on the porch. "You young gentlemen must excuse me," the tall man went on. "I did not understand

Sambo's message. He said, but you must pardon me for repeating it, but he said there were some tramps out here. But I did not dream there were some old friends of Cousin Henry's. I am very pleased to meet you."

All of which was more and more puzzling to the boys.

"Friends of mine! I should rather say they were!" exclaimed the little man. "These young gentlemen," he went on, "are honorary members of the Towanda Fire Department, of which I am the only living charter member!" and he threw back his shoulders proudly.

"That's what they are," he went on. "You should have seen them and their steam boat at the Dudley fire. They saved the day, that's what they did. We elected 'em on the spot. I was there! I ought to know! My, but that was a blaze!" he exclaimed. "Me and the chief never forgot your services. I'm general adviser of the department," he continued. "You saw me there?"

"Of course," said Jerry, who, with the other boys now remembered the little man who had been so fussy to see that the ancient hand engine worked well.

"Well, any friends of yours are friends of mine," said the tall gentleman. "Introduce me, Henry," which the only living charter member of the Towanda Fire Department proceeded to do with old fashioned courtesy.

"You're just in time for dinner," spoke Mr. Johnson. "I shall only be too proud to have you join us. My cousin has told me, several times of your assistance at the big fire. I have often desired to meet you. My cousin came over on a visit this week. Fortunate that you should have known of it and followed him."

"We didn't. It was all an accident," said Jerry.

Then, in a few words he explained what had happened, relating the theft of the motor boat, and how it happened they were only chance visitors.

"Remarkable, remarkable!" exclaimed Mr. Johnson. "I never heard anything like it. Now come right in. My wife and daughters will be delighted to meet you and hear that story."

Almost unconsciously, at the suggestion of meeting ladies, the boys glanced at their clothes.

"Now, now, no apologies!" exclaimed Mr. Johnson. "I'll explain everything. You must take dinner with me. It is almost ready. Sambo, show the young gentlemen to the bath room, and tell Mary to put on three extra plates. Delighted to have the opportunity of dining with you," Mr. Johnson added, bowing to the

boys.

“Talk about luck!” said Bob, when they were left alone. “Say, we’re right in it. Who’d ever thought our helping at that fire would have brought us a meal just when we needed it most.”

The other boys were equally impressed by the strange coincidence, and voted it a most fortunate thing that they should have come to the house where cousin Henry was stopping. They were all the more inclined to thank their lucky stars when they saw the bountiful meal that was set upon the table half an hour later.

The boys had to tell their story over again, with all the details, for Mrs. Johnson, and her two daughters, both young ladies were much interested, and asked scores of questions.

“I don’t suppose you heard or saw a motor boat going up the river, did you?” asked Jerry of his host.

“Not personally,” replied Mr. Johnson. “But I did hear Sambo say something about hearing a queer whistle out on the water sometime ago. Maybe that was it. I’ll let you ask him.”

The colored man was summoned, and proved to have even better news. He said he had been down on the river bank several hours previous and had seen a boat, that answered every description of the *Dartaway*, going up at full speed.

“Could you see who was on board?” asked Jerry.

“Peared laik there was two men on her,” said Sambo, “a little one an’ a bigger one.”

“We’d better start right off after them,” said Ned.

“I can’t let you go so soon,” protested Mr. Johnson. “Perhaps I can be of some assistance to you. I have a number of rowboats, and you’re welcome to one or more of them. You can row up stream, which is better than walking, though it’s not so fast as your craft goes. Then, if I were you I’d send dispatches to the principal cities and towns along the river, asking the police to keep a look-out for your boat.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Jerry. “I never thought of that. Thank you very much.”

“Then you had better send a telegram home to your folks telling them you will be delayed,” went on Mr. Johnson.

“Is there a station near here?” asked Ned.

“I will send Sambo over to town with the messages this afternoon,” Mr. Johnson said. “In the meanwhile make yourselves to home here, and rest up. You’ll have hard work ahead of you I’m afraid before you get your boat back. We have heard rumors lately of a gang of thieves that have infested this neighborhood, especially along the river. Maybe some of them have your craft.”



CHAPTER XVII

FINDING THE DARTAWAY

Right after dinner each of the boys wrote a message home, and the colored man drove off with them to the village about five miles away. Then, having recovered from their fatigue, the boys went to look at Mr. Johnson's collection of craft. They found he had several large rowboats, and they selected one which two could pull, while a third person in the stern could steer. It was rather a heavy craft, but it was large and roomy, and on a pinch they could sleep in it at night.

"This will be just the thing to make the search in," said Jerry. "Could we take her for three or four days?"

"As long as you like," said Mr. Johnson heartily. "Just keep it and use it until you find your boat, and you can then tow it back. Now come into the house. I want to pack up some lunch for you, and give you some blankets to camp out with, since you are determined to start to-night."

Having packed some provisions in the boat, taking along a pot to make coffee in, a supply of the commodity and a small oil stove, some kerosene, and a lantern, the searchers started off.

They camped out under a big tree at dusk and ate with good appetites in spite of their gloomy spirits and then, having built a fire on the bank, they prepared to spend the night.

"Forward again!" cried Jerry when after breakfast the simple camp outfit had been packed into the boat. At noon they came to a small village where they stopped for lunch, and to stretch their weary legs.

There they learned that the *Dartaway* had passed early the previous afternoon. It had made a short stop for gasoline. Of the dealer in the fuel the boys learned that two rough looking men were aboard the craft. Neither of them had said anything to give a clue to their identity.

It was about three o'clock, when, as the boys were rowing in a wide stretch of the river, Jerry, who was at the tiller ropes, cried:

"Hark! Cease rowing! I hear something!"

Bob and Ned rested on their oars. The sound of puffing was borne to them on the wind which was blowing up stream.

“It’s a motor boat!” exclaimed Jerry.

“Or an automobile,” said Bob.

“Automobiles don’t run along the river,” said Jerry. “There’s no good road within a mile of the stream, Mr. Johnson said. It’s a motor boat.”

“But it’s coming up stream,” said Bob. “It can’t be our boat.”

“Unless it went down past us in the night,” remarked Ned. “But we’ll soon see.”

Nearer and nearer sounded the puffing of the engine. There was no doubt that it was a motor boat and that it was coming up stream rapidly. The boys rowed enough to keep their craft from drifting, and, five minutes later the oncoming boat hove in sight.

“It’s the *Terror!*” exclaimed Ned and Jerry at once, as they recognized the Cresville police boat. “Well, if this isn’t good luck,” Jerry went on. “*Terror* ahoy!” he shouted making a megaphone of his hands.

In answer there came three sharp toots from the whistle of the gasoline craft, and her course was changed to send her over towards the boys.

“Did you come for us?” called Jerry.

“Not unless you are the burglars we’re after,” replied Chief Dalton, who was in the bow, and who recognized the boys.

“Burglars?” asked Ned.

“That’s what,” replied the chief of the Cresville force. “We’re out on business this trip. But what’s the matter with you? Got tired of your new boat so soon?”

Jerry quickly explained what had happened. The chief was much surprised. The *Terror* had been stopped and, at the invitation of the police official, the boys came into the motor boat. There were several policemen aboard and the engineer.

“Shall we tow our boat?” asked Bob.

“Better leave it tied to the bank,” said the chief. “I want to make all the speed I can. We’ll pick it up on the way back, that is if you boys want to come along with us.”

“We sure do,” said Jerry. “We’d like to have your help in finding our boat.”

“Maybe I can kill two birds with one stone,” the chief replied. “There was quite a robbery at Northville last night, and they telegraphed for me to help. The thieves got away in a motor boat, it seems.”

“Northville,” said Jerry. “That’s the very place we stopped for lunch, where the gasolene man said he saw our boat. Who was robbed?”

“Why they broke into the general store there, and got away with about a thousand dollars in cash that was in the safe from the Saturday night sales. They haven’t much of a police force in the town, and they asked me to help ’em out.”

“Maybe the same men who stole our boat robbed the safe,” ventured Ned.

“I shouldn’t be a bit surprised,” came from Chief Dalton. “But we must get a hustle on. I’ll tow your rowboat over to shore and you can tie her up. Then we’ll keep on up the river.”

Ten minutes later, Mr. Johnson’s boat having been safely moored, the boys were on their way up stream in a much speedier fashion than they had been proceeding since the loss of their craft. A good lookout was kept for any sight of the *Dartaway*.

“I’ll land ’em yet,” the chief said. “They can’t go much farther as the river gets too shallow. I only hope they stick to the boat to the last. If they strike across country it will be hard to find them.”

All the afternoon the *Terror* chug-chugged on her way. The boys forgot their anxiety over the loss of their boat, and did not think of their fatigue in the excitement of the chase.

It was about six o’clock, when, having made a short stop at a little village, to learn that the *Dartaway* had passed not more than an hour before, the chief, who was steering, held up his hand for silence.

Everyone on the *Terror* listened intently. From the broad stretch of water before them, borne on a wind which had shifted and was coming down the river, the faint puffing of a motor boat could be heard.

“That’s the *Dartaway*!” exclaimed Jerry. “I know her exhaust!”

“I hope you’re right!” said the chief grimly. “Put a little more speed on,” he said to the engineer, and the *Terror* leaped ahead under the influence of more gasolene and an advanced spark.

A minute later they rounded a turn in the river and saw the *Dartaway* just as her engine came to a stop.



CHAPTER XVIII

READY FOR A CRUISE

“They’re slowing up!” cried Jerry. “They’re going to stop! We’ll get ’em now!”

Sure enough the *Dartaway* was slackening speed. She was headed toward shore. The *Terror* was gaining rapidly now. Chief Dalton stood up and drew his revolver in preparation of capturing the motor boat thieves.

But now the *Dartaway* was so near shore that the men in her could almost leap to the bank. They could be seen turning the wheel so as to throw the craft parallel with the shore.

“They’re going to jump! We’ll lose ’em!” cried Ned.

“Let ’em go,” advised Bob. “All we want back is our boat and we’ll get that.”

“That may suit you but it doesn’t me,” spoke the chief of police grimly. “I’m after thieves and I’m going to get ’em. They may not be the men I want, but I’ll catch ’em just the same and find out what they’re up to.”

But it looked as if the chief would have no easy task to secure the motor boat thieves. For, the next instant the pair leaped ashore, splashing through the shallow water near the edge, and leaving the *Dartaway* to continue on from the momentum it had gathered.

With a whirl of the wheel the *Terror* was headed toward shore. The chief and some of his men prepared to make a quick landing.

“As soon as we get ashore I’ll have the engineer put you out where you can get your boat,” the chief said. “I’ve got to take after those fellows!”

“We’ll be with you as soon as we secure the *Dartaway*!” cried Jerry.

“That’s what!” chimed in Ned and Bob.

With drawn revolvers the chief and his men leaped toward shore, not waiting until their boat was at the bank, but splashing through the water as the thieves had done. As soon as they were off the engineer of the *Terror* put his craft after the boys’ boat.

In a little while the boys were aboard. They soon satisfied themselves that no great damage had been done, nor had anything of value been taken. The thieves had evidently made themselves at home, since the lockers were pretty well emptied of food.

The *Terror* had put back to where the chief and his men disembarked. Jerry set the engine of the *Dartaway* going and soon found it was in good order. Then, with Ned at the wheel, the craft was turned around and headed back toward where the thieves had jumped off. The boys landed at about the same spot, and moored their craft to a big tree.

“Look there!” exclaimed Jerry pointing to a soft place in the mud on the river’s bank.

Ned and Bob glanced to where he indicated. There in the soil were the marks of several large foot-prints, and, conspicuous among them were several in the sole of which was the mark of an arrow, made in hob nails.

“The same man who took our boat stuck by her until the end,” said Jerry. “Come on; let’s go after the chief.”

Calling to the engineer of the *Terror* to have an eye on their boat, the boys raced up the bank and across the fields in the direction the police posse had taken. As they started to run they heard the sound of several revolver shots.

“They’re fighting!” cried Jerry. “Come on!”

The boys needed no urging. They raced at top speed in the direction of the shots. As they topped a small hill they could see in a valley below them, two roughly dressed men running away from the chief and his officers, who were a quarter of a mile behind. As they watched they saw the chief raise his revolver and fire twice into the air.

“He don’t want to hit them, he’s only trying to scare them into stopping!” cried Ned. “Come on!”

Down the hill they raced, losing sight of the pursued and the pursuers as they got below the hill top. Still they could hear the shouts of the police.

The chase was now on in earnest. But it was a stern one and likely to prove a long one. The boys, in about five minutes, caught up to one of the officers, and raced along with him. They could hear the crashing of the underbrush as policemen ahead of them raced through it. The chief fired several more shots, but, the boat thieves were not to be intimidated, and did not halt.

In a little while the boys came up to the chief. He and the leaders were panting from the run.

“Have you lost them?” asked Jerry.

“I’m afraid so,” said the chief. “They turned into a swamp, and I’m not familiar enough with it to make it worth while to go in. I’m going to get help from the local authorities and surround the place. Then perhaps I can catch them.”

“Can we take any message for you?” asked Jerry. “I think we’d better be going back. It’s getting dark and I don’t suppose you can do anything more this evening.”

“I don’t believe I can,” admitted the chief. “I guess we’ll all go back. I’ve done my part in this. Let the local constables finish where I left off. I’ve run their men to cover now let ’em get ’em out.”

“Anyhow you got back our boat for us,” said Jerry, “and we’re much obliged for that.”

Rather tired from the chase and the excitement, the boys and the policemen retraced their steps to the river. They found the two boats awaiting them.

“Did they do any damage to your craft?” asked the chief of Jerry.

“None that I could notice, but I didn’t make a close examination,” replied the boy. “Come aboard, you’ve never been on her.”

“Thanks,” replied the chief, and, as his men got into the *Terror*, he stepped into the *Dartaway*. As he did so he uttered an exclamation.

“What’s the matter? Is she leaking?” asked Jerry in alarm.

