

THE RIVER MOTOR BOAT BOYS ON THE
RIO GRANDE

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BOYS ON THE RIO GRANDE ***

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The sight they saw sent the boys off in peals of laughter.

The River Motor Boat Boys on the Rio Grande

In Defense of the Rambler

Harry Gordon

AUTHOR OF

"The River Motor Boat Boys on the Amazon"
"The River Motor Boat Boys on the Columbia"
"The River Motor Boat Boys on the Mississippi"
"The River Motor Boat Boys on the St. Lawrence"
"The River Motor Boat Boys on the Ohio"
"The River Motor Boat Boys on the Colorado"
"The River Motor Boat Boys on the Yukon"

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THE RIVER MOTOR BOAT BOYS ON THE RIO GRANDE

CHAPTER I A CALL FOR HELP

“Listen, boys!”

There was silence for a moment, and then the cry was repeated—a long, low, wailing call for help.

“It can’t be far away,” said the first speaker. “If the water wouldn’t make such a racket, we might locate it exactly. There! Sounds like the fellow was about all in.”

A large white bulldog of most disreputable appearance leaped to the railing of the motor boat and stood looking into the waters of the Rio Grande. In a moment the plea for assistance came again, sounding fainter and farther away.

It was evident that the man, whoever it was, was going down with the current. The dog glanced questioningly into the face of the nearest boy as if asking for instructions, and then leaped into the river.

“What did you do that for?” demanded Alexander Smithwick, throwing off his coat and shoes.

“What did I do?” demanded Julian Shafer, with a wink. “Captain Joe asked permission to go to the rescue, and took it for granted that it would be given. Intelligent dog, Captain Joe! What’s he up to now, I wonder?”

In a moment Alex, with one hand on the railing which enclosed the deck of the motor boat, heard the rattle of anchor chains and knew that the boat was drifting downstream.

The boys called to the dog, but without avail. Save for the rush of the river, all was still. “Mighty strange!” Alex exclaimed.

Night had settled down on the Rio Grande, but the electric lights shone far out on the stream, revealing nothing!

When the motor boat reached the point from which the cries had seemed, to come the anchor was dropped again and the boys scanned both shore lines eagerly, hoping, at least, to discover the white form of the bulldog. It was not at all like Captain Joe to remain silent under such conditions.

“What do you make of it?” asked Clayton Emmett, in a tone of alarm. “Captain Joe never acted like this before.”

“There’s something gone wrong with the dog!” exclaimed Cornelius Witters, who was rather inclined to look on the gloomy side of life. “He may have been drowned.”

“Catch Captain Joe getting drowned!” cried Alex Smithwick and Julian Shafer in a breath.

In a moment, however, Captain Joe was seen to leave a great mass of rocks which stretched at least a third of the way across the stream and strike out for the motor boat.

“Did you lose him, Captain Joe?” Alex asked, lowering a floating platform as he spoke in order to give the dog access to the deck, at the same time keeping out of reach of the torrent of river water deposited on the deck by the dog.

“Where is the man you went after?” added Julian Shafer, also taking good care to keep on the other side of the deck.

The dog was evidently doing his best to convey to the boys what knowledge he possessed regarding the stranger who was, if still alive, somewhere out in the night. For a time he met with scant success.

The boys listened intently, but there was only the rush of the river and the wind sweeping down from the mountains.

“Drop downstream to that ledge of rocks,” advised Clayton Emmett. “If the fellow is still alive, we’ll find him there.”

This proceeding apparently met with the hearty approval of the bulldog, who was the first to gain the rocky beach. Without loss of time he set off at a swift pace and soon brought up beside the prostrate figure of a lad who could not have been over sixteen. Alex bent over the body with his searchlight and made a hasty examination.

“Is he dead?” asked Cornelius Witters, known to his chums as “Case.” “He certainly looks the part.”

Alex shook his head.

“Let’s get him to the motor boat,” he said, with a shudder of horror. “Somewhere back in the dark ages, before the dawn of civilization, there may have been a kid more badly beaten up, but I doubt it.”

“Well, I should say so!” Jule cut in. “Looks like he had been run through a sausage mill! Where’s the fellow who did it?”

“Search me!” replied Alex. “The thing to do now, it strikes me, is to get the poor fellow where he can receive the attention of a surgeon. I wonder if one is to be found in this neck-o’-the-woods?”

“There are plenty of towns along the river,” Clayton Emmett suggested, “and there must be a surgeon in some of them; but his injuries may not be so

serious as they appear to be at first glance. Perhaps it may be well to get the stretcher," he added, as the boys gathered in an awed group about the silent figure.

Jule darted away to bring the stretcher, while the other boys made a rough examination of the injured boy's wounds. His head was one mass of bruises, and his left leg seemed to be broken. He was still unconscious, and the only wonder was that a person so battered and beaten should be capable of uttering the cries which had brought the dog to his assistance.

Presently Alex and Case, leaving Clay to watch beside the stranger, climbed an almost perpendicular wall of rock and, with the aid of their searchlights, looked down the narrow neck of land which connected with the shore.

The searchlights illuminated the scene only faintly. The night was very dark, and the rays of light traveled only a short distance before becoming absorbed by the shadows which shut out the landscape.

"It's darker than a stack of black cats!" said Alex, after a moment's inspection of the scene. "We may as well be on our way back."

The boys started back in the direction of the boat, but came to a halt at the sound of a low, whining cry which seemed to come from behind a ridge of rocks off to the left.

"What's coming off now?" Alex exclaimed, turning his searchlight in the direction of the sound. "Hope it isn't anything that will bite! Come out of that, you rascal!"

But whatever it was it did not seem inclined to obey the command, so Alex dashed off on an exploring trip.

"Come back, you mutton head!" shouted Case. "That may be a fake to lure us into a trap!"

But Alex's searchlight was by this time out of sight around a corner of rock and Case followed on behind. After making his way, not without difficulty, along a shelf of rock Case came to a pit-like depression, and, looking down, caught a glimpse of his chum's light.

The lad was bending over some object which was lying on the ground, and appeared to be preparing to take it into his arms. Case was at his side in short order.

"What have you got, Alex?" he asked. "Looks like a black cat! It takes you to keep the menagerie from growing shy!"