“No, but see what I found!” the chief said, holding up a small object he picked from the cockpit of the *Dartaway*.

“What is it?” asked Ned.

“A diamond ring,” said the chief. “It is one of several stolen, together with the money, from the Northville store. There’s no doubt now but that the motor boat thieves and those who robbed the store are the same. My! But I wish I could have caught them!”

He placed the ring in his pocket, and, after a look over the boys’ craft, prepared to return to his own.

“Maybe the thieves left some cash behind as well as a ring,” suggested Jerry.

“No such luck,” the chief made answer as he went over the side. “Well, are you boys going down the river?”

“I think we’ll put up at the hotel in Northville, if there is one,” said Jerry. “It’s too long a trip to go back to Cresville to-night.”

“That’s a good idea,” said the chief. “I think I’ll do the same. Just come along with me and I’ll see that you are accommodated with lodgings. I’ll swear you in as my deputies,” he said with a laugh, “and it won’t cost you anything. Besides I may need your help.”

Just as the two boats were making ready for the trip down the river there was a movement on shore. The bushes parted and a roughly dressed man, with what seemed to be a week’s growth of beard on his face, stepped out.

“Can any of you gentlemen oblige a poor tired wayfarer with a lift down this placid stream?” he asked with a bow which took in both parties.

At the sound of his voice the boys started. They wondered where they had heard those tones before.

“Who are you and what do you want?” asked the chief sternly. “They don’t deal very lightly with tramps in these parts. You’d better clear out. We’re police officers.”

“Glad to meet you. I am the Duke of Wellington,” said the tramp in airy tones.

At that answer the chief gave a start, and then tried to appear as if nothing had happened. But Jerry who was watching intently, saw an almost imperceptible sign pass between the chief and the ragged man.

“Oh, if you’re the Duke, I suppose we’ll have to accommodate you,” the chief replied. “You can come in my boat if you want to.”

Then, to the no small astonishment of the policemen, the tramp climbed aboard the *Terror*, which, with a throb of the engine started down the river. The *Dartaway* put after her at full speed.

“Well, I must say we’ve had plenty of excitement for one spell,” observed Jerry.

“And there may be more,” said Ned.

“What makes you think so?”

“Because of that tramp,” and Ned indicated the one aboard the *Terror*. “There’s something strange about him. Does he remind you of any one?”

“There!” exclaimed Jerry. “I was wondering where I had heard that voice before. He’s the tramp who was asleep on the hay barge. I wonder what he’s doing around here, and so friendly with the police.”

“There’s something behind all this,” observed Ned. “We must keep our eyes open.”

The boys’ craft soon caught up to the police boat which was more heavily laden, and the two proceeded down the stream toward Northville. It was after dark when they tied up at a dock, and, making their boat snug proceeded to follow the lead of Chief Dalton.

“Is it safe to leave our boat here?” asked Jerry.

“I guess so,” replied the officer. “I’m going to have a man on guard all night. I guess the thieves won’t come back. Come ahead; we’ll go to the hotel and have supper.”

Jerry and Bob walked on ahead with the main body of policemen, but Ned, who lingered to get from the locker a better coat than the one he was wearing, the other boys having changed garments before, found himself close behind the chief and tramp who were walking up from the river together.

“Any luck?” Ned heard the chief ask the ragged man in a low voice.

“I think I’ve discovered the cave where they hide the stuff,” was the cautious rejoinder. “It’s about where—”

In his eagerness to walk softly and hear what was being said, which perhaps he had no right to do, Ned stepped on a piece of wood that broke with a sharp crack. The two men turned suddenly.

“As I was saying,” the tramp spoke suddenly in a loud voice, evidently for the benefit of any listeners, “I have tramped many weary miles, and have eaten scarcely anything. I am too ill to work, and I don’t know where I am to sleep to-night.”

The jingling sound of money passing from the chief’s hand to that of the tramp could be heard.

“Now you’d better clear out of here,” said the police officer sternly. “It isn’t a healthy place for tramps. If I catch you loafing around I’m going to lock you

up.”

“You’ll never catch me,” the tramp said with a laugh as he moved away in the darkness. “I’ll clear out.”

“Odd character,” the chief remarked turning back to Ned. “Sometimes I feel sorry for those fellows. Some of ’em are all right, but luck is against ’em. Well, I expect you are hungry.”

“Oh I can eat a little,” replied Ned, puzzling his brains over the strange scene he had witnessed. But the chief was evidently not inclined to talk about it, and Ned did not feel like asking.

In a little while the whole party was at the hotel, where a meal was served. Then the boys, having sent telegrams home, stating they were all well and would be home the following day, went to bed.

The next day they returned Mr. Johnson’s boat and went home.

For a week after this the boys dug away at their examinations and, though they were, perhaps, thinking more of what they would do in vacation than about their studies, they all managed to pass with good averages.

“Now for a long cruise down to Lake Cantoga!” exclaimed Jerry on the afternoon of the last day of school. “I’m going to tie a stone to my books and anchor ’em out in the middle of the river. When I want ’em again I hope the fishes will have eaten ’em up!”

The boys arranged to leave the Tuesday following the last Friday at school. Bob and Jerry were early down at the boathouse that morning. Ned had promised to be on hand early but, for some unaccountable reason was late.

“I wonder what’s keeping him,” said Jerry.

“Here he comes now,” spoke Bob, “and he’s running as if something had happened.”



CHAPTER XIX

THE STORE ROBBERY

“What’s the matter?” asked Jerry as Ned came down on the dock, his face quite pale, and, evidently laboring under some excitement.

“Store—robbed—last—night!” panted Ned.

“Whose store?” asked Jerry and Bob together.

“Father’s,” replied Ned. “They just discovered it, and I came to tell you we’d have to delay the trip. They got in last night, and got away with about three thousand dollars in money and jewelry. About one thousand was in cash. It’s a big loss. Now I’ve got to go back and help dad.”

“Who did it?” asked Bob.

“That’s what they’d like to find out, Chunky,” said Jerry. “I don’t s’pose the burglars left their cards, with their addresses on, behind them.”

“Great excitement! Terrible! Awful! Big robbery! ’Bout a million loss! General alarm sent out! Get the detectives to work! Send for blood hounds! Notify the sheriff and start a hunt! This is the greatest thing that’s ever happened!”

The boys turned to see whence the torrent of words proceeded.

“I might have known it was Andy Rush,” said Jerry. “Is there anything else, Andy? Haven’t you forgotten something?”

“Oh yes! I forgot to tell you. I have a clue to the thieves!”

“What?” cried all the boys at once.

“That’s what,” said Andy, growing more calm as the others grew excited. “I went over the place as soon as I heard of the robbery, and I got the clue. I’m going to be a detective some day. You just keep your eye on me.”

“It’s all we can do to keep track of what you are saying,” said Ned, “let alone what you are going to do. But tell us about it. I’m interested.”

“Let Ned tell us of the robbery first,” suggested Bob.

This was voted a good idea, and Ned related how, when his father's department store was opened in the morning, it was discovered that the safe had been blown open, and the money and jewelry stolen. In addition the thieves had carried off some solid silver tableware, and a few rolls of valuable silk.

"How did they get in?" asked Bob.

"That's the funny part of it," replied Ned. "There's no trace of anything being forced, not a door or window is disturbed, as far as we can learn."

"That's where you're wrong," said Andy calmly. "That's where my clue comes in. I know how they entered."

"Then why didn't you tell the police about it?" demanded Ned somewhat indignantly.

"Because no one asked me to," answered Andy. "I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't find you so I came here, as I thought you'd be starting on the trip."

"Well, you can tell me now, Andy," remarked Ned.

"I can explain it better if we go up to the store," Andy answered. "I want to show you just how it was."

"We might as well go there," came from Jerry. "We will not undertake the trip to-day. To-morrow or next day will do as well. Besides, maybe we can help your father, Ned."

"I don't want to spoil your fun," interposed Ned. "But I've got to stay home for a few days anyhow. You could go on without me."

"We're not going," said Bob stoutly.

"No indeed," chimed in Jerry.

The boys talked of nothing but the robbery as they started back towards Cresville, having locked the boat up. When they got to Mr. Slade's store they found a big crowd about the place. They elbowed their way through the throng and were about to enter, when a little man with a small bunch of whiskers on his chin stopped them.

"Here, where you boys goin'?" he asked.

"Inside," answered Ned.

"I guess not, young man. I'm a deputy constable, sworn in special t' maintain order an' not to let anyone inside. I'm goin' t' do it, tew, an' you can bet your

bottom dollar on it,” and the little man threw back his coat and displayed a big tin star.

“Who swore you in?” asked Ned.

“Chief Dalton, that’s who, an’ I’ll arrest ye, if ye make any more threatenin’ moves.”

“Well, it’s my father’s store, and these are friends of mine,” said Ned. “We want to go in.”

“Look here!” exclaimed the little deputy excitedly. “Look me in th’ eye, young man,” and he pulled down the lower lid of the optic, placing his face close to Ned’s.

“Looks all right,” said Ned, with a smile.

“Course it does; there nothin’ th’ matter with that eye. But d’ye see anythin’ green in it?”

“No,” answered Ned.

“No, I guess not. I cut my eye teeth some time ago. Th’ last time I bought a gold brick was so long ago I’ve forgotten it. You can’t come it over me with any of your bunco games. I believe ye’re part of th’ robber gang!”

The little deputy seemed so impressed with his sudden idea that he was for at once putting the four boys under arrest. He was only deterred by the timely arrival of Chief Dalton, who had heard the disturbance and come to see what it was about.

A word from him satisfied the constable, who was one of a number hastily sworn in when it was found what a crowd had gathered on hearing news of the robbery, and he let the chums pass.

“Come ahead boys,” said the chief. “This is a bad piece of work.”

“Do you think it has any connection with the Northville robbery?” asked Jerry.

“I wouldn’t be surprised. But I haven’t time to talk. I’m trying to get a clue to start with, and I can’t seem to find any. I will before night though.”

“Have you found where they got in?” asked Jerry.

“Not yet,” answered the chief. “Have you heard anything, Ned?”

“Andy here seems to think he has a clue,” replied the son of the store proprietor. “Tell him about it, Andy.”

Andy blushed at the notice he was attracting from the head of the Cresville police force.

“It was this way,” began Andy, when they had all entered the store, which was deserted as far as customers went, since Mr. Slade had ordered it kept closed. “I was one of the first to arrive. In fact I was an early customer. I wanted to buy a new knife. So I was on hand when the head clerk discovered the safe had been robbed. As I’m going to be a detective, I decided I would look for clues. I couldn’t find any around the safe, so, when the clerk ran to the telephone to call for the police, I wandered through the store. No one noticed me, and I soon found myself on the top floor. If you’ll come with me there I’ll show you what I found,” and Andy started toward the elevator.

“Oh can’t you tell us without waiting all that while?” asked Ned who was growing impatient as it really seemed Andy had discovered something.

“I can, but I can do it better if I point out to you what I saw,” replied the boy. “Come on.”

They followed him. The elevator carried them to the top floor. No trade was done there, as it was only a loft used for storing stock or goods that were out of season. Andy led the way through the half darkness to the rear. He stopped in front of a window the sill of which was thick with dust.

“Look there!” he exclaimed, pointing to something in the soft and fluffy covering of the sill. It was the print of a man’s foot.

“The mark of the arrow!” exclaimed Ned as he bent over it. “The same man who stole our boat robbed the store!”

The party gathered around the window, the chief plainly excited at the unexpected clue. The window had a large iron shutter on it, and this was partly closed. The chief swung it open.

“There’s how the thieves got in,” said Andy, pointing to a window in a building which was close to Mr. Slade’s store in the rear. In this half-opened casement a plank could be seen sticking, as if some one had pulled it part way in and then left it.

“There’s the bridge they came across on,” said the chief. “Sure enough, Andy, you’ve discovered what I could not. Come on, we’ll make positive of it.”

Down stairs the party hurried, and around the block to the building which abutted Mr. Slade’s place in the rear. The structure contained stores on the

ground floor and apartments for several families above. The top story was used as a lodge room. There was a hallway at one side of the store entrance, which gave access to the flats above, and the door to it, as the chief learned was never locked.

“They just waited their opportunity, went up to the lodge room, stuck the plank across, and came in the window,” said Mr. Dalton.

“But the window did not appear to have been forced,” said Jerry.

“They didn’t have to force it,” replied the chief. “It has no lock on it.”

Up to the lodge room went the chief and the boys, their entrance attracting no attention, as the crowd, and most of Cresville’s idlers, were in front of the robbed store.

“I thought so,” the chief said as he came to the door of the lodge room where it opened from the hall. The portal had been forced. Through the big apartment they tramped, and to the rear where there were dressing and store rooms, seldom used.

“Look!” cried Andy, pointing to the dust covered floor. “The mark of the arrow!”

There, plainly to be seen in the particles of dirt were the footsteps of the mysterious man who had escaped the police in the motor boat chase. The marks were all over, showing that the one who made them had tramped about the room making his arrangements to rob the department store.

“There was some one with him,” the chief said.

“How can you tell?” asked Ned.

For answer the police official pointed to another series of footprints in the dust. They were smaller than those with the arrow mark, and bore no distinguishing imprint.

The board, a plank about ten feet long, had been dragged from a store room as the marks in the dust showed. It had been drawn back only part way, probably because the thieves had been in too much of a hurry to leave after securing their booty.

Following the chief the boys descended the stairs from the lodge room. The recent developments put a new light on the matter, though the boys did not see how they could lead to the detection of the thieves.

“I must have a talk with some of the tenants of this place,” the chief remarked.

They had reached the street by this time, and the boys were about to leave. At that instant, Mr. Nixon, Noddy’s father came running up to the head of the police force.

“I want your help!” Mr. Nixon exclaimed.

“What’s the matter?” asked the chief.

“Noddy has been kidnapped!”



CHAPTER XX

OFF TO THE LAKE

“Kidnapped?” the chief exclaimed.

“Yes! Look here!” spoke Mr. Nixon, his hands trembling with excitement as he extended a piece of paper to the chief. “Noddy did not come home all night. This morning I found this in his room. It is terrible. You must help me find him.”

The chief read aloud what was written on the paper:

“We have taken your son away. If you want his return say nothing but leave \$1,000 under the old oak tree on the river bank Friday night.

“The River Pirates.”

“What do you think of that?” asked Mr. Nixon, who was much excited.

“Um,” spoke the chief non-committally. “It’s certainly very strange, Mr. Nixon. Noddy is rather a large size to kidnap, but then you can’t tell about criminals now. If you’ll leave this with me I’ll put some of my men right to work on it. I’ve got my own hands full with this robbery.”

“Cresville certainly is coming into public notice,” remarked Jerry in a low tone to Bob. “First it’s a robbery, then Noddy Nixon disappears.”

“Kidnapped you mean,” interposed Bob.

“No, I don’t,” said Jerry. “Noddy is no more stolen away than I am.”

By this time the chief had walked off down the street and Mr. Nixon went with him. The boys remained together.

“But what in the world—” began Bob, when Jerry stopped him with a wink, and made a slight motion of his head toward Andy. He need have no concern about Andy, as it developed, for that youth, all afire to continue his detective work, made a hasty excuse to the motor boys and hurried off down the street after the chief.

“What’s that you and Chunky were saying about Noddy?” asked Ned, who

had not been listening very closely to what his friends were talking about.

“Jerry says Noddy was never kidnapped,” spoke Bob.

“I don’t believe he was,” put in Jerry. “I happened to get a glimpse of the note Mr. Nixon had. It was partly printed and partly written, but I’m a Dutchman if some of the handwriting wasn’t Noddy’s.”

“How do you happen to be so familiar with his handwriting?” asked Ned.

“I have a couple of specimens,” replied Jerry. He drew from his pocket some slips of paper. “One is that letter he wrote to us some time ago,” said Jerry, “when he accused us of being responsible for his running away from home the time he rode off in his father’s auto. The other is that bill he gave us for the fifteen dollars damage to the rowboat. I picked it up after Ned threw it at Noddy that Sunday.”

“And you think the writing in the kidnapping note is like some of this?” asked Ned.

“I’m sure of it,” went on Jerry. “Besides, who would kidnap Noddy? It’s true, his father is wealthy, and able to pay a ransom, but don’t you suppose Noddy would raise a cry if some one tried to walk off with him?”

“Maybe he did, but he might have been all alone, and no one heard him,” suggested Bob.

“Noddy doesn’t go out very much alone,” said Jerry. “He has Bill Berry or some other crony of his with him. Of course I’m only guessing at it, but I wouldn’t be a bit surprised to find out that Noddy’s disappearance had some connection with this robbery.”

“You don’t mean to say you think Noddy robbed my father’s store?” asked Ned.

“Oh no, not quite that,” said Jerry.

“What then?”

“Well, I think Noddy has gotten in with a bad gang. Some of them may have done this robbery, and in order to get him out of the way, for fear he might disclose something, they have arranged this kidnapping hoax. He may be a sort of captive, but he is among friends, I’m sure of that.”

“Why don’t you tell Chief Dalton this?” asked Bob.

“And get laughed at for my pains,” said Jerry. “I guess not. The chief has his hands full. Perhaps he doesn’t believe Noddy is kidnapped, but he will not say so. Mr. Nixon is one of the biggest men in town, and the chief wants to please him. So he’ll naturally fall in with Mr. Nixon’s notions, and try to pretend he believes Noddy is a captive.”

“Then what are we to do?” asked Chunky, to whom the events of the last few hours came in bewildering rapidity.

“I think the best thing for us to do is to go camping just as we planned,” said Jerry. “I don’t believe we can do much here, do you Ned?”

“No, I don’t s’pose we can,” replied that youth. “I did want to help dad, but as long as the stuff is gone, and there is some clue to the thieves, I don’t see that I can do any more. I’m for going to camp.”

“Well, let’s go then,” said Bob. “I’m anxious to get out in the woods where I’ll have an appetite.”

“Good land! If you get up any more of an appetite than you have now, Chunky,” said Ned, “I don’t know what we’ll do with you. Can’t you do something for it? Take Anti-Fat or Padded Pellets for Peculiar People or something that’s advertised in the backs of magazines. It’s terrible to have such an appetite as you have.”

“I guess you’d think so, sometimes,” remarked Bob, as he looked at his watch and noted with satisfaction that it was nearly dinner time.

“Come on down to my house for lunch!” exclaimed Ned, divining Bob’s thoughts. “We can talk matters over with dad, and see if it’s all right to go.”

Mr. Slade saw no objection to the boys making the trip. His loss, while a heavy one, did not cripple him, as he was a rich man. He thanked the boys for their thoughtfulness in offering to give up their pleasure trip to help him, but said he did not see there was anything they could do.

“I guess the police will find the robbers if it’s possible,” he added. “At the same time, if you run across any clues on the lake you can let us know. It seems to be the belief of the officials that the robbers came and went in a boat. It might have been a power or a sail boat. If it happens to come on the lake with my valuables and goods in, if you get them I’ll give you a reward,” and he laughed for the first time that day.

“We may claim that reward,” said Jerry.

The boys made an early start the next morning and, just as it was getting dusk they made a turn in the broadening river, and, saw spread out before them a big sheet of water.

Lake Cantoga was about fifteen miles long and nine wide. There were several small islands in it, and these, as well as the shores were favorite spots for camping parties. The boys decided to pick out one of the islands, but, as it was getting dark, they could not see which one had not been selected by other campers.

“I think we had better tie up along shore to-night,” said Jerry, as he steered the boat out upon the lake. “We can look about better in the morning.”

“Suits me,” said Bob, and Ned agreed.

As the *Dartaway* skimmed out from the shadows of the shore she was seen by the owners of other power boats, and greeted with the regulation three whistles, to which Jerry replied.

“Guess they’re glad to see us,” he remarked. “I had no idea there were so many here this year. Maybe we’ll get a race.”

“That will be bully sport,” said Bob.

“Going to camp here?” called the steersman of one boat, which, as the boys could see, was evidently built for racing, as there was little room for anything but the engine.

“We figure on staying a week or so,” replied Jerry.

“Glad of it,” replied the stranger. “My name’s Smith, just plain John Smith. I’m camping with some friends over on Coon’s Island. Come over and see us when you get settled.”

“Thanks,” answered Jerry. “Are there any other good islands to camp on?”

“There’s Deer Island, next to ours,” replied Mr. Smith. “It’s a nice place, and hasn’t been taken yet this year. Why don’t you come there?”

“Maybe we will,” replied Jerry. “We’re going to tie up along shore for to-night.”

“Be pleased to have you put up at my shack,” said the owner of the racing boat. “Got lots of room.”

“Thank you, we’ll rough it for to-night,” said Jerry. “We’ll look you up to-

morrow.”

“Well, then, good-night,” called Mr. Smith, and he opened up his boat and shot away in a smother of foam. “Hope you go in the races,” he called back, but he was too far away then to be answered.

“Let’s have supper,” broke in Bob. “We can talk about racing to-morrow.”

Jerry sent the boat under some overhanging trees. She was made fast with bow and stern lines, and then the boys, having lighted several lanterns, and the big search lamp, prepared supper.



CHAPTER XXI

THE RACE

The meal was eaten with appetites such as only come from perfect health and a life in the open. The boys filled themselves with no fear of future consequences, and then, having let down the side curtains, and seeing that all was snug, they pulled out the bunks and went to sleep.

They arose about nine o'clock and, after a bath donned their old clothes, for they anticipated rough work in making camp, and prepared breakfast.

"Shall we use lake water or get some from a spring for coffee?" asked Ned.

"Better hunt for a spring," suggested Jerry. "There's a house up there," and he pointed to one quite a way from the river. "Maybe you can get some there."

Ned took a pail and jumped to the bank. As he did so he uttered a cry.

"Sprain your ankle?" asked Jerry.

"No, but look here!" exclaimed Ned.

In an instant Jerry was at his side. Ned pointed to the ground close to a big tree to which the bow line of the *Dartaway* was fastened.

There, in the soil was the imprint of a foot, and in the center of it was the mark of an arrow worked in hob nails.

"The man who robbed my father's store!" exclaimed Ned.

"Or one with the same kind of shoes," added Jerry.

"There would hardly be two alike," spoke Ned. "I'm sure it's the same one."

"How can you be?" asked Jerry.

"Because I noticed that in the prints in the dust on the window sill," replied Ned, "that there was a nail missing from the shaft of the arrow. See, there is a nail out in this one," and he showed his companion that this was so.

Jerry bent closer to the print.

"You're right!" he said. "This mystery is deepening. But the prints might have

been there for some time.”

“No,” said Ned. “It rained after we went to bed last night. Not much, but a shower sufficient to make mud. That print was made after the rain.”

“Then the man was spying on us,” said Jerry.

“He certainly was around here,” put in Bob, who had come ashore. “Say, let’s send for Chief Dalton.”

“Maybe we can do a little detective work ourselves,” suggested Ned.

“I think it would be better to let the chief know the man may be in this neighborhood,” spoke Jerry. “Probably the information will not amount to anything, but if something should happen they could not blame us for keeping still.”

“Are you going back to Cresville?” asked Bob.

“No, I think it will do to drop him a note,” said Jerry. “We can run to some post-office after breakfast.”

The meal was hurried along and then, Jerry having written a note to Chief Dalton, the lines were cast off and the boat started for Eastport, a little village about five miles off, where, as the boys learned from the house where they got the water, they could post letters.

They all went ashore at the post-office, which was near the edge of the lake. Inside they found quite a large crowd.

“Mail must come in early,” said Ned, for it was hardly ten o’clock.

But it was not the arrival of the mail which had attracted the throng. Instead they were all staring at a big poster on the wall. On top the boys saw in big letters:

REWARD!

Underneath was a lot of reading matter, which, as the boys hastily perused it, they saw was an account of the robbery of Mr. Slade’s store, and a description of Noddy, who, it was stated, had been kidnapped by a gang of river thieves. A reward of \$500 was offered for the arrest and conviction of the thieves, while Mr. Nixon offered to pay a like sum for the return of his son. The posters were signed by Chief Dalton.

“Well, things are certainly doing back in Cresville,” remarked Ned, as Jerry

posted the letter. "Mr. Nixon still thinks Noddy was stolen away."

"Wouldn't it be fun if we could land the thieves and Noddy too," said Bob. "That would be a thousand dollars."

"I guess if we landed the thieves Noddy would not be far off," spoke Jerry in a low tone. "I don't believe he would rob the store, but I'm afraid he's gotten in with a bad gang that would. Hello, here's another notice."

There was one on the opposite wall. It was not so large as the other, and was an announcement that the following Saturday there would be a regatta at the lake, in which there would be rowing, sailing, swimming and motor boat races.

"What's the matter with us entering?" asked Bob.

"I guess we could," commented Jerry. "I see our friend John Smith is in charge. We can probably find out all particulars from him. But come on, we'd better be getting to the island or we'll find it taken."

They learned from the postmaster how to get to Deer Island, and, purchasing a few supplies, and some butter, which they had neglected to bring along, they set out.

Deer Island was about an hour's run from the village of Eastport, and as they neared it they saw the boat they had met the evening before cruising about.

"*Dartaway* ahoy!" exclaimed Mr. Smith, who, as the boys could now see, was a man about twenty-five years old.

"On board the *Tortoise*!" called back Jerry, reading the name of Mr. Smith's craft on the bow.

"I was wondering if you'd show up," went on Mr. Smith. "That's a nice boat you got there. Can she go?"

"Well, we think so," replied Jerry modestly.

"Come on out and have a brush," invited Mr. Smith, running up along side. The boys saw his craft was a powerful six cylindered one.

"Thank you, but I guess we'd better get our camp in shape first," spoke Jerry. "Afterward why perhaps we can have a race."

"Tell you what, you're just in time for the regatta," went on Mr. Smith. "I'm in charge of the motor boat contests. Let me enter you. The prize is a silver cup."

"Oh I guess you can put us down all right," went on Ned.

“What are the names?” asked Mr. Smith, slowing down his craft and producing paper and pencil.

Ned gave the names of his friends and his own, and Mr. Smith jotted them down. “I’ll send you an entry blank this afternoon,” he said, “and you can fill it up. I’ll show you over the course whenever you like. Good-bye, I’ve got to run over for the mail,” and, opening the throttle, he sent his boat ahead in a smother of foam while the cylinders fairly thundered with the explosions.

“Guess we wouldn’t have much chance with him in the race,” observed Bob.

“Oh I don’t know,” Jerry said. “The *Dartaway* is a pretty fast boat. I’ll not give up until we’re beaten.”

The boys found Deer Island a pleasant place to camp. There were no parties on it yet, though it was big enough for several. There was a natural harbor, in a little cove, and some one had built a small dock, and a boathouse, with merely a roof and no sides, where the *Dartaway* could be kept.

“Say, this is all right,” commented Ned. “This is going to be jolly sport.”

The boys spent a busy morning. They set up the tent, made up the cots, and took the gasoline stove ashore, as they decided to do their cooking on land rather than in the boat, where quarters were not any too large. This done they found they had their appetites with them, and proceeded to make a meal off canned stuff.

In the afternoon Mr. Smith came over with the entry blanks, which the boys signed. Then, at their new friend’s suggestion, they followed him over the course, a triangular one of three miles to each leg. Mr. Smith showed them where the stake buoys were, and told them there was a clear course, and plenty of water all around.

The day of the regatta could not have been better had it been made to order. There was enough of a breeze to make sailing a pleasure, but not enough to make the water rough. One after another the different events were run off until it came time for the motor boat contest.