As Alex lifted the object in his arms, however, Case saw that it was a bear cub—certainly not more than a month old—a black bear cub who looked into the faces of the lads with an appeal which was not to be resisted! It softened Case's heart in an instant.

"Now, what do you know about that!" Case exclaimed. "Wonder if his mother is anywhere around?"

“She’d be very much in evidence by this time if she was,” replied Alex, hugging the cub. “My!” he continued, as his hands came in contact with the ribs of the cub, “I reckon a square meal wouldn’t come amiss right now! Here, you little cannibal, quit eating my ear!”

“I’d like to know what Captain Joe will say about this,” laughed Case. “He’ll want to make one bite of the cub!”

“Just let me catch him at it!” exclaimed Alex.

When, after rather a long, hard tramp, the boys, still carrying the baby bear, came in view of the place where Clay had been left they saw at once that something was amiss. Clay was nowhere in sight, and Captain Joe, usually the most faithful of sentinels, was not to be seen. The stranger still lay where he had been placed, gazing up into darkness with swollen eyes!

It took only a minute for the lads to reach his side. He made an effort to arise to a sitting position as they came running up, but fell weakly back with a groan of agony.

“What’s up?” asked Case.

The lad turned his head in order to get a good view of his questioner before making any reply whatever. Under the searchlights his face seemed beaten to a pulp.

Then Alex remembered that the boy had not regained consciousness at the time of their departure, and hastened to make the proper explanation. The boy again attempted a sitting posture and again failed.

Case knelt by the side of the wounded boy.

“Do you wish to say something?” he asked.

“Ask him where Clay went,” suggested Alex, keeping the baby bear in his arms.

“I don’t know,” replied the boy, answering the question asked by Alex. “When I came to consciousness there was a white bulldog drawing me out of the river.”

“And is that the last you remember?” questioned Case.

“Yes.”

“And so Captain Joe fished you out of the drink. Where did he go after that?”

“I did not see him go anywhere. I fainted, I guess.”

Alex examined the boy’s clothing and found it wet.

“The lad is right about the river,” he declared. “The boy must have been swept past our boat. It is a wonder none of us saw him.”

“Unless he drifted into the circle of light thrown out by the cabin windows,” Case cut in, “we should not have seen him.”

“Captain Joe certainly did a good job in making the rescue,” Alex added.

"How long were you in the water, stranger?"

"When I drifted by the motor boat," replied the boy, "I tried to catch hold of a rope, but was too weak and dazed from the beating I had received. If the dog hadn't found me just as he did, I should have floated on down the river and drowned."

"Good old Captain Joe!" Alex exclaimed. "Somehow he is always to the front!"

"There is a gang of robbers up the river about a mile," said the lad, evidently speaking in great pain. "If you came down the river in a boat, you ought to be looking after her. They are bad men. The marks of their treatment of me are still in sight," he added, smiling faintly. "They beat me because I refused to deliver my boat to them. Well, they have it now, but they had to fight for it," he added.

"Wonder we didn't see them when we came down," said Case, hastily getting to his feet. "For all we know, they may be already in possession of the *Rambler*!"

"The *Rambler* is too nice a boat for that gang of toughs to ride in," declared the stranger. "You see," he continued, "that I know all about you boys. I am from Chicago myself!"

Anxious as the boys were to learn more about the lad so strangely met, and to relieve his sufferings, they had other things of more importance, at least to themselves, to look after.

Alex, still carrying the baby bear, was off like a shot and Case was not far behind him. The Rio Grande was but a short distance away, but there was a wall of rocks which must be passed before the river came into view.

When at last the boys gained the top of the elevation and flashed their lights down upon the wind-swept stream, the *Rambler* was nowhere to be seen!

"Just our luck!" grumbled Case.

Alex, still holding the baby bear, wrinkled his nose.

CHAPTER II

A NEST OF PIRATES

To those who have read the books of this series already published the boys of the *Rambler* will need no introduction. Their adventures on the Amazon, the Columbia, the Colorado, the Mississippi, the St Lawrence, the Ohio, and the

Yukon will be readily recalled to mind.

Coming originally from the south branch of the Chicago river, they had accumulated handsome fortunes during their journeys in quest of adventure, but they still saw the world through boys' eyes, and were not satisfied to settle down to a humdrum life.

The *Rambler*, as will doubtless be remembered, was a very speedy boat, fitted up with electric lights and all modern conveniences. She carried an armor of chilled steel underneath as pretty a coat of paint as was ever sent out of the port of Chicago.

This trip down the Rio Grande had long been planned, and now that it was actually begun the lads were jubilant. They had been warned time and again against the uprisings for which Mexico is noted, but, boy-like, they had disregarded them.

The *Rambler* had been shipped to Wason on the Denver & Rio Grande, and the journey was on! This town lies some distance east from Silverton, and is surrounded on the north, west and south by the mountains which form a part of the great continental divide.

As Alex and Case stood now, on the bank of the Rio Grande, their hearts were very heavy.

"If we only knew that Clay and Jule were safe," Alex finally said, "we could endure the loss of the *Rambler*. Where do you think they have gone. Mister Teddy Bear, Junior?" he added whimsically, addressing the cub. "I'll bet you'd tell me if you could!"

But the cub nestled closer to the neck of the boy and not being in a conversational mood said nothing at all!

"We may as well return to where the injured boy was left," Case suggested in a moment. "The boys will know where to find us, at least, if we go there, which is more than can be said of any other locality. Just our rotten luck to have Captain Joe find that boy when we haven't got a thing to give him that might add to his comfort!"

"Kick!" laughed Alex. "You'd kick on a mouthful of pie! Say, how would a piece of apple pie go right about now? I'm hungry enough to eat one of those pirates, boots and all!"

"You are likely to be a great deal hungrier before you come upon anything to eat in this rotten hole!" grumbled Case, setting off for the designated spot at a fast walk.

Alex, however, remained behind, in the hope of catching a glimpse of the lights of the *Rambler*. It was very dark outside the small circle of light thrown out by the searchlight, and the wind was blowing great guns. It was as wild a night as ever blew over the Colorado hills.

As if to heighten the discomfort of the time, a cold rain began to fall in great gusts, sweeping everything movable before it. Alex was soon wet to the skin.