There were ten craft entered, and a pretty sight they made as they came up to the starting line. Some of the boats were small and were given a time allowance, while the larger ones were handicapped. Mr. Smith’s boat, having the reputation, as the boys learned, of being the fastest on the lake was held back ten minutes. The *Dartaway* with Jerry steering was placed on “scratchy” time, that is starting off with the five boats judged to be about on an even footing as regarded speed.

At the signal off went the boats having a time allowance. Then the five, including the *Dartaway*, got off together. Behind it came three rated higher than the Cresville boys' craft, and then the *Giant*, a big boat, but with a smaller engine than the *Tortoise's*. Last came Mr. Smith's craft, and what a noise she made when her captain, who, with two friends was running her, threw in the high speed gear.

The race was on. Several power boats that had not entered followed the contestants. The Judge's boat was also going part way over the course. At the two outer buoys were stationed markers to see that the boats kept fairly to the course.

For the first few minutes the boys were so excited that they did not know whether they had a chance to win or not. They kept pace with the five boats in the company of which they started. Jerry called to Bob and Ned to oil the engine more, and then he put on a little additional speed.

The *Dartaway* seemed to leap forward, and left the four boats behind. Seeing this their owners increased their speeds, but Jerry, once he found his craft was behaving finely, shoved the lever over another notch or two, and soon was two lengths ahead of the nearest of the four.

"Now to overhaul some of those ahead," spoke Bob.

"I'm afraid we can't," remarked Ned.

But the boys found they were slowly but surely coming up to the leaders. Gradually they lessened the space between them until the *Dartaway* was in line with the first boat that got away.

But during this time the *Giant* and *Tortoise* had not been idle. With their powerful engines they were slowly cutting down the *Dartaway's* lead. For a while the two larger craft were in line, but the *Giant*, finding the load too much for her motors, dropped slowly to the rear.

Not so the *Tortoise*. In a smother of foam she came on, the explosions roaring like a blast furnace.

"He's going to catch us," shouted Ned, for one had to yell to be heard above the roar of the *Dartaway's* engine which had been cut off from the muffler to give a little more power.

"The race isn't over yet," called back Jerry, shoving the levers over almost to the last notch.

Shortly after the first buoy had been passed it became evident that the struggle for the winning place was between the *Dartaway* and the *Tortoise*. The others had either given up or were racing among themselves for third and fourth prizes.

Rounding the second buoy the *Tortoise* passed the *Dartaway*. It was to have been expected, but the boys felt none the less chagrined. They had hoped to win, but it was a big thing to go up against a six cylindered craft with a four.

But Jerry had not given up yet. He had the motor running at top speed now. The spark had been advanced to the last notch, and the cylinders were taking all the gasolene they could use and not choke. Slowly but surely the *Tortoise* drew away.

Suddenly there seemed to be some commotion on board the leading boat. The two friends of Mr. Smith were seen to be busy over the motor.

“Hark!” cried Jerry. “One of his cylinders is missing! We have a chance now.”

Sure enough the explosions from the *Tortoise* were not so regular as they had been. One of the cylinders had become clogged, and with five going the engine worked unevenly.

“I think we can beat him!” exclaimed Jerry grimly. He was not rejoicing over a contestant’s misfortune, but it is on such mishaps as this that motor boat and automobile races are won and lost.

Now the *Dartaway* was creeping up on her rival. True it was but a slow advance, for there were still five cylinders in the *Tortoise* against her four. But the boys’ craft was doing nobly, and their hearts beat high with hope.

Mr. Smith was not going to give up without a struggle. His two companions worked like Trojans over the silent cylinder, but could not get it to respond.

Then to the boys’ delight they found themselves on even terms with the redoubtable *Tortoise*. They were on the home stretch with less than a mile to go. Already they could hear the shouts, the cries and the applause of the watching throngs, with which mingled the shrill whistles of steam and motor boats.

Three minutes later the *Dartaway* had regained the lead she had at the start, and thirty seconds later had increased it. With two big waves rolling away on either side of her cut-water she forged ahead. Foot by foot she approached the stake boat. With one last look back, which showed him the *Tortoise* five lengths to the rear, Jerry with a final turn of the wheel to clear the judges’ boat safely, [sent the *Dartaway* over the line a winner.](#)



CHAPTER XXII

THE COLLISION

What shouting and cheers greeted the motor boys as they slowed up their craft! The din was deafening, augmented as it was by the shrill whistles. The *Tortoise*, too, was received with an ovation as she came over the line second, but it was easy to see the victory of the smaller boat was popular.

“Congratulations, boys!” called Mr. Smith as he ran his craft alongside. “You beat me fair and square.”

He did not refer to the fact that one of his cylinders went out of commission, but for which fact he undoubtedly would have won. The boys appreciated this.

The boys accepted their victory modestly, and when they were sent for to go aboard the judges’ boat and get the prize Bob was for backing out, while neither Ned nor Jerry felt much like going through the ceremony.

“Tell ’em to send it over,” suggested Bob.

“That would hardly look nice,” replied Jerry. “Come on, let’s all go together. It will soon be over. Who’d have thought we could have butted into the lime-light so soon?”

Having received the cup and stowed it safely away Jerry was about to steer the *Dartaway* back to Deer Island when he was hailed by Mr. Smith.

“Oh I say, you’re not going away, are you?” asked the skipper of the *Tortoise*.

“I think we’d better be getting back,” replied Jerry. “We have to straighten out the camp.”

“Nonsense,” said Mr. Smith. “The fun’s not half over. Why there’s no end of good things to eat over there. The committee made arrangements to dine all contestants, and I’m sure you boys are the chief ones after the handy way in which you won that race. Really now, you must stop a bit with us.”

“I guess we’d better,” said Bob, in a whisper. “It wouldn’t be polite to refuse.”

“You were willing enough when it came to sliding out of the cup proposition,” said Jerry, “but now, when there’s something to eat, you’re right on the job,

Chunky.”

“Guess we might as well,” put in Ned. “I could dally with a bit of chicken myself.”

“Well, far be it from me to stand in the way,” said Jerry, and, throwing the wheel around he followed the *Tortoise*, which, with the other boats, was making toward shore.

In the grove the boys found Mr. Smith had not exaggerated matters when he said there “was no end of good things to eat.” Large tables had been spread under the trees and waiters were flying here and there. The boys were a bit confused by all the excitement, but Mr. Smith soon found them, and introducing them to some of his friends, got places for them at one of the best tables.

“I guess you boys will have plenty of chances to race while you’re here,” said Mr. Smith. “I hear a number of skippers want to try issues with you.”

“Well, they’ll find us ready,” said Jerry. “We’re rather new at the game, but we’ll do our best.”

“That’s the way to talk,” cried Mr. Smith. “Play the game to the limit, no matter what it is. I’d like another brush myself. Your boat can certainly go.”

“I think you could beat us,” said Jerry frankly. “If you hadn’t had that accident you would have won.”

But now the dinner was almost over. Ice cream was being served, and when every one had eaten their fill, there arose from the head table where the regatta committee sat a cry of:

“Speeches! Speeches!”

Then came applause and cheers. The chairman of the committee arose and, looking down toward where the motor boys were sitting, began:

“I’m sure it would give us all pleasure to hear a few words from the winners of the motor boat race. They are newcomers to our midst, and, as such we welcome them.”

“Hear! Hear!” cried the crowd. “Speech! Speech!”

For a moment the boys felt a sort of cold chill go down their backs. It was the first time they had been placed in such a position. Bob looked at Ned, Ned looked at Jerry, and Jerry glanced down at Bob.

“Say something, Jerry!” whispered Ned.

“Yes; go ahead; talk!” exclaimed Bob.

“Wait until I get you both back to camp!” muttered Jerry, as he pushed back his chair and arose.

His heart was beating fast and there was a roaring in his ears. He was greatly embarrassed, but he felt he must say something to show that he appreciated the honor paid him and his comrades.

“I’m sure my friends and I are deeply sensible of this welcome,” he said. “We didn’t expect to win the race, though we did our best. We’re very glad to be here among you, and we hope to continue the acquaintances we have made. And I want to say that if one of Mr. Smith’s cylinders—I mean if one of Mr. Cylinder’s smith—er—that is if the boat Mr. Smith cylinders—I mean owns—if his cylinder—er—that is if his boat’s culander—cylinder—hadn’t cracked Mr. Smith’s head—I would say if the cylinder—”

“What he means,” said Mr. Smith gallantly coming to the relief of poor Jerry, “is that if I hadn’t had the misfortune to crack the forward cylinder I might not have been beaten so badly. But I want to say that that’s all nonsense. It was a fair race, and won fairly, and the *Dartaway* did it. So I ask you to join with me in giving three cheers for the owners.”

The cheers were given with a will, and the boys felt the blushes coming to their cheeks. Altogether it was a jolly time, and one the lads never forgot.

“We didn’t make any mistake coming here,” said Jerry, who had taken his place at the wheel as they started for their camp. “It’s almost as much fun as automobiling in Mexico or crossing the plains.”

The boys were proceeding rather slowly as they had not yet familiarized themselves with the lake and their bearings, and they did not want to run into anything.

For a while the *Dartaway* skimmed along, there being no other craft near. The water lapped the sides and broke away in a ripple of silver waves.

Suddenly Jerry threw out the gear clutch, and began spinning the wheel around. At the same instant Bob and Ned, who had been looking to the rear, turned around and saw a big black shape in front of them.

“Ahoy there! Schooner ahoy!” called Jerry. “What do you mean by cruising about without a light. You’ve no right to do that. Look out there. You’ll foul us!”

The sound of feet running about on a deck could be heard. Then there came a moment of silence followed by a sudden jar and a grinding crash.



CHAPTER XXIII

THE MYSTERIOUS VOICE

The shock threw the *Dartaway* back. Jerry had already turned off the power, and was slowing down for the reverse when the smash came. The motor boat had fairly poked her nose into the side of the schooner.

“Are we damaged?” cried Ned.

“I guess not,” replied Jerry, seizing one of the oil lanterns and holding it over the side of the bow. He could see a big dent in the wooden hull of the motor boat, and a larger one in the schooner. The two boats were now drifting apart.

Aboard the schooner there was much confusion. Several persons seemed to be talking at once. Lights flashed here and there.

“Look out, I’m going to back away,” said Jerry to Bob and Ned. “Is it all clear to the rear?”

He swung the search lantern so that the beams cut a path of light aft.

“Nothing in the road,” sung out Ned.

Slowly the *Dartaway* separated from the side of the schooner. As she did so the stern of the larger vessel swung over toward the motor boat, and Bob, who was watching it gave a sudden cry.

“What’s the matter? Is she going to hit us again?” called Jerry, slowing up the engine.

“No!” cried Bob. Then lowering his voice and crawling to where Jerry stood he whispered:

“This boat has the name of *Bluebird* on her stern!”

At the same instant there came floating over the water the sound of a voice from some one aboard the larger craft.

“We’re sinking! Quick Bill! Get the boat over and find me a life preserver. I don’t want to drown!”

At the sound of the mysterious voice, coming so plainly amid the stillness that

followed the crash the boys were startled.

“Doesn’t that sound just like—” began Bob.

“Hush!” cautioned Jerry in a whisper. “Wait a while before you talk.”

“I tell you we’re sinking!” the voice went on. “They rammed a hole clear through us. They did it on purpose! They want to capture me!”

“Keep quiet, you numbskull!” the boys heard some one exclaim in reply. “You’ll be caught quick enough if you don’t keep still. Do you want to give the whole thing away? Get below before they flash that search light on the deck and see who you are!”

Silence ensued, broken only by the sound of some one moving about on the deck of the schooner.

“Flash the light on ’em!” called Ned.

Jerry swung the big gas lamp around on its pivot, and the blinding white glare illuminated the schooner. The only person to be seen on deck was a man at the helm, and, by the beams the boys could see he was roughly dressed.

For an instant the steersman stood plainly revealed in the beams. He wore nothing on his head, but, as soon as the glare set him out from the darkness he caught up from the rail a slouch hat which he pulled over his eyes, screening the upper part of his face.

“What’s the matter with you?” demanded Jerry with a pretense of anger, as he wanted to hear the man’s reply. “Couldn’t you see our boat?”

“If I could have d’ye s’pose I’d a stood here an’ let ye run int’ me?” the man asked in answer. “Them gasolene boats is gittin’ too dangerous. I’ll have th’ law on ye for this.”

“What about the law requiring sailing boats to carry lights at night?” asked Jerry. “I guess if there’s going to be any suing done we can do our share.”

The steersman made no answer. The wind freshened just then, and the schooner gathered way. The helmsman put her about, and she heeled over as the breeze came in powerful gusts.

While the after part of the sailing vessel was still in the zone of the search light the boys observed a second figure aboard. It came up the companionway leading down into a small cabin.

“Git down there!” the steersman exclaimed. “They’ll see you!”

The figure disappeared suddenly. The boys, seeing it would be no further use to argue with the surly skipper, put their boat on her course and resumed the trip to the island. They found beyond a slight loosening of the engine, due to the shock, no damage had resulted.

“Well, I think we ran into something that time,” remarked Ned.

“Two things I would say,” put in Jerry. “If that mysterious voice, the steersman tried to hush, wasn’t that of Noddy Nixon’s I’ll eat my hat.”

“I was just going to say the same thing,” added Bob. “I was sure I recognized it.”

“Then he isn’t kidnapped at all,” said Ned.

“I never believed he was,” came from Jerry.

“I wonder who the other person was,” said Bob.

“I have an idea it was Bill Berry,” said Jerry.

“It didn’t sound like his voice,” interposed Ned.

“If you noticed,” went on Jerry, “he talked with two voices. When he spoke to Noddy his tones and words were much different than when he addressed us and threatened to have the law on us. I’m sure it was Bill Berry.”

“Then those two are up to some mischief, I’ll bet,” ventured Ned. “There must be some game afoot when Noddy lets it be thought he is kidnapped, and when we find him away off here in a schooner.”

“There is,” spoke Jerry. “It’s the same game that began with the reference to something ‘blue’ that Bill Berry made that day. It’s the same game that we nearly discovered when we almost ran into the *Bluebird*, and now we have the same schooner away down here on the lake and we nearly sink in consequence of hitting her, or of her hitting us, for I believe they got in the way on purpose.”

“But what is the game?” asked Bob.

“That’s what’s puzzling me,” replied Jerry. “I’m inclined to think that the gang Chief Dalton is after will be found to have some connection with this vessel, and while I have only a mere suspicion of it, I believe the robbery of Mr. Slade’s store is—”

“Look out there! You’re going to hit me! Keep to the left!” exclaimed an

excited voice.

Jerry rapidly spun the wheel around and the *Dartaway* veered to one side with a swish of water, just grazing a rowboat with a man in it, that loomed up dead ahead.

“Almost had me that time,” said the rower pleasantly as the *Dartaway* slowed up. “It was my fault though, I ought to have had a light.”

His frank admission of his error, and his failure to abuse the boys for nearly colliding with him, as most rowers would have done under the circumstances, made the boys feel at ease.

“Sorry we caused you such a fright,” said Jerry. “Can we give you a tow?”

He swung the search light about to illuminate the rowboat. As he did so he gave an exclamation of astonishment. The rower was none other than the ragged tramp who had been rescued from the hay barge, and who had been given a ride in the *Terror* following the unsuccessful chase after the motor boat thieves. He recognized the boys at once.

“Oh it’s you, my young preservers!” the tramp said. “Well, we seem fated to meet at odd moments. First you save my life, and then you nearly take it from me. Well, it evens matters up.”

“Can we tow you anywhere?” asked Jerry again.

“Thanks, noble sir,” replied the tramp with the same assumed grand air he had used when talking to Chief Dalton. “I fain would dine, and if you can take me to some palace where the beds are not too hard, and where I could have a broiled fowl, or a bit of planked whale, with a sip or two of ambrosial nectar, I would forever call you blessed.”

“Do you mean you’re hungry?” asked Bob, who had a fellow feeling for all starved persons.

“As the proverbial bear,” answered the tramp. “You haven’t a stray cracker about your person, have you?”

“No, but I’ve got a couple of ham sandwiches,” said Bob.

“Well if you’re not at it again, Chunky,” said Jerry. “Where’d you get ’em?”

“I put ’em in my pocket at the feed this afternoon,” replied Bob, taking the sandwiches out and passing them to the tramp, whose boat was now alongside. “I thought they’d come in handy.”

“As indeed they do,” the ragged man put in, munching away at the bread and meat with right good appetite. “I thank you most heartily.”

“If you care to come to our camp we can give you something more and a little coffee,” said Jerry. “You could also sleep under shelter. We have a tent ashore you can use and we can sleep on board the boat.”

“If it would not discommode you, I would be glad of the opportunity,” the tramp said, dropping his assumed manner and speaking sincerely. “I was about to spend the night in the woods,” he went on, “but I much prefer shelter. I have a mission here, and while I am on it I have to rough it at times. But I am almost finished.”

“Will you come aboard, or shall we tow you?” asked Ned.

“Perhaps it would be as well to tow me,” replied the tramp. “I have some things in my boat I would not like to lose.”

The tow line was soon made fast to the *Dartaway*, and the boys resumed their trip which had twice been interrupted by accidents. They reached the island in safety, and soon were preparing some coffee and a light supper. The tramp fastened his boat to a tree that projected over the water, and, then sat at the rough table the boys had constructed under a canvas awning.

“I don’t believe I have been presented to you gentlemen,” said the tramp, as the night dinner was about to begin. Jerry laughing, introduced himself and his chums.

“Are you Aaron Slade’s son?” asked the tramp excitedly, as Ned’s name was mentioned.



CHAPTER XXIV

A QUEER MESSAGE

“Aaron Slade is my father,” replied Ned, wondering what object the tramp could have in asking.

“The one who was recently robbed?”

“The same.”

“Well if this isn’t—” began the tramp more excited than before. “I must—no I must not. Pray excuse me,” he went on, with an assumption of his former grand air, “I must not refer to that. It escaped me before I was aware of it. Pay no attention to what I said. I was going to tell you something, but the time is not yet ripe. Now let’s fall to, for I’m still imitating the bear in the predilection of my appetite,” and he attacked the food with every evidence that he was speaking the truth.

The boys looked at each other in surprise. Ned, in particular, wondered what the tramp meant by starting as if he intended to tell some secret and then stopping. Seeing that their guest was not observing him, Jerry made a gesture that indicated the tramp might not be altogether right in his head. In this view Bob and Ned coincided.

They were not alarmed, however, as the man did not seem to be dangerous. He was too busy eating to talk, and the boys soon forgot their curiosity in making away with the food, for the trip across the lake had given them all appetites.

It was arranged that the tramp should sleep in the shelter tent, while the boys made use of the bunks on board the boat. It was nearly midnight before they turned in, and the motor boys, at least, slept soundly until morning.

As for the tramp he may have rested well, but at any rate he was not a late sleeper, for, when the boys crawled out of their comfortable beds for a plunge into the lake they found he had built a fire on shore and was boiling their tea kettle over it.

“That’s very good of you, but you needn’t have gone to that trouble,” said

Jerry. "We have a gasoline stove."

"Tut, tut!" exclaimed the ragged man. "Water for coffee should always be boiled over an open fire. It has more flavor."

Thinking this was only one of the tramp's odd conceits the boys did not argue further with him. They took their bath, their odd guest meanwhile making coffee.

"If you'll tell me where the bacon and other things are I'll finish getting this meal," he called to them where they were splashing in the lake.

"Shall we let him?" asked Jerry of his chums in a low voice.

"Guess he won't poison the stuff," said Bob. "Besides it will be ready while we are dressing and we'll not have to wait."

Accordingly Jerry called out directions how to find the victuals, and soon the savory smell of sizzling bacon and frying eggs was wafted over the water. They had a breakfast fit for a king, and complimented the tramp on his skill.

A little later the tramp proposed that the boys take his rowboat and go fishing on the other side of the island. They were doubtful about leaving him in charge of the camp.

"I see you're a little suspicious of me," the tramp said. "Well I don't blame you. However to show you that I'm all right read that."

He held out a slip of paper, on which was written:

“This man can be trusted. Henry Dalton, Chief of Police, Cresville, Mass.”

“If the chief says you’re all right, I guess that’s enough for us,” spoke Jerry, as he handed the paper back. “We’ll take a day off and go fishing. Don’t let any one come bothering around our camp. We have reason to believe an enemy of ours is on this lake. He would do us some harm if he could.”

“There are enemies of mine, also,” said the tramp. “But have no fear. I’ll look after things.”

Getting some bait and fishing tackle the boys started off in the tramp’s rowboat. They did not take any lunch, as they planned coming back at noon.

“Do you think it’s all right to trust him?” asked Ned.

“I’m sure it is,” replied Jerry. “That note from the chief was genuine. I know his writing, and the paper was the same as the chief uses in his private office. I got a permit once from him to carry a revolver. You remember, when we made our first auto trip.”

Satisfied that their belongings had been left in good hands, and were safe from any chance intrusion from Noddy Nixon or his cronies, the boys put in an enjoyable morning fishing. They made several good catches, and when the sun indicated that it was nearly noon, they rowed around the island to camp.

“I hope he has a good fire going so we can cook some of these fish,” observed Bob.

“I guess he will be ready for us,” said Ned. “He seems to be a willing worker.”

Sure enough, when the boys rowed to shore they found their odd guest had built a fine fire in an improvised oven, and was all ready to proceed with cooking the fish. It was the best meal the boys had eaten since coming to camp, and they had the tramp to thank for the major part of it. The ragged man proved he had a better appetite even than Chunky, which is saying a great deal. The fish were done to a turn, and the bacon gravy gave them a most excellent flavor.

So heartily did all eat that they were too lazy to do anything but lounge around after dinner. They stretched out under the trees and before they knew it the boys had dozed off.

Jerry was the first to awaken. It was about three o’clock when he sat up, rubbing his eyes, and, for a moment wondering where he was. Then he saw the

lake through the trees and remembered. He looked around and saw Bob and Ned still stretched out on the sward. The tramp was nowhere in sight.

“I wonder if he’s gone fishing,” thought Jerry. “He’s a queer duck. I must take a look at our motor boat.”

Slowly he walked to where the *Dartaway* was moored. He saw she was riding safely. Then he looked for the rowboat. It was nowhere to be seen, though it had been tied close to the motor craft.

“I guess he’s slipped away,” thought Jerry.

At that instant the sound of oars being worked caught his ears. He looked up and saw, coming around the point of the island, the tramp’s craft. But the tramp did not seem to be in it. Instead it held a fisherman, with a broad brimmed hat, a corduroy coat, green goggles on, and a big basket hung over one shoulder. In the boat two poles could be seen, also a gaff sticking up.

“Some one has stolen his boat,” thought Jerry. “Hi there!” he called. “Where you going?”

“Fare thee well!” called back the fisherman. “I must away on my mission.”

“Come back with that boat!” yelled Jerry.

“Why so? ’Tis mine,” came back the answer over the waters as the fisherman rowed farther out from shore. “Sorry to leave you in this fashion, but my mission calls.”

“Why it’s the tramp!” exclaimed Jerry, as he recognized the voice of the ragged man in spite of his queer disguise. “But where in the world did he get that rig?”

“What’s the matter?” asked Ned, having awakened and coming down to join Jerry.

“There goes our tramp,” said Jerry.

The tramp was now quite a distance out. He stood up in his boat.

“Look—in—your—coffee—pot!” he called. “I—left—a—message!”

Then he sat down and began rowing hard.

“Hurry up, get the coffee pot!” cried Jerry. “We must get at the bottom of this!”

He and Ned ran back to the tent. They found the pot set in the middle of the

table. Jerry threw back the cover. Inside was a piece of birch bark, on which was written in pencil:

“Where the *bluebird* spreads her wings, there you’ll find the stolen things. Search her deep, and search her through, you will find I’m speaking true.”



CHAPTER XXV

SEARCHING FOR THE SCHOONER

“Well if this isn’t mystery and more of it!” exclaimed Bob. “What in the world does it all mean, and the tramp going off in this fashion?”

The boys gathered close together, their heads bent over the mysterious message on the birch bark.

“Let’s call to him to explain,” suggested Ned.

“It’s too late,” said Jerry. “He’s too far out. Besides I don’t believe he’d come back. Anyhow I think I know what the message means.”

“What?” asked Ned and Bob in a chorus.

“Isn’t it plain enough?” asked Jerry with a smile. “If Andy Rush was here he’d have half a dozen explanations.”

“Let me read it once more?” came from Ned.

“Where the *bluebird* spreads her wings, there you’ll find the stolen things. Search her deep and search her through, you will find I’m speaking true.”

“Why of course!” exclaimed Bob. “It must be the schooner *Bluebird* he’s referring to, and he means your father’s things will be found in her, Ned. It’s as plain as the nose on your face.”

“That’s so,” agreed Ned. “Is that what you make of it Jerry?”

“Sure. That part is easy enough. What does puzzle me though is that tramp. I can’t quite make him out. He’s a funny character, and his latest effort is stranger than any since his adventure on the hay barge. I wonder how he knew there was stolen stuff aboard the *Bluebird*?”

“Well that seems simple enough to me,” spoke Ned. “He’s probably been a criminal in his time, and knows some of the crooks who robbed my father’s store. In some way he found out they had the stolen stuff on the schooner, and he wanted to let us know to pay for our favors to him. You remember how excited he got when he found out my name was Slade.”

“Yes, that’s all right as far as it goes,” said Jerry, “but you’ll never get me to believe that tramp is either a criminal or one who travels with thieves. He’s a different character altogether. You’ll see I’m right. He may have found out where the stolen stuff is, but it was in some other way than being a companion of the thieves.”

“Well, maybe, you’re right,” came from Ned. “That part can be settled later. The main thing is to find the *Bluebird* and see what there is aboard.”

“Which isn’t going to be such an easy thing as it sounds,” Jerry remarked.

“Why not?”

“Well, it may be a simple matter to locate the vessel, as the lake is not very large, but when we get to her have you thought of what we will do with her?”

“Go aboard, of course, and demand my father’s goods and money,” said Ned boldly.

“You seem to forget there is a difficulty in the way,” Jerry went on. “The men who stole the stuff, provided it is aboard the ship, are not likely to let us come over the side as if we were on a visit, and search for incriminating evidence. Then, too, there is Noddy, and he is not likely to welcome a call from us. No, I think we’ll have our hands full in getting aboard the *Bluebird*.”

“What would you advise?” asked Bob, as both he and Ned had come to regard Jerry’s ideas as being a little better than their own on important matters.

“I think it would do no harm to make a search and find where the *Bluebird* is lying,” said Jerry after a little thought. “Then, perhaps we can decide on a plan of action. It’s a sort of following the old recipe of making a rabbit pot-pie,—to first catch the rabbit.”

The other boys agreed this was the best idea. They watched the boat with the tramp-fisherman growing smaller and smaller as he rowed out on the lake, and puzzled more than ever over the queer character.

“Well, shall we start right away?” asked Ned.

“I don’t believe it would do any good,” said Jerry. “Let’s get ready for supper, and this evening we can take a run out on the lake. We probably will not discover anything, but it will be fun, and we may gain a clue.”

Shortly after sunset, the evening meal having been finished, the boys made the *Dartaway* ready and started away from camp. The lake was alive with power and

other boats and the boys met a number of new acquaintances they had made at the luncheon following the winning of the prize. They speeded back and forth until dusk, and then accepted an invitation of a party that was bound for one of the resorts on the shore of the lake.

They spent some time there and when they reached their island dock and made a landing it was as dark as pitch. The boat was made fast to the wharf and then, lighting some oil lanterns, the boys walked up to their camp, which was a little way from shore.