"How's this for a storm, Mister Teddy Bear, Junior?" said the boy, addressing the cub. "There's one thing been overlooked, though," he added, "and that's a little thunder and lightning. There certainly ought to be a batch of thunder and lightning with a peach of a storm like this, don't you think, Teddy?"

But Teddy did not have an opportunity to express his thoughts on the subject, if he had any, for just at that instant there came a blinding flash of lightning, followed immediately by a peal of thunder which seemed to shake the solid earth.

"Whew, but that was a corker!" cried the boy. "Wonder if I'm all here?"

But Alex had no time to consider this last conundrum, for just at that minute the lights of the *Rambler* made their appearance, coming up the stream. Alex had no means of knowing, of course, whether she was manned by friend or foe, so he switched off his electric and stood on the bank waiting in the wind and rain.

Directly the motor boat came to a halt at the side of a little rocky projection which extended into the stream for some distance, and the boy was no longer in doubt as to the character of the crew.

A frowzy head appeared above the rail of the boat and a hoarse voice demanded:

"Who's there?"

It was clear that the *Rambler* was in the possession of the pirates! Alex stood mute, awaiting developments.

Presently the low murmur of voices was heard, seeming to come from the shore, and Alex listened eagerly, but could not distinguish the voices. At times he was almost certain that the speakers were Clay and Jule, but the wind carried their voices downstream, and he could not be certain. He listened intently, listening at the same time, too, for the sound of advancing footsteps.

But the rush of the wind, the downpour of the rain effectually drowned all other sounds save at rare intervals. The frowzy head, evidently gaining courage, now spoke again.

"Whoever you are, come aboard!" the voice said.

There came a lull in the storm, and Alex was positive that the voices he heard were those of Clay and Jule; still he could not afford to make a mistake. So he waited.

The man on the deck of the *Rambler* either left his position or got out of sight behind the railing, for he was no longer to be seen. For a time all was still, then a voice which appeared to come from the *Rambler* rang out, causing Alex to almost drop the baby bear in his excitement. He knew that voice!

During the long winter evenings in Chicago Jule had made a study of ven-

triloquism, and had become such an adept that his voice could be heard for a long distance. Although standing within ten feet of Alex, the voice apparently came from the *Rambler's* deck.

"What are you doing on my boat?" the voice demanded.

There was a great bustle aboard the motor boat, as if search was being made for the speaker, followed by a fluttering of wings and a hoarse, croaking voice:

"What's coming off here?" were the words spoken.

"That's Tommy!" said a voice at Alex's side, and Clay made his appearance in the faint light thrown from the cabin windows.

"Where have you been?" demanded Alex, speaking in a voice loud enough to be heard above the rush of the storm. "Thought sure you had been carried off by the robbers."

"The pirates already had possession of the boat when I reached the shore," Jule explained, "and when Clay came we both followed on down the river in the hope that something would happen to again put us in possession. Say! Just listen to Tommy's conversation! He thinks he is the whole works! He has a horror of being awakened suddenly."

"Tommy" was a great red and green parrot, who had evidently been sound asleep during the short trip down the river. He was making up for lost time now, however, making the boat ring with his screams.

Presently a man's form shot out of the cabin as if fired out of a gun, with the parrot astride of his shoulders! The red and green feathers of the bird shone and glistened under the electric light, the long tail trailed out behind like the tail of a comet, while the topknot was very much in evidence, standing up straight and rigid.

The man thus attacked gave utterance to a string of oaths and billingsgate which would have made a fishwife green with envy.

"The bloomin' bird is clawin' me eyes out!" he shouted, doing his best to dislodge the bird. "Take 'im off, someone!"

By this time two other men were on deck, struggling with Tommy, who did not seem at all inclined to release the excellent hold which he secured in the hair of the robber. At last, however, he was dislodged, and secreted himself behind a chest of drawers in the cabin.

"I'll 'ave 'is bloody life!" shouted the fellow, starting away in pursuit, but a chum blocked his entrance to the cabin.

"Have it out with the bird some other time," he advised, with a broad smile. "Just now we have other fish to fry. We came back to get a kid what can operate this boat. There's something wrong with the motors. We got it up the river as far as this, and that's about all, consarn the luck!"

"Try him again with your Peter Pratt," advised Clay, having reference to

the boy's trick of throwing his voice. Whenever this faculty was referred to by any of the lads it was invariably known as "Peter Pratt." "Let's see what Peter Pratt can do for us in the way of getting possession of the *Rambler*."

Jule threw his voice across the rushing, water again, but no attention whatever was paid to it.

"That's strange!" said Alex.

"They evidently believe it to be the parrot!" said Jule.

"Of course you are right," admitted Clay. "It is a wonder we didn't think of that before."

The robbers now appeared to be holding a consultation as to the best means of getting one of the boys on board the *Rambler*. The boys could not catch a word, although the *Rambler* lay only a few feet from the shore.

The thunder and lightning were now almost continuous, and the robbers sought shelter in the cabin.

"Now's our opportunity," exclaimed Jule.

"I must be pretty dense," said Clay. "If there's a chance here I must have overlooked it."

"What's the matter with the stern deck?" ventured Jule. "I've known kids to get on board boats in that way before now!"

"Not in the face of a current like that!" replied Clay. "A boy couldn't swim in that millrace any more than he could fly!"

"You just wait a second and I'll show you!" replied Jule. "Anybody got a rope or a strong cord?"

"Alex has," responded Clay. "I saw him put one into his pocket! Produce it, Alex!" he added, all excitement at the prospect of getting the best of the pirates.

"Who's going to make the attempt?" Jule asked.

Alex deposited the baby bear in Clay's arms.

"Here," he said, "you take charge of Teddy, Jr., and I'll do the trick myself. You fellows couldn't make the raffle in a thousand years! This is a man's job!"

As Alex had kept the cub in a measure protected from the storm by his coat, and as the cub had remained perfectly quiet during this conversation, Clay was greatly surprised at being presented with a baby bear. He made a quick examination of his charge and then burst into a hearty laugh. Alex proceeded to unwind his fish line as if the presentation of a cub was the most natural thing in the world.

Jule stepped to Clay's side and gravely shook hands with the bear after locating him in the darkness.

"Where did you get the cub?" he asked.

"Oh, I presume he picked it off a bush!" Clay cut in. "Alex has an affinity for bears."

"He's making too much noise," Jule asserted, as the cub set up a wail which might have been heard on the *Rambler*. "Better let me take that line, Alex, while you teach your baby manners."

"Mind the nerve of him! Talking about a man's job!" laughed Clay. "If I had his good opinion of himself, I'd walk on the water out to the *Rambler*." "Yes, you would!" commented Alex, throwing off his outer garments preparatory to entering the river. "If you don't take good care of that cub, I'll set him on you when you come aboard."

The boys now carried the fish line up the stream a short distance and Alex entered the water. In order to gain the stem deck it would be necessary to follow the motions of the swimmer until the stem was reached and then release the line, trusting to the dexterity of the boy in the water to make connection with the hull of the boat.

"Now, boys!" cried Alex, and the next he was feeling the draw of the current.

The moment the lad was in the water the bulldog sprang in after him. Jule tried in vain to coax him to return to the shore, but Captain Joe was obstinate and paid no attention to the entreaties and threats of the boy. The dog soon was abreast of the boy, swimming with his head well down in the water.

In the meantime Jule was having about all he could do following Alex with his eyes, for the light from the cabin windows was uncertain and the great prow light had been extinguished.

"It's a wonder that Tommy keeps so quiet," said Clay, holding to the bear cub with one hand and pulling at the line with the other. "He is usually very much in evidence if awakened in the night."

"Here's hoping he has the good sense to remain quiet until Alex is on board," added Jule. "The parrot may have been killed, for all we know! If he has, there'll be doings when we get aboard!"

By this time the lights of the cabin were about opposite, and the boys on shore slackened their pace in order to give Alex an opportunity to gain the stem deck, which was, of course, downstream.

They saw very dimly indeed, for the rain was now falling in great sheets, obscuring the light from the cabin windows, and making the stem deck very slippery.

"Can you see where he is?" asked Clay.

"I can see that the line has slackened, and that is about all," replied the boy. "I wonder where Captain Joe is?" Jule added, tossing the fish line to one side. "He ought to be getting into action pretty soon. There he is now!"

The voice of the dog came faintly through the storm, and the screaming of the parrot added to the din.

"I'd give a hundred dollars to know exactly how things stand!" shouted Clay, dancing up and down in the excitement of the moment.

"That was a fool venture of Alex's," was Jule's comment.

CHAPTER III

ALEX TAKES A LONG CHANCE

Case sat for a long time at the side of the injured boy, doing what he could to relieve his suffering, but there was little he could do in the absence of a surgeon. The boy was in great pain and conversed only at long intervals.

"I presume the robbers have taken possession of the *Rambler*," said Case, crouching low to escape as much of the storm as possible, "and they may have carried Jule and Clay off with her, but I don't see what is keeping Alex. He should have been here a long time ago."

"They may have taken him, too," said the sufferer. "In that case we may stay here until we starve to death. If I could only walk, I'd soon get out of this!"

"What's your name, and how is it that you come to be here on the Great Divide?" Case asked abruptly. "You're a beauty, I must say!" he added with a grin.

"My name is Paul Stegman, and I'm from Chicago, as I told you before," the boy explained. "I came up here in quest of adventure, and reckon I'm getting enough of it. If I ever get back to civilization you just bet your bottom dollar I'll stay there!"

"Cheer up!" said Case, "the worst is yet to come!"

"I fail to see how it could be much worse," said Paul. "My boat is gone and, unless we can connect with the one you have, there are mountains to climb before we get out of here."

"It does look pretty dark," Case admitted, "but we'll find a way out. Suppose I go down to the river and see what's keeping Alex? The pirates haven't captured him, I hope!"

"It's pretty dark. And pretty wet, too," replied Paul, loath to lose Case's companionship for even a minute. "Perhaps he will come back after he has failed to discover the boys."

Case had his doubts about Alex returning as long as there was any prospect of finding either the boys or the *Rambler*, but he kept his thoughts to himself. It

was very dark when the searchlight was for a moment turned aside, and rain was falling in torrents. The wind, too, was racing over the narrow point of land as if sent for by the Evil One.

It was a wild night for early May, and Case, sitting dejectedly at the side of Paul Stegman, could feel the rain trickling down the back of his neck in streams. It was cold too, and the teeth of both boys rattled like castanets.

“No use trying to build a fire,” Case grumbled, “for what little wood there is in sight is soaking wet. I guess the *Rambler* made one trip too many!”

There was silence for a minute and then a footfall was heard on the rocky ridge which ran through the center of the peninsula.

“Alex at last!” shouted Case, springing to his feet. “Come forward, give an account of yourself! Did you find any trace of the boys or the boat?”

But the man who appeared a moment later was not Alex. He stood for a second looking down on the boys and started to join them, swinging a pocket dark-lantern as he advanced. But Case was shy of strangers and ordered the fellow back, at the same time switching off his searchlight.

“Oh, all right!” replied the stranger. “I thought you might be in some sort o’ trouble and might need help.”

“We are in trouble, and do need help,” Case answered, “but we mean to make sure first that you are just what you pretend to be.”

“I hain’t pertended to anything yet,” was the reply. “If you want my pedigree, I reckon you’ll have to want. I came down here lookin’ for a brindle steer what strayed away from the herd an’ saw your light, likewise the light from that boat anchored out there in the river. But, still, if you don’t want me to butt in, I’ll be joggin’ along.”

“Wait a minute,” Case exclaimed, starting to climb the ridge, “do you say there’s a boat out there in the river?”

“Come up here and see for yourself; seein’ is believin’, as the cat said to the mouse.”

Case clambered to the top of the ridge and looked out upon the river. There were the dim lights of the *Rambler*, but the rest of the scene could not be discerned.

“The boat’s there, all right!” the boy said jubilantly, hopping up and down in his excitement. “The boys will soon be here now.”

Case looked into the stranger’s face with a question on his lips—a question he might or might not answer.

“You didn’t come to this rocky place in quest of any brindle steer,” the boy ventured. “Will you tell me what you did come for?”

“Perhaps I’ll do it if you’ll tell me what I want to know,” was the reply, “and that is this: What were you doing with that wounded boy in that nest of rocks?”

"You know the lad is wounded, then?"

"I don't suppose you could hear much in this storm, but I've walked twice around the spot where you sat," was the reply.

"Well, you didn't hear anything of any account," was Case's reply. "Up to two hours ago I didn't know there was such a kid living. According to his story, he was set upon by robbers a short distance up the river and beaten up proper."