As the gleam of the lamps fell on the place Jerry who was in the lead uttered an exclamation:

“Some one has been paying us a visit!” he said. “And they haven’t been friends of ours either.”

This was soon evident, for the camp was topsy-turvy. The shelter tent was pulled down, the utensils and camp stuff were scattered all about, and the place looked as if a small cyclone had struck it.

“I wonder who did this?” came from Ned. “I’d like to get hold of them for a few minutes.”

“Maybe this tells,” said Jerry, taking up a piece of paper from the planks that served as a table. The scrap had evidently been placed where it would be easily seen. It read:

“You had better clear out of here before something worse happens to you and your boat.”

“Who signs it?” asked Ned.

“It has ‘The River Pirates’ at the bottom,” said Jerry, “but I’d be willing to bet a new hat against a cookie that it’s Noddy Nixon’s writing.”

“Then the *Bluebird* has been here in our absence,” said Bob.

“Looks so,” admitted Jerry. “Now let’s see if any great damage has been done.”

They made a hasty examination, but beyond tearing up the camp, and upsetting things, nothing appeared to have been stolen or seriously damaged. It seemed that the visitors merely wanted to annoy the boys.

There was nothing much that could be done until morning, so the boys, seeing that the *Dartaway* was securely made fast, went to sleep on board. They rested

undisturbed until morning.

“Now to hunt for the mysterious schooner!” exclaimed Ned after breakfast. “Do you know I have a good scheme?”

“Let’s hear it,” said Jerry.

“We ought to disguise ourselves,” went on Ned. “If we go hunting for the schooner in our motor boat the way we are now, they can see us coming and get on their guard. We ought to make up as fishermen, just as the tramp did, and steam around slowly.”

“They know the boat by this time,” objected Jerry.

“We can disguise her a bit by hanging strips of canvas over the sides,” went on Ned, “and by taking the canopy off.”

“I believe that’s a good suggestion,” said Jerry. “Then we could take the thieves by surprise. Come on, we’ll see what we can do to the boat.”

By removing the awning, and putting strips of dirty canvas over the bright clean paint on the sides of the *Dartaway* the whole appearance of the craft was changed.

“Now for ourselves,” said Bob. “We’ll wear our oldest clothes.”

If the boys hoped to succeed with little effort they were doomed to disappointment. They spent all the morning cruising around the lake and did not get a glimpse of the craft they wanted. They did not go back to camp for lunch, having brought some eatables with them. In the afternoon the cruise was resumed, but with no better luck.

For three days the boys went forth every morning disguised as fishermen, and came back at night having had their trouble for their pains.

“This is getting tiresome,” said Ned, on the evening of the third day. “We’re having no fun out of this trip at all. Let’s let the thieves go. I don’t believe they have any stuff on the boat.”

“Let’s try one more day,” pleaded Jerry. “We’ll go away down to the other end of the lake.”

So it was agreed. They made an early start the next morning and in the afternoon found themselves cruising around at the extreme southern end of the lake. There the body of water narrowed in one place because of an island close to shore. It was a spot seldom visited, and there were no camps in that vicinity.

“Let’s take a look around the other side of that island,” suggested Jerry, when his companions proposed going home. “There might be a dozen schooners there.”

The *Dartaway* was headed through the narrow channel. Jerry, who was steering, was proceeding slowly, as he was in unfamiliar waters, and the channel seemed rather shallow.

Suddenly, as the motor boat emerged from the strait, the three boys could hardly help refrain from uttering an exclamation. There, moored to the shore, was the *Bluebird*.

“We’ve found her!” whispered Bob excitedly.

“Hush!” cautioned Jerry. “Pretend to be fishing while I work the boat nearer. Don’t look at the schooner. They may be watching us.”

With swiftly beating hearts the boys listened to the throb of the propeller that brought them nearer and nearer to the *Bluebird*.



CHAPTER XXVI

THE PIECE OF SILK

“Are you going right up close?” asked Bob. “Maybe we had better wait a while.”

“Keep quiet,” said Jerry. “Just watch.”

The *Dartaway* continued to approach the schooner. In the stern Bob and Ned pretended to be trolling. Jerry held the motor craft on her course, going at first speed, and kept her headed right for the sailing vessel.

“You’re going to bump!” exclaimed Bob in a low tone, looking over his shoulder at Jerry.

The next instant the *Dartaway* hit the side of the schooner with a resounding thump, but not hard enough to do any damage, as Jerry, on the alert, reversed the screw just in time.

“I told you we were going to hit,” said Bob in reproachful accents, for he had nearly been tossed overboard by the recoil when the motor boat backed away from the *Bluebird* from the force of the blow.

“That’s all right I meant to hit ’em,” said Jerry coolly, as he caught hold of a rope that hung over the schooner’s side. “I did it on purpose,” he went on in a lower voice. “It will seem as if it was an accident and we can get a chance to see who’s aboard. That knock ought to bring ’em out.”

The boys, making the motor boat fast to the sailing vessel with the rope, waited for a hail from those they supposed to be aboard. But a silence ensued after the noise of the collision and the throbbing of the motor died away. All that could be heard was the sound of the wind in the trees, birds singing in the woods, and the lap of little waves against the sides of the boats.

“Queer,” muttered Jerry, “I thought that would arouse them. Must be sound asleep. Here goes for another.”

He pushed the *Dartaway* back from the side of the schooner and then, holding to the rope pulled her forward again so that the nose of the motor craft hit the sailing vessel a resounding blow. Still there was silence on the *Bluebird*.

The boys waited for several minutes, listening intently, but there was no sign of life other than on their craft.

“I’m going aboard the schooner,” said Jerry at last.

“Do you think it’s safe?” asked Ned.

“I don’t see why not,” replied Jerry. “There doesn’t seem to be any one in her. Maybe they’ve only gone away for a little while, but it’s our best chance. So here goes.”

With that he scrambled up the rope hand over hand, and soon stood on the schooner’s deck.

“Come on up,” he called to Ned and Bob. “The schooner is deserted!”

Up came the other two boys. They found the hatches tightly closed, and, as the day was hot, they reasoned that no one would be below with all the openings shut. The schooner was in good order, everything on deck being neatly arranged, and showing that those who had deserted her had not gone off in any haste. The vessel was moored to shore with bow and stern lines.

“Well, now that we have things to ourselves,” said Jerry, “let’s see what we can find. It ought to be an easy matter to get below.”

“I wonder if we have any right to,” said Bob.

“I don’t see why not,” came from Ned. “We suspect that some things from my father’s store are here. If we take a look and don’t do any damage where’s the harm. The thieves ought to be caught, and we may get a clue to them in this way.”

“I say, let’s go below,” put in Jerry. “Try all the hatches. Maybe some of them are not locked.”

Whoever had deserted the schooner had evidently not felt any alarm about leaving their property without the protection of lock and key, for the first hatch cover the boys tried slid back easily, disclosing a rather dark and steep companionway.

“Who’s going ahead?” asked Jerry. “Don’t all speak at once.”

There was a moment’s hesitancy on the part of all three. There was no telling what they might meet with, or who might be below.

“Pshaw!” exclaimed Ned. “I don’t believe any one’s there. I’ll make a break.”

He started down the companion steps, and, after a second, Bob and Jerry followed.

“It’s as dark as a pocket!” said Bob. “I wish we had a lantern.”

“Hold on!” called Bob who was in the rear. “I have a candle-end in my pocket.”

He brought it forth and lighted it, sending a rather faint illumination through the cabin in which the boys found themselves. No one was to be seen, but, as was the case on deck, everything was neatly in place, and no disorder evident.

“Now for the search!” exclaimed Ned. “We’ll see if that tramp knew what he was writing about with his funny message.”

Around the cabin were several lockers. These the boys opened in succession, only to find them empty. Clearly the booty, if it was aboard, was not in this part of the vessel.

But there were many other places to search. The craft was not a large one, but there was a forecabin, and a small hold amidships. The boys decided to try the hold first. To get into it they found they would have to slide back the deck hatch, and then lower themselves into the black hole by means of a rope which hung from the gaff, and which was evidently used to hoist cargo in or out of the schooner.

With the hatches open the dark hole was made lighter but at best it was not a pleasant place. Still the boys were determined to explore it. Seeing that the rope was securely fastened to the gaff, Jerry swung himself over the hatchway, and went down hand over hand. It was about ten feet from the deck to the bottom. Bob and Ned followed.

In his descent Bob dropped the candle, which, after burning a little while on the bottom of the hold, went out.

“That’s nice,” said Jerry. “Don’t move now until we get a light. No telling what sort of a hole you may fall into. Stay under the patch of sunshine.”

The boys remained immediately under the hatchway until Jerry, groping around, had found the candle end and lighted it. Then the boys peered around them, Jerry holding the tallow illuminator above his head.

“Forward!” cried Ned.

The next instant there sounded a scurrying as if some one was running about

the hold.

“Some one’s coming!” cried Bob. “Come on! They’re after us!”

The noise increased, and Jerry and Ned peered forward expecting to see some one approaching out of the darkness. Then came a series of shrill cries.

“Rats!” exclaimed Jerry with a laugh. “I forgot that all vessels are full of them.”

“Are you sure?” asked Bob, who had grabbed hold of the rope.

“Sure; can’t you see them?” asked Jerry, and, moving his candle back and forth close to the floor, he pointed out where several big gray rodents were huddled in one corner.

“Only rats, eh,” muttered Bob. “Well I wouldn’t want a lot of them to get after me. They’re as big as cats.”

But the animals were probably more frightened than Bob had been, for the next instant they all disappeared down some hole. The boys began a systematic search of the hold of the vessel. It did not take long to show that no booty was contained in it, unless, as Ned suggested, there was a secret hiding place.

“Well, we’ll try the fo’castle now,” said Jerry as he blew out the candle to save it, and ascended the rope. Bob and Ned followed.

By opening bull’s-eyes in the forecastle the place was made light enough to see fairly well in. There were several bunks, and a small table which could be folded against the side out of the way. The bunks were provided with bed clothes, and a hasty examination of them showed nothing to be hidden among them. The whole place was well looked through, but there was no sign of the goods stolen from Mr. Slade’s store.

“I guess that tramp must have had a dream,” said Ned, “or else he wanted to write some poetry.”

“Looks that way,” admitted Jerry, who was idly looking at a figure of Neptune carved in the middle of a panel on the forward bulkhead. “Still I don’t believe —”

But what Jerry believed he did not state, for, the next instant he nearly fell as the panel containing the representation of the sea god slid back and disclosed a dark opening.

“Why—why—” exclaimed Jerry recovering his balance with difficulty. “This

is queer. I was just pressing on the trident when all of a sudden—it happened.”

“Well I guess it did!” cried Ned. “I’ll bet it’s the secret hiding place. Come on, let’s have a look!”

“Light the candle!” said Jerry. “It’s as dark as two pockets.”

In the gleam of the light there was disclosed a place about five feet square, which had been built forward of the forecastle bulkhead.

“Now for the stolen stuff!” cried Ned, as he stepped inside. He flashed the candle around, but it took only an instant to show that there was nothing in the secret hiding place so opportunely discovered by Jerry.

“Well of all the—” began Ned, when he suddenly made a grab into one of the corners. “This looks like something!” he went on. “Let me get to the light.”

He stepped into the forecastle and held up to the view of his comrades a piece of cloth.

“What is it?” asked Jerry.

“A piece of red silk!” exclaimed Ned. “It’s just like some that was stolen from my father’s store! The things have been here, but they are gone!”

“Perhaps they are here yet,” suggested Jerry, “only we can’t find them. Maybe there are other secret hiding places. What had we better do?”

The boys were much excited over their find. That they were on the trail of the thieves they were certain, but what to do next puzzled them.

“How would it do for one of us to stay here, and the others go and get police assistance,” suggested Ned. “We ought to have the detectives on this case at once.”

“I have a better plan,” said Jerry. “Let two of us stay here, and the other take the motor boat and go after Chief Dalton in Cresville.”

“How will we decide who are to stay and who is to go?” asked Ned.

“We’ll draw lots,” replied Jerry. “Those who get the longest will stay on the schooner, and the one who gets the shortest will start in the motor boat.”

The lots were made from three straws. Jerry got the shortest.

“Well, the sooner I get off the quicker the chief will be back here,” he observed.

“Hold on a minute,” put in Bob. “Have you figured how long we’ll have to stay here, and not a thing to eat? You can’t get back here before this time tomorrow.”

“That’s so,” admitted Jerry, for once forgetting to laugh at Bob’s concern over the food question. “I’ll tell you what we’ll do. We’ll run back to camp and bring enough stuff here to last until I come back.”

“Good idea,” said Ned. “Only there’s no use in us all going. I’ll stay here, while you and Bob go back to camp. Bring some lanterns, and some cold victuals. Maybe we can find some food on board. We certainly can make coffee for there’s a stove in the galley, and I saw a coffee pot. All we need is some coffee.”

So it was arranged. Jerry and Bob made a fast run to Deer Island, and were soon back to the schooner with enough provisions to last the two boys a day or more. In the meanwhile Ned had been all over the schooner, but had made no new discoveries.

He had found a good supply of canned goods, and even some coffee, so there was no danger of starving even if the victuals Jerry and Bob brought gave out. The bunks were clean and there was plenty of clothing, though it would hardly be needed for the nights were warm.

It was now getting dusk and, after seeing that his boat was in good shape Jerry prepared for the long run back to Cresville.

“Take care of yourselves,” said he. “Keep a good watch and if Noddy and the gang come back, don’t run any chances. They’re desperate men, and it would be better to retreat than run the chance of a fight. If I were you I’d sleep in the cabin or on deck in hammocks. I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

“Better tell the chief to bring a couple of men along,” said Ned. “No telling what may turn up.”

“All right,” called back Jerry, as he headed the *Dartaway* through the narrow channel and started on the course to Cresville.



CHAPTER XXVII

NED AND BOB CAPTURED

It was a little lonesome for the two boys after Jerry had gone. For as long as possible they listened to the exhaust from the motor boat. When that died away, and silence, broken only by the lap of the water, and the occasional note of a bird getting ready to seek its nest for the night, settled down, that part of the lake was not the most pleasant place in the world.

“Well, we’ll have supper, go to bed, and it won’t seem so long,” said Bob. “I wish this robbery business was all cleared up. I’m afraid something may happen.”

“Oh, you’re getting nervous,” remarked Ned.

“Well, maybe I am,” admitted Bob, “but I can’t help feeling that something is going to happen.”

After a simple but substantial meal the boys brought some blankets up from the bunks and made beds on the deck, in the shelter of the awning which stretched from the forecastle to the galley amidships. They were not long in falling asleep, as they were worn out by the events of the day, as well as being rendered drowsy by the open air and wind.

It was about an hour past midnight when there echoed over the lake, in the vicinity of the island near which the schooner was hidden, the muffled throbbing of a motor boat. It was not speeding, as could be told by the intervals between the explosions. Sometimes they died away altogether, and silence ensued.

It was in one of these intervals, which betokened that the engine had stopped and that those in the boat were listening intently, that some one in the craft dropped an object that awoke the echoes.

“What’s the matter back there?” exclaimed a harsh voice.

“Oh, Noddy dropped his gun butt,” some one replied.

“I couldn’t help it, Bill, honest I couldn’t,” whined Noddy. “It slipped out of my hand.”

“Keep quiet!” exclaimed the one who had first spoken. “If you don’t know how to handle a gun let it alone. Then keep still. Do you want to bring the whole lake down on us? Above all, don’t yell out names like that.”

“All right, I’ll be careful,” said Noddy in a whisper.

“It’s so fearful dark I can’t see where the channel is,” said the man who was steering the motor boat. The craft, which was a large one, held five men, besides Noddy Nixon, who, if he had been kidnapped by the “River Pirates,” seemed to enjoy being in their company.

If Ned and Bob had been on watch they would have seen, coming over the water toward the sailing vessel a small dark object. They would have heard the throb of the motor in the boat, which was more plain, now that it was in the open. But they were both, snoring away, blissfully unconscious that their enemies were so close at hand.

Nearer and nearer came the boat, the man in the bow watching with eagle eyes as the schooner loomed out from the dark shadows of the woods.

“Any signs of anything suspicious?” asked Bill Berry, who stood near Noddy.

“Not as I can see,” came the whispered answer. “But we’ll take no chances. I’ll stop the engine now and we can row up the rest of the way. Then we’ll go aboard cautiously.”

Propelled by the oars, which were kept aboard the motor boat in case of emergencies, the craft made scarcely a sound as it slipped through the water. A few minutes later it slid alongside the schooner.

“Hold her steady,” said the man in the bow. “I’ll go up the ladder and see if the coast is clear.”

Over the side he stepped, dropping softly to the deck. Then every sense on the alert he moved forward. As he came around the galley he dimly saw, stretched out under the awning, the sleeping boys.

He listened a moment, and then softly crept nearer. Now he could hear the heavy breathing of the sleepers that told they were soundly slumbering.

“I’m going to chance it,” the man said softly to himself. “I’ve got to know who they are.”

He struck a match and, shading the flame with his hands, held it as close as he dared to the sleeping ones. At once the man started back with a half-smothered

exclamation.

“Two of the boys!” he muttered. “They found us after all, and are on guard. Lucky for us they’re asleep. What shall we do?”

It did not take the man long to make up his mind. He went softly to the side of the schooner, and was soon back in the motor boat.

“Well, Paxton, what’s the verdict?” asked Bill Berry. “Any one aboard?”

“Softly!” exclaimed Paxton. “We’ve got our work cut out for us. Two of those boys are asleep on deck. Now here’s my plan.”

“Hadn’t we better get out while we have the chance?” asked one of the gang. “This game is getting too hot. There may be only two boys asleep on deck, but who knows but what there are some police in the cabin?”

“With the hatches shut on this hot night?” asked Paxton. “I guess not. I’m sure there are only the two lads, and we’ve got ’em just where we want ’em.”

“What you goin’ to do?” asked Bill.

“We’re going to tow the schooner away from here,” replied Paxton. “Look lively now. Some of you go ashore, and cast off the lines. We’ll need ’em for a tow rope.”

“What about the boys?” asked Bill.

“We’re going to take ’em along with us,” replied Paxton. “If they walk into the spider’s web they can’t complain if the spider eats ’em. Lively now, but walk as though you were treading on eggs.”

In a few minutes two men who went ashore, the motor boat having been moved so they could easily land, had cast off the ropes. Then they were unbent from the cleats, and reeved together to make a long tow line. One end of this was fastened to a capstan in the bow, and the other to bitts in the motor boat.

“Now if you’re all ready go ahead,” said Paxton in a whisper to his crew. “I’m going to stay aboard the schooner to attend to the boys when they wake up. Bill, you’d better steer. Pull the schooner right out into the middle of the lake. If they raise a row there it can’t be heard.”

The motor boat was worked around, by means of the oars until it was in the narrow channel through which the schooner had come. Then it was propelled ahead by the same means until the tow rope was almost taut. This was done so that when the engine was started the noise of the explosions might be farther

away, and so less likely to wake up the sleepers.

Waiting aboard the sailing craft, Paxton heard the distant sound of the motor getting into action. Then the rope stretched out, and the schooner began moving slowly through the water. As it gathered headway, Paxton went to the wheel and kept her on the course, taking sight by means of a lantern he had directed Bill Berry to place on the stern of the motor craft. In ten minutes the schooner was well out on the lake, which at that late hour, or rather early one, for it was about three o'clock in the morning, was deserted.

Leaning against the wheel Paxton filled his pipe with tobacco and applied a match. It was drawing good, and he was beginning to feel more comfortable in spite of the cold and the hard work he had done that night, when one of the sleepers stirred.

"I guess we'll have a scene now," muttered Paxton, as he lashed the wheel to keep the schooner on a straight course down the lake, in which direction the motor boat was towing it. A second later Bob sat up.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "What's up. I say, Ned, wake up! We're adrift!"

"What's that?" cried Ned, rubbing his eyes, and jumping to his feet. "Adrift? Why so we are. We're out in the middle of the lake."

It was getting a little lighter and the mist was lifting somewhat.

"In the middle of the lake?" repeated Bob in bewilderment as he too got on his feet and stood beside Ned. "Why I didn't know there was current enough in the lake to carry us this far out."

"There isn't!" exclaimed Ned. "There's something wrong here. Hark! Isn't that a motor boat?"

The faint throb of the craft towing the schooner could be heard.

"It is, sure enough," came from Bob. "Can't be Jerry back already."

"No, it isn't Jerry," spoke Paxton, from where he stood at the wheel, being somewhat hidden from the sight of the boys. "It's some friends of mine."

"Who are you?" asked Ned, walking in the direction of the voice.

"Never mind who I am," replied the man. "You'll learn soon enough. But first you'll have to learn a little bit about how we do things aboard ship. So stop just where you are, young man. If you come any nearer it might be dangerous for you. This part of the vessel is sacred to the captain and his friends. For the

present you represent the crew, and the crew's place is forward.

“So just march over to the fo'castle, and stay there until I tell you to come aft. Take your beds with you, if you like, and bunk there.”

“You seem to be running things with a pretty high hand,” said Ned.

“Well, I guess I've got a right to. This is my ship. I didn't invite you to come aboard. But now you're here you may not find it so easy to get away. I may like your company.”

“Are you aware that we have proof that you and your gang was concerned in the robbery of my father's store?” asked Ned.

“I'm not good at answering riddles,” replied Paxton, composedly smoking away. “Now you do as I say before I get mad and cause you trouble.”

The schooner was now well out in the middle of the lake. It was getting quite light, but the boys could see no help at hand. The motor boat was steadily towing away.

“What shall we do?” asked Bob of Ned, in a low voice.

“I don't see anything but to do as we're told,” answered Ned. “No chance of help now.”

They moved forward. At that moment Paxton placed his fingers to his lips and gave a shrill whistle.

A few minutes later the motor boat was alongside the sailing vessel. Bill Berry and another man scrambled aboard.

“Help me tie up these lads,” said Paxton. “Then we'll take them aboard the motor craft. When that's done start towing again.”

For an instant Bob and Ned had a wild thought of resisting the gang, or at least jumping overboard and swimming to escape. But a moment's reflection showed how futile this would be.

Believing discretion the better part of valor at that time, they submitted quietly while the three men bound their arms. Then they were led to the side, helped over and were soon seated in the stern of the motor boat.

Paxton and Bill Berry remained on board the schooner, and were joined by Noddy, who said he did not want to stay in the smaller craft. Then, as the sun was peeping up over the distant hills, the towing was resumed, the schooner

being pulled directly up the lake, and approaching the western shore in a long curve. Bob and Ned were in the hands of their enemies.



CHAPTER XXVIII

JERRY'S RETURN

Jerry's voyage to the head of the lake and then up the river was without incident. It was rather a lonely trip, but he had no time to feel any alarm.

He arrived at Cresville early the next morning and left the boat at the private dock, while he hurried to acquaint the chief of police and Mr. Slade with the news about the schooner.

Jerry found the chief had not yet come down to headquarters, and, not caring to tell the sergeant in charge his errand, he went to Mr. Slade's house.

"What's this? Oh it's you, Jerry, eh? No bad news I hope? None of you boys drowned at the lake? What's the trouble? You look as if you'd had a tussle with a bull and came out second best," said Ned's father.

Jerry told his story and also related their plans.

"Good idea!" exclaimed Mr. Slade. "We'll go and see the chief at once."

Mr. Dalton had arrived by the time they got to headquarters and called Mr. Slade and Jerry into his private room. There Jerry told the story over again, to the no small astonishment of the police official.

He gave several orders over the telephone, including one to have the motor boat *Terror* made ready at once for a long trip.

Jerry found he would have about an hour to wait before the start back could be made, so he went to his home and also Bob's and told the folks the camping party was all well. He said nothing of the discoveries, for fear of alarming his mother and Bob's parents.

The chief and two detectives made up the police posse. They went to the dock where the *Terror* was tied up and got aboard. Mr. Slade had counted on going, but, at the last moment, found some business affairs needed his attention.

As soon as Jerry found the chief and his men were about to start he hurried back to the *Dartaway's* boat house and made ready for his return trip. He found the engine needed some slight adjustments, and quickly made them.

While he was bending over the cylinders, putting in some new spark plugs, he heard a step behind, and Andy Rush joined him.

“Are you going on another trip?”

“Yes, want to come along?” asked Jerry, for he liked Andy, in spite of the galvanic battery action of the younger lad.

“Say! Do I!”

“Jump in,” spoke Jerry.

Jerry looked over the engine to see that it was in good order. He filled the auxiliary gasoline tank, took aboard some extra batteries and other supplies and announced he was ready to start.

“We’ll see if we can’t catch the *Terror*,” he remarked, having told Andy something of the plans afoot.

Jerry cranked up the motor. It throbbed and roared and he was about to throw in the clutch and send the boat off when some one hailed him.

“I say, fair sir. Wilt take a poor wayfarer aboard? I fain must be on my way, and my coach seems to have passed me by.”

Jerry looked up. Down the dock was approaching a ragged figure; a man clothed in old garments that flapped about him. The mere remnant of a hat completed his attire.

“It’s the tramp!” Jerry exclaimed under his breath. “If he doesn’t turn up at the oddest times. I wonder what his secret is.”

“May I come aboard?” asked the ragged man.

“Don’t let him. Maybe he’s one of the thieves,” objected Andy in a low tone.

But Jerry had different ideas. He wanted, if possible, to learn more about the tramp. He felt that the man had a secret, and that it concerned the robbery, and some other queer happenings of late, Jerry was most certain.

“Wilt take an humble passenger?” the tramp asked again, seeing that Jerry seemed to hesitate.

“Why, yes, your Majesty, if you wilt be pleased to accept such mean transportation as your slave is able to offer you,” replied Jerry with a smile, determining to enter into the tramp’s humor.

Past Cresville they went, and by noon they had caught up to the *Terror*, for the

chief had ordered her run slowly, as he wanted to see Jerry. The presence of the tramp excited no comment from Mr. Dalton. On the contrary Jerry was almost sure he saw some secret sign pass between the chief of police and the ragged man. This, more than ever, made him curious to get at the bottom of the strange fellow's secret.

It was decided to go ashore for dinner at a small town which the boats reached about one o'clock. The craft were tied up at the dock, and when Jerry and Andy left the *Dartaway*, the tramp remained behind.

Jerry asked if the chief knew the man at all.

"Oh, I've seen him around," Mr. Dalton replied. "He's an odd character. But never mind him. Where do you expect we'll pick up the boys?"

"Right aboard the schooner at the island," answered Jerry, wondering why the chief changed the subject so suddenly.

The journey was resumed after the meal and about four o'clock the boats emerged from the river upon the lake.

"Now for the schooner!" exclaimed Jerry as his boat swung ahead, it having been agreed that he should lead the way. The *Terror* was close behind.

Several miles had been covered, when the tramp, who had not spoken for some time, exclaimed, stretching out his hand:

"I think there's your schooner!"

"We're nowhere near the place," Jerry answered.

"I think you'll find I'm right," the ragged man went on. "I guess something has happened and the schooner has moved. I see her masts sticking up from behind those trees."

In a few minutes Jerry rounded the point. There, in full view of the setting sun, was the schooner. There could be no mistaking her.

He steered his boat up to the sailing craft. There seemed to be no sign of life aboard.

"Ahoy *Bluebird!*" called Jerry.

He had stopped his engine, and the chief had done the same for the *Terror*. Amid a deep silence they waited for an answer to the hail. None came.

Then, as the motor boats drifted alongside the schooner, it could be seen that

she was tied to the shore and deserted.

“Where are Ned and Bob?” asked Jerry, a nameless terror tugging at his heart.