"So!" said the other.

"We, my three chums and myself, were lying up the river, anchored, when Captain Joe—that's the bulldog—leaped into the river and brought him out, more dead than alive. The dog is on the *Rambler* now. We boys wouldn't part with Captain Joe for his weight in gold."

The man looked thoughtfully into the boy's eyes.

"I guess," he began, but was interrupted by voices coming from the *Rambler*. The wind was now blowing a fierce gale and the words were indistinguishable, but words were not needed.

The prow lights flared up, lighting the deck of the boat as thoroughly as it was possible to do it in the dead of the night.

At the same instant the watchers caught sight of a man leaping over the railing of the boat.

"There goes one of the pirates!" shouted Case. "I wonder how many of them there are?"

"Perhaps he thinks it's just as dry in the river as it is on board the boat," the other said with a chuckle, "and I for one think he's about right. Here comes another."

When three had taken to the water there came a lull in the procession of jumpers and Case observed: "Now we'll soon be tucked up in our little beds, that is as soon as we get Paul cared for."

"Suppose the robbers return?" the stranger suggested.

"They'll have to be pretty swift in their movements if they connect with the *Rambler*," Case answered. "We've got a boat that can go some, and then some more!"

The two then descended the ridge and were soon standing where Paul had been left. The boy was still in great pain from his broken leg.

"This boy shouldn't lie here in the storm," said the stranger. "He'll take the newmonnie."

"He'll not remain here long now," replied Case, with a smile at the man's pronunciation of "pneumonia," "for we'll get him to the *Rambler* in short order. We must get him to a surgeon."

"I thought you'd never come," groaned Paul.

"It's all right now," Case assured the boy.

“Wait until the boys come with the stretcher, and we’ll have you where you can receive the care of a doctor in three jerks of a lamb’s tail.”

Clay soon appeared with the stretcher and the injured lad was carefully placed upon it. Then Clay turned to Case with a smile.

“Why don’t you introduce me?” he asked.

Case hesitated and the stranger came forward.

“I reckon we don’t either one know what to call the other,” he said with a smile. “I’m Rube Stagg.”

“Glad to know you, Mr. Stagg,” said Clay with a laugh at the odd appearance of the man.

He was at least six feet four inches tall, lean to emaciation, with enormous hands and feet, and just about the reddest and longest head of hair that the lads had ever seen. It came far down on his shoulders and was so tossed about by the wind that it appeared to be in one great snarl.

His eyes were blue and bright, his nose blunt stub, and his head was adorned with a pair of enormous ears. His dress was of the sort usually worn by ranchmen.

“I’ve got a ranch over here a short distance,” explained Mr. Stagg, “and you are quite welcome to use it if you feel so disposed. That boy has been exposed to the storm too long already.”

“We’ll have him under shelter directly,” was Case’s reply, “but we’re a thousand times obliged to you, all the same.”

“Well,” Stagg replied, “if you won’t use my shack, perhaps you won’t object to my carrying one end of the stretcher.”

“You are all right, Mr. Stagg,” said Clay, heartily. “We are a little short-handed on account of leaving two boys at the boat.”

“What was the ruction at the boat?” Case asked.

Clay burst into a ringing laugh.

“That was the funniest thing I ever saw!” he said as they set the stretcher down for a rest. “Alex, the little monkey, sneaked on board the *Rambler* when an especially hard shower came on, accompanied by thunder and lightning. Captain Joe was with him, as usual, and when they came to the window which looks out on the stern deck the parrot joined the combination.”

“Great combination, that!” laughed Case. “A boy full of mischief, a bulldog full of bites, and a parrot full of the old Nick! What happened then? Did the pirates take to the river as soon as they saw what they were up against?”

“No, they attempted to put up a fight,” replied Clay, “and what followed was a jumble of legs, arms, parrot and bulldog. The parrot screamed and the dog got in his work on the shins of the outlaws, who had laid their weapons aside in order to dry their clothing and couldn’t get them without coming in contact with

the dog.”

“Must have been very funny,” said Case. “I should have enjoyed seeing it.”

“I imagine the bandits thought the devil was after them for sure. How that parrot did scream! The racket might have been heard a mile away only for the wind and rain. How it did rain! And thunder and lightning! Say but it was fierce!”

“And where was the baby bear all this time?” Case asked. “Of course you knew that Alex adopted another bear?”

“Yes, I’m wise to the fact,” answered Clay. “Well, the cub was asleep under my coat until the fireworks started, then he took a hand in the game. It certainly was comical to see that little runt trying to eat a full-sized robber.”

The boys now continued their progress to the *Rambler*, and soon saw the cabin lights shining through the rain. As the lads neared the boat the great prow light was switched on, making everything as light as day. The rain was still falling in torrents, and the wind was blowing a hurricane.

In fact, the boys were obliged to stand pretty close together in order to make themselves heard at all.

“It’s a wonder the boys didn’t think of that prow light before,” was Case’s comment as they laid the stretcher down on the shore.

“It was out of kilter when I left the boat,” said Clay. “What is bothering me now is how to get this boy on board the boat. I don’t think we can get the boat any nearer to the land.”

“We must manage it, in some way, before long, for the lad has been exposed to the storm for a long time.”

“Why, of course we can get him over to the *Rambler*,” cut in Case. “You have only to lift the stretcher into the rowboat, then lift it out again when we reach the *Rambler*!”

“Never thought of that!” laughed Clay. “Two heads are better than one, if one is a bit thick!”

“Anything to get me out of this storm!” groaned Paul. “I don’t think I shall ever be warm again.”

While the boys were getting Paul on board the *Rambler* Stagg appeared to be very busy about the boy’s head. More than once he bent over the lad, as if trying to recognize him, but the boy was too badly beaten up for that.

At last he seemed to give it up, but there was still a look of inquiry in his eyes, and Clay referred to it.

“He acts to me like he was looking for a friend,” he said.

“He does act rather strangely,” was Case’s comment. “Still, he may be one of the curious kind.”

No more was said on the subject at that time, though Clay often wondered

if there could be any connection between the two, and also if Mr. Stagg was exactly what he seemed.

CHAPTER IV

A NIGHT ON SHORE

The boys had a hard time getting on board the *Rambler*, but it was accomplished at last, and the sufferer was soon in one of the bunks. Then the boat was headed downstream.