CHAPTER XXIX

THE CHASE

“Humph! This is strange!” the chief exclaimed as his boat swung up alongside of the *Dartaway*. “Let’s go aboard.”

Making the motor craft fast, they all scrambled up and were soon on the schooner’s deck.

A hasty search served to show that the schooner had no occupants.

“I can’t understand it,” said Jerry, who was much alarmed.

From the shore, where the tramp had gone, leaping from the schooner’s deck, there came an excited shout.

“Here’s a clue!” he cried.

“What is it?” asked the chief as he prepared to join the ragged man.

For answer the tramp pointed to several footprints in the soft sand near the edge of the lake.

“The man with the arrow on his shoe!” he said. “I thought we’d find him with the gang. Now, Chief, I guess we can close in on ’em.”

Jerry and the two detectives had gone ashore by this time. They observed several footprints, indicating that a number of men had been tramping around near where the schooner was moored to the bank. Probably they had been engaged in making the craft fast.

“I wonder if the boys were here also,” said Jerry.

“Looks very possible,” said the tramp. “Here are the mark of feet smaller than those of men. Did Bob or Ned have any peculiar nail marks in their shoes?”

“Not that I know of,” replied Jerry.

“Well, the chances are if they were not here on shore they were in some boat the rascals had,” the tramp went on.

“You think they must have had some other boat than the schooner?” asked the chief.

“I’m certain of it,” the ragged man replied. “How else could the schooner have gotten here? There wasn’t enough wind all night to move a canoe, let alone a heavy schooner. Yet we find this vessel several miles from where Jerry left her. The thieves must have had a power boat, gone back after their craft and towed her. Now I don’t see any use lingering here. They’ve got a good start of us, but maybe we can catch them.”

“Where shall we look?” the chief asked. “Up or down the lake; or follow the river?”

“Follow the river,” the tramp said. “I’ll round these fellows up now. We’ll land ’em at the cave if not before.”

Jerry wondered at the tramp’s manner. He seemed to have assumed control of matters, and to be directing the hunt after the thieves.

“Who is he?” Jerry asked of the chief.

The tramp overheard the lad’s question.

“Shall I tell him?” the odd character asked. “I guess we’ve kept up the mystery long enough, Chief, and we’re pretty near the end of the affair now.”

“Go ahead,” spoke Mr. Dalton.

“So you think there’s something queer about me, do you?” the tramp asked Jerry, who nodded in assent. “Well, I admit I am not what I seem. Allow me to make you acquainted with the Duke of Wellington, otherwise known as Detective Sergeant Layton, of New York,” he went on with an elaborate bow and an assumption of his former grand manners.

“A detective!” exclaimed Jerry. “Well I had my suspicions all along that you were something like that, but I couldn’t see what you were after.”

“I’m after these thieves,” replied Detective Layton. “From the time you rescued me from the hay barge I’ve been on their trail, first here, then there, often in this disguise, and now I think I am about to close in. The chase started in New York, where they committed a series of daring robberies in department stores. For a while I lost track of them. Then I heard they were in this section and I came here. They kept quiet for some time and I thought I had lost them. Then I got on the track of Bill Berry and—”

“Is Noddy Nixon mixed up in this robbery?” asked Jerry.

“I’m not sure, but I don’t believe he is,” replied Mr. Layton. “I think he is with

the gang instead of being kidnapped, but I believe he is more a tool in the hands of designing men than an actual criminal himself. However, we'll soon see.

"The time the thieves took your motor boat I was after them, but they gave us the slip as you saw. However, I managed to locate a cave where I am sure they have their headquarters."

"All ready, then!" exclaimed the chief. "We'll speed the boats up after the scoundrels!"

"Going to make it a night affair?" asked one of the Cresville detectives. "It'll soon be so dark we can't see."

"That's all right," said Mr. Layton. "We'll make a start, and tie up long enough for supper. Then we can go on all night. It will not do to lose any time. Have we any provisions?"

"We can stop at our camp and get some," said Jerry.

This plan was carried out, and, in a short time, both boats having been well stocked, the craft puffed away toward where the river flowed into the lake.

While the preparations of the police for capturing the thieves were going on, the fellows themselves had not been idle. Once Ned and Bob were aboard the motor boat, and the towing of the schooner was resumed, the robbers followed a well-laid-out plan.

The schooner was taken to the little cove where she was hidden behind the trees. Then, those who had been aboard her, getting into the motor boat, the flight began.

Bob and Ned were gagged to prevent them giving any alarm when other boats were passed, and they were bidden to lie at full length on the cushions in the small open cabin of the craft, so they could not be seen. Paxton put one of the gang to keep watch over the boys while he attended to the steering of the boat. Another was kept at the engine to see that it ran properly, and Noddy Nixon and Bill Berry were left to their own devices.

All that morning the motor boat was speeded up the river. About noon the boys could see, from the surrounding country that they were nearing Cresville. This fact seemed to be apparent to Paxton and his gang. He steered the boat close to shore and tied up in the shadow of some bushes. There a rude meal was prepared, and the two captives were allowed to eat a little. They expected to see the boat start up again after dinner, but this was not Paxton's plan.

He realized to go past Cresville in daylight might result in the discovery of the two boys, and, though he knew his craft was a swift one, he did not want any pursuit.

Accordingly he held the boat in its hiding place until dusk. Thus it happened that Jerry and Chief Dalton, in their craft, on their journey down the river had passed the boat in which the thieves and their captives were.

It was after dark when Paxton gave the order to start, and the motor craft slipped past Cresville about ten o'clock. A little while before this the *Dartaway* and *Terror* had taken up the pursuit on Cantoga Lake, starting in the race more than a score of miles behind.

Bob and Ned, though they had kept their spirits up bravely were almost in despair. Their jaws ached from the strain of the gags, and their bodies were tired from lying in one position so long.

Through the long night the flight continued. Past village after village the thieves and their captives sped.

Behind them, though they did not know it, came the pursuers in the *Terror* and *Dartaway*. The two boats were making good time, but were far in the rear. It was early dawn when the forces of the chief, and Jerry in his craft, which also contained Andy Rush and Detective Layton, passed Cresville.

“I wonder how far they are ahead,” asked Jerry.

“We’ll make some inquiries of persons ashore, as soon as it gets light enough,” the tramp-detective said.



CHAPTER XXX

CAUGHT—CONCLUSION

About seven o'clock the two pursuing boats were about ten miles above Cresville. They made a short stop at a little village and coffee was prepared. While the simple breakfast was being gotten ready the chief and Detective Layton went ashore. They learned from a man who kept a boathouse that a large motor craft had gone up the river about four o'clock that morning. He said he had seen it when he came down to go out on a short fishing trip.

"Three hours ahead of us," said Mr. Layton. "Well, if they only have some sort of an accident we might catch them. If not, we'll have to trail them to the cave."

Jerry, who had not been asleep during the past two nights, save for a brief nap or two, was almost exhausted. Seeing his condition Mr. Layton offered to steer the *Dartaway*.

"All right," said Jerry. "But wake me up the moment you sight the other boat."

About two o'clock the pursuing boats swung out into a long straight stretch of the river.

"We're getting pretty close now," the tramp-detective called to the chief. "About five miles up is where they left the boat the other time and took to the cave. I wish we could sight 'em now."

"Same here," the chief replied. "Say," he went on, standing up and pointing ahead, "doesn't that look like some sort of a boat?"

"It sure does," Mr. Layton replied. "Wait a minute."

Holding the wheel steady with his knees he drew from his pocket a small telescope. Adjusting it, he peered forward and looked steadily through it for several seconds.

"I believe it's them!" he exclaimed. "I can't make out the figures very well, but it's a big motor boat, and one I've not seen around here before. They seem to be having some trouble aboard. Maybe the engine has broken down."

“Let’s hope so,” the chief said. “If it only stays broken until we catch up!”

The *Terror* and *Dartaway* were making good time against the current. Nearer and nearer they came to the other boat. When within a mile of her Mr. Layton could make out the occupants quite clearly through his glass.

“There they are!” he cried. “And whatever was the matter with the engine they’ve got it fixed now for they’ve started up again.”

“Try and get a few more revolutions out of your craft!” cried the chief. “Every inch tells. I guess we can hit our engine up a bit more!”

“I’ll have to wake up Jerry,” Detective Layton said. “I don’t know enough about engines to monkey with ’em.”

Jerry awoke as soon as he felt the detective’s hand on his shoulder.

“Have we caught them?” he asked.

The detective pointed ahead.

“Can you get a little more speed up?” asked the officer.

“We’ll have ’em pretty soon!” cried Jerry, as he put the engine to the utmost limit.

The gang of thieves was now making frantic efforts to escape. Several of the men were in the stern, and they seemed to hold guns in their hands.

“Better lay low,” advised Mr. Layton.

At that instant a shot rang out from the boat ahead.

“I guess they mean real business!” exclaimed Andy Rush. “That sounded like a bullet.”

“It was,” Mr. Layton said, “but they fired in the air to scare us. Go on, Jerry!”

The *Dartaway* was in the lead. Close behind it, however, was the police craft. A short quarter mile separated the pursuers from the pursued.

“They’re giving up!” cried Detective Layton.

A minute later the craft ahead had run ashore. Out of her piled several men and Noddy Nixon. They set off on a run across the meadows which at that point bordered the river.

“Where are Bob and Ned?” exclaimed Jerry.

“They’re probably tied in the boat!” yelled Mr. Layton. “You look after them. The chief and I will see to the thieves!”

Jerry steered the *Dartaway* close to where the disabled boat was poking her nose into a mud bank. As soon as it was near enough to shore Mr. Layton leaped for the bank. He was followed by Chief Dalton and his men, who went off on the run after the thieves.

Jerry shut off the power and then leaped into the other boat. He saw Bob and Ned lying bound on the seats.

“Are you hurt?” he cried, but the boys could not answer because of the gags. Jerry saw what the trouble was and cut them. Then he released his friends, and with Andy Rush, chaffed their hands, which were numb from lack of circulation, caused by the tight ropes.

“Are you all right?” asked Jerry, when he saw Bob and Ned could stand up.

“Well I guess so!” exclaimed Bob, speaking for the first time in several hours. “Have you got anything to eat, Jerry?”

“Say, if you were to be blown up in a powder mill, I believe the first thing you’d ask for when you came down would be a sandwich,” exclaimed Ned. “But go ahead, Jerry, get him something to eat, and then tell us how it all happened.”

“Come over on our boat,” advised Jerry. “We’ve got lots to eat there.”

While Ned and Bob were partaking of food Jerry quickly told of what had happened. In turn the boys related their experience, and how, at the last moment the engine of the thieves’ boat gave out, which lucky chance led to their being overtaken by the pursuers.

“I hope they catch the thieves,” said Ned. “They’re a bad gang.”

“Well, I don’t care what happens as long as you and Bob are all right,” Jerry replied.

The boys exchanged all the details since the parting at the place where the schooner was moored, and were going over some events for the second time when they heard a sound as of some persons approaching. A few seconds later there appeared at the edge of the river Chief Dalton, Detective Layton, and the two Cresville officers. Each one held a captive by the arm, and the wrists of the captured ones were enclosed in irons.

“Did you land ’em?” asked Jerry.

“We sure did!” cried the tramp-detective.

“Got ’em just as they were going to barricade the cave. Nabbed ’em without a shot being fired, and got possession of a lot of plunder too.”

“Is the stuff from my father’s store there?” asked Ned.

“Yes, and from half a dozen other stores,” replied the detective. “It’s the biggest round-up of thieves in a good while, and you boys deserve credit for your part.”

“Where’s Noddy?” asked Bob.

“Well, he and Bill Berry got away,” said Chief Dalton. “But we don’t mind. We got the principal ones. Noddy was not mixed up in the thefts. He only helped the men, and I guess they bled him for money. Bill Berry we’d like to have, but we’ll get him later. Now for home.”

The captives were taken aboard the police boat. Some of the more valuable of the plunder was placed on the *Dartaway*, and the rest was left in charge of one of the detectives.

There was a sensation that lasted for several days when the motor boys got back to Cresville and the affair became known. There were stories in the newspapers, not only in the town where they lived, but in the New York journals. The boys were complimented on all sides for the parts they had played.

Mr. Slade recovered nearly all of his stuff and the money taken was found buried in the cave. He divided the reward among the boys and the police. Several other store proprietors in nearby towns, and in New York, received goods that had been stolen from them. The schooner, it developed, had often made the voyage between New York and Cresville.

The thieves were tried and convicted, being sentenced to long terms in prison.

As for Noddy, he was not found for nearly a month after the sensational capture. Then one of the Cresville detectives, who was working on a chicken stealing case, found him in the old hut, near which the boys had once picked up Noddy’s knife. It developed that he had run away after the arrest of the thieves, and had been living as best he could, traveling about the country doing odd jobs. He was brought back home, but was not arrested, as there was no charge against him.

“I wish he’d stayed away,” remarked Jerry, when he heard of Noddy’s return. “He’s a bad sort of chap to have around.”

“Well I guess we’ve taught him not to interfere with us,” said Bob.

“That kind never learns a lesson,” Jerry added. “We’ll be bothered with Noddy as long as he’s anywhere near us.”

And though he did not know it, Jerry spoke with truth. For Noddy was smarting over what had happened, and much ashamed of the disclosures regarding his connection with the thieving gang.

The further trouble he and Bill Berry caused the motor boys will be told of in another volume to be called, “The Motor Boys on the Atlantic; Or, The Mystery of the Lighthouse.”

But with the clearing up of the mystery of the robbery, and the arrest of the gang the motor boys were destined to have a period of quietness. They went back to Lake Cantoga after matters in regard to the trial of the thieves had been settled, and enjoyed several days of life in the open.

There we will leave them for the present, having a good time in their motor boat, which proved to be all that they had hoped.

THE END

Transcriber's Notes:

Punctuation and spelling inaccuracies were silently corrected.

Archaic and variable spelling has been preserved.

Variations in hyphenation and compound words have been preserved.

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