Mr. Stagg was left standing on the river bank in the rain. The boys invited him on board, but he explained that he was determined to “get that pesky steer before he went home.”

“It’s a wild night to be hunting for cattle,” Clay suggested as the boat was got under way, “but we all hope you’ll find it.”

“Say,” said Alex, as the boat started downstream, “do you believe the story that man told?”

“Seems like an honest fellow,” was Jule’s reply, “but one can never tell. To tell the truth, he looked to me more like an outlaw than any fellow we caught on board.”

“Pretty fierce night to be hunting cattle,” commented Alex, and the discussion was dropped.

“How far is it to the Hayes Junction?” asked Case. “We can’t get a surgeon to set that broken leg until we get there, and perhaps not then. I think I’ll study surgery, just to be ready for any emergency, when I go to college,” added the boy.

“We’ve got quite a distance to travel before we reach Hayes, and I suggest that we put in the time eating,” said Alex. “I wouldn’t want to get a regular meal,” he continued, “just a large steak and French fried potatoes, and bread and butter, and a couple of pies, and a couple of dozen doughnuts. Just a light luncheon!”

“When the time comes for you to die,” Case observed, with a wink at Jule, “you’ll die of starvation because of having swept the world slick and clear of food.”

“Go ahead and get up your light luncheon,” Jule advised. “I think I could take a little nourishment myself.”

“Oh, well, if you’re going to get up a simple luncheon like you suggest, I don’t know but I’ll take a light snack myself,” said Case, his mouth watering at

the mention of pie.

“How’ll you have the steak cooked?” asked Alex.

“When it comes to cooking steak,” Jule cut in, “I’ve got the crowd up a blind siding with fires banked.”

“That comes pretty near being slang,” Clay laughed, putting his head in at the cabin door. “I can see someone washing the supper dishes right now.”

While this conversation was going on Paul Stegman, worn out by pain and exposure, was sleeping soundly. At first the boys talked in whispers, but they soon saw that it was a useless precaution, as the roaring of the storm drowned all lesser sounds.

Nothing more was heard of the robbers at that time. The boys believed them to be tramps, and so put them out of their minds. How wrong they were in this the future will show.

The sky cleared shortly, just as the town of Hayes came into view. There was not much of the place—which was little better than a railroad crossing.

Paul still slept soundly, and the boys decided to wait until he awoke before looking over the town for a surgeon.

The steak and potatoes being done to a turn, the boys fell to with appetites sharpened by the keen air.

“Pie,” declared Alex, “is Nature’s best gift to man! There is green apple pie, dried apple pie, red apple pie, and pie-pie. Pie has all other food on its back with its tongue out!”

“When you get to pie,” Jule cut in, “you’re always due for a eulogy. If I had the appetite for pie that you have, I’d feed it to the bears! By the way,” he exclaimed, bounding up from the table, “where is Teddy, Junior? Why isn’t he out here getting filled up?”

The boy shot away like he had only a second more to live, but soon returned with the announcement that the baby bear was lying on his belly snoring “to beat the band!”

“Who’s got the job of washing the supper dishes?” asked Alex, rolling back in his chair with the air of a millionaire. “Who talked the most slang to-day?”

“Jule did,” declared Case.

“I should say not!” denied that lad. “If I could talk slang equal to Alex, I’d give the slang dictionary cards and spades and then win out! He’s got a tongue that whirls round and round like a puppy after his tail. The idea of putting me in his class!”

“In order to settle this dispute amicably,” interrupted Clay, “I propose that the boys both tackle the job. They have both been talking slang all day.”

“All right!” consented Jule. “Only you don’t want to forget and leave any pie on the plates.”

“If I had your mouth for pie—”

Alex began, but checked himself before completing the sentence—much to Jule’s disappointment.

The boys had a merry time over the dishes, and then Clay and Case went to bed, leaving Alex and Jule to watch the *Rambler* during the remainder of the night. In a short time all was still on board. The storm which had driven so fiercely against the motor boat in the early part of the night had now passed over, leaving a rim of moon in the west.

Directly Alex passed out of the cabin and stood on the deck. Jule was half asleep in the cabin.

For a time there was only the roaring of the river to break the silence. The wind had died down to a gentle breeze, and there was the scent of spring in the air.

Captain Joe came out on deck after a time and sniffed the air excitedly. In a moment he was on the railing of the boat, looking over to the west shore. Alex spoke to him, but for once his words received no attention.

“What is it, Joe?” asked the boy.

Captain Joe only wagged his stumpy tail.

“I’ll soon find out what’s doing here!” decided Alex. “How would you like a run on shore, Captain Joe?” the boy went on. “It ain’t a very swell night for a ramble, but I feel as if my legs wouldn’t be the worse for a little stretching.”

Jule was below, in the cabin, and there could be no possible harm, the boy thought, in leaving the watch to him. Therefore he took the rowboat and started for the shore, accompanied by the dog, who seemed very anxious to get to the land.

The moon was setting, but the stars were out, and the boy and the dog had little difficulty in finding their way after gaining the shore. The latter, however, after hastily sniffing the air for an instant, darted away, leaving the boy alone.

“That’s a dirty Irish trick, Captain Joe,” said the lad, doing his best to keep up with his four-footed rival. “I wonder what he sees in there, anyway?”

The dog was now lost from sight in the underbrush which lined the shore, and Alex could only whistle in an effort to secure his return. The rustle of the dead foliage was the only sound for some time, then the dog set up fierce barking.

This was very unusual for Captain Joe, who confined himself, as a rule, to a series of warning growls, and Alex quickened his steps in order that he might see what the dog was at.

All was still in the thicket penetrated by the lad, however, and it was dark as a pocket, too. There was little hope of finding the dog in that smother of shadows, so Alex reluctantly turned his steps toward the boat.

“I’d like to know what’s got into Captain Joe,” thought the boy as he made

his way back to the *Rambler*. "He certainly is acting queerly, and I don't like the looks of it."

In a few minutes he was back on the shore.

"It will be a good joke on the crazy pup to go away and leave him on the shore," thought the boy. "It will teach him better manners, anyway. Now what's that?"

"That" was a low whistle, evidently a signal. It came again in an instant, louder and clearer.

Alex listened again for the dog, but heard nothing indicating his presence. In a moment there was a rustling in the underbrush and then a man's voice asked: "Are you there, Charley?"

There was no answer, and the question was repeated. Still there was no answer. There was another movement in the bushes, and then a figure showed dimly in the starlight.

Presently the man who had given the signal was joined by two other men. They talked in low tones for a time, but gradually their voices grew louder and Alex was able to hear what was being said.

"I don't think they succeeded in getting the motor boat," the first speaker said.

"Wonder they wouldn't show a signal," commented another.

"It's a sure thing they didn't get the boat," a third man said. "If they had, you needn't be guessing."

"No, they would be holding a celebration now. Wonder why they failed? The job seemed an easy one to me—just to take a boat away from four boys."

There was further talk that Alex could not hear, then the men passed out of hearing.

"The *Rambler* seems to be in good demand," was the boy's comment. "If Captain Joe would show up now, I'd go on board and put the boys on their guard. Somehow that dog always runs away at the wrong time! Perhaps I'd better take another look for him. It doesn't seem as if he could be very far away. He needs a thumping!"

Alex made another trip through the underbrush, but no Captain Joe rewarded his search. At last the boy abandoned the quest and started for the *Rambler*.

"The boys will want to know what's going on, and the dog can be found at some other time," he reasoned. "It would serve the beast good and right to leave him in a place where he'd get hungry enough to devour his own shadow!"

When Alex reached the spot where the boat had been left it was nowhere to be seen. He got away from the locality in quick time.

The place was probably being watched. The men who had found the boat

would know very well that it couldn't walk there.

The boy slipped back in the bushes, where he was protected from observation by a rocky elevation, and waited. Presently there was the murmur of hushed voices, and then a man's form appeared, outlined against the sky, which was now showing the first faint traces of daylight.

"Wonder if the fellow who went ashore in the boat intends to make his permanent home there?" said a voice. "He certainly stays long enough to give one that impression."

"He's got to come back here after his boat, and we'll be right here, waiting for him," said another voice. "The thing that puzzles me is why the boys didn't get the motor boat upstream."

There was silence for a time, during which the three men waited for the return of the boy, who was listening to most of their talk. Directly Alex felt a cold nose thrust into the palm of his hand, he knew that Captain Joe had returned.

"You're a bad dog, going off like this!" exclaimed the boy. "What have you to say for yourself?"

The dog stretched himself at Alex's feet and offered no explanation. The matter ended, as all such matters usually did, by the boy taking the dog's head into his lap and pulling his stubby ears.

Daylight was now coming on rapidly, and Alex realized that something must be done. The least of his troubles concerned the manner of getting back to the *Rambler*.

So far as that went, he could easily swim that short distance. But the lad had no intention of going back to the boat to be laughed at.

Presently the cabin door opened and Jule made his appearance, looking as if he had had a pretty sound sleep.

The watching men crouched out of sight in the bushes, and Jule stepped to the railing of the *Rambler* and looked into the river. The sun would be in sight in half an hour and it would be a bright day.

Jule stood looking over the water for a minute and then turned and entered the cabin. Directly Clay and Case came out and the three stood at the rail talking.

"I think I know what they are saying," said Alex with a smile. "They are holding a squaw man's convention on me. It was a rotten thing to do to go and lose that boat. Perhaps I shall be lucky enough to get it back. I wish those men wouldn't watch this spot so closely. I half believe they suspect something."

Alex did not know that there were two parties watching the movements on board the *Rambler*, each party consisting of three men. One was up the river perhaps eighty rods, while the other lay on the bank of the stream only a short distance from the spot where Alex was hidden.

Directly Captain Joe arose and moved over toward the clump of bushes

where the three men lay. The chances are that he knew of their presence, and was willing to overlook it in the interest of harmony, but one of the three launched a rock at his head as he came up.

This was an insult by no means to be overlooked. In less time than it takes to tell the story, Joe had him by the throat.

All three boys on board the *Rambler*, seeing the dog struggling with superior numbers, were over the rail in an instant, striking out for the spot where the combat was in progress.

At that instant the three men who had been up the river, hearing the sounds of a conflict below, emerged from the shelter of the trees and started toward the scene of action.

Clay afterward declared that he thought Jule was left in charge of the boat, while Jule declared that Case was the responsible one. At any rate, while the boys were umpiring the fight between the dog and the man the three men plunged into the stream and made off with the *Rambler*. The boys saw their loss too late. The boat was already headed downstream.

CHAPTER V

A FRIEND IN NEED

Released from the jaws of the dog in a slightly damaged condition, the man who had been attacked started on a run for the spot where the rowboat had been concealed. Blood was streaming down his neck and throat as a result of the attentions of Captain Joe, and the fellow shook his fist wrathfully as he ran.

The next instant he was followed by the two other men, who made many threats as to what they would do to the dog if they ever came upon him again. Captain Joe looked as if he wanted to finish the job he had begun, but was restrained by Clay.

The three men were not followed by the boys, for they were too much interested in watching the men on the *Rambler*.

For once the boys were unarmed. They had leaped into the river on the spur of the moment, only half dressed, and were absolutely defenseless. They now looked at each other with faces from which every vestige of color had fled.

In the meantime the three men were making their way to the spot where the rowboat had been hidden in the thicket. Almost before they could sense what

was being done, they had pushed the boat into the water and were away in the wake of the *Rambler*.

"There goes our Rio Grande trip!" exclaimed Alex sorrowfully. "What can we do now?"

"Just our luck!" was Case's comment.

Jule said not a word, evidently thinking that no words could do justice to the occasion.

Clay remained silent for a moment, and then a smile flickered over his face as he observed:

"Well, our next stunt will be to get the boat back. No game is played out until the cards are all on the table."

"Oh, you'll get it back, all right! In a pig's wrist."

Case was almost ready to cry with anger and vexation.

"We never should have left the boat alone," he declared.

"Well, it can't be helped now," Clay suggested. "Who has any ideas to offer?"

"I would suggest that we take turns kicking each other," said Alex, wrinkling his nose. "We all deserve the boot good and plenty! Who'll be the one to begin the ceremony?"

"Cut that," remarked Clay, cheerfully. "We have no one to blame but ourselves. The first thing to do is to get into a decent suit of clothes. I presume such things can be bought here."

"Yes, but we are on the wrong side of the river," complained Case. "I would advise suicide!"

Three of the boys greeted this remark with roars of laughter, but Case was not to be coaxed out of his pessimistic mood.

"It's all right for you boys to think you'll get the *Rambler* back again, but I just know you won't!" he contended. "We'll be lucky if we catch a ride back to Chicago. Anybody in the crowd got any money? I thought not," he added as the boys all shook their heads. "Then how're you going to get any clothes or anything?"

"Say," cried Alex, in a moment, "do you know that we never got Paul Stegman off the boat?"

"I wonder if the new proprietors will get his leg set?" Case suggested. "You bet they won't! Pirates don't go around doing Red Cross stunts. Not much they don't."

"If I had your disposition," ventured Jule, with a grin to take the sting out of the remark, "I'd take it down to the river and drown it. It's a wonder it doesn't keep you awake nights."

"Come, boys, we've got to get a move on if we ever get anywhere," sug-

gested Clay. "I move that we begin operations with a morning bath. Bathing suits are barred."

The *Rambler* was now out of sight around a bend in the river, and there was no sense in longer delaying the moment of departure, so Alex plunged into the stream and was soon making his way to the other side. He was closely followed by the dog, who seemed to regret his share in the incident which had cost the boys the *Rambler*.

The boys were soon assembled on the opposite shore, and it became necessary to decide upon some course of action. It was now broad daylight, and the people of the town were already astir.

"It amounts to just this," Clay declared. "There isn't a cent in the crowd, and we are all hungry and in need of wearing apparel. There isn't even a watch or a piece of jewelry in sight. Now what's the answer? Shall we spend the time loafing about Hayes until our money gets here, or shall we make a touch and get into action at once?"

"For Heaven's sake," insisted Alex, "let's do something that will bring us something to eat. My internal machinery is about run down."

"I've been anticipating this," explained Clay, "and am in a measure prepared for it."

Alex's face brightened instantly at the thought of something to eat. Clay turned to Case with a smile.

"Give me a slice of that cold shoulder you've been turning on every suggestion made this morning," he said.

Alex shouted and Jule joined in the demonstration until early risers who were passing paused to inspect the party.

"Never again!" said Case, joining in the laughter. "From now on I'll be the first one to roar at a desperate situation. What an ass a fellow is to be always growling!"

"That's what we all think," said Alex.

No more was said on the subject, and for a time Case really did better.

"We are attracting considerable attention here," Jule remarked, glancing about at the little crowd which had already assembled. "Perhaps we would better select some less conspicuous place for our deliberations."

"Is there anything to eat there?" Alex asked, with a wrinkle in his nose which made his face look very comical. "My stomach feels like the Mammoth Cave."

Before the boys could put their plan into execution and seek a more secluded place in which to find a way out of their trouble Alex caught Clay by the arm and pointed up the street.

"Do you see anyone you know up there?" he demanded. "That man looks

like something to eat. But how did he make the distance in the storm?"

The boys looked in the direction indicated by the pointing finger and saw Rube Stagg making for them with a broad grin on his homely face.

"Say," said Alex, advancing to meet him, "if you're down here looking for brindle steers, it falls to me to tell you that there's hot a thing stirring."

Rube walked up to the boys and immediately doubled up with laughter at the figure they cut. All were sopping wet, and Clay, Case and Jule were only half dressed.

"They got your boat, did they?" he asked, after he had his laugh out. "And where are the injured lad and the baby bear?"

"Gone down the river with the boat," was the reply.

"Too bad, too bad!" mused Rube. "I see," he added, whimsically, "that you saved the bulldog."

As if in recognition of the mention, Captain Joe advanced to Rube's side and laid a wet nose in his hand.

The dog seemed to know that something was amiss, but could not tell what it was. The *Rambler* was not in sight, and he could not understand that.

"Look here, man," Alex remarked, with a prodigious grin, "have you got any mazuma? I refer to coin of the realm, skads, you know."

"The men who robbed you of your boat also got your money, did they?" and Rube went into another paroxysm of laughter.

"I don't see anything funny about the situation," frowned Case. "Here we are, half naked in the street, with Paul Stegman, who may be dying for want of medical attention, away on the river, no one knows where. I call it rotten!"

"I ask your pardon, young feller," came the quick answer, "but there's no harm in a laugh where no harm is intended. Now, what was it this freckle-faced kid said about money?"

"Oh, yes, money! I didn't know as there was any left in the world. Have you really got some?"

And the boy regarded Rube with a stare of disbelief.

"I had good luck selling my oxen, and therefore am moderately well hooked up. How much do you want, son?"

By way of showing that he was both willing and able to supply all their present needs, Rube extracted a wad of bank notes from his pocket that would have, in the language of Alex, "choked a cow."

"Whoop-ee!" shouted that young man. "Lead me to the fodder! Lead me to it!"

"First," began Clay, "tell us whether we can send a message from this place. We've got to catch the *Rambler*, you know."

The man took a ponderous silver watch from his pocket and consulted it

before replying.

“The telegraph office will open in exactly forty minutes,” he said, snapping it shut. “Do we eat first? You see,” he continued, “I was broken of my rest last night, and it always makes me hungry to lie awake.”

“There’s a place down the street that looks like something to eat,” and Alex shot ahead to investigate.

Several men who had been following the little party now came forward.

“Say, stranger,” a man who appeared to be the leader said, “if you’ll step aside and answer a few questions, I’ll take it as a favor on your part. A bank was robbed of \$100,000 by a man answering your description—red head and all. The robbery was pulled off Monday night.”

CHAPTER VI

ALEX GETS A SQUARE MEAL

“And you think I turned the trick?” asked Rube.

“I don’t think anything about it,” was the answer, in an unpleasant tone of voice. “I just asked you to step aside for a minute so I could find out. If you get gay, I’ll have to put the irons on you—just for luck.”

“See here, stranger, if you ever get irons on me, you’ll have to put up a fight for it,” Rube remarked with a scowl. “And,” he continued, “I may as well tell you right now that I’m not here to answer any fool questions.”

Both men drew revolvers at the same instant, and would have used them had Clay not stepped in between them.

“There goes my beefsteak,” Alex whispered to Jule. “Our good thing will be in the village lockup in about half a second.”

“Just our luck!” declared Case.

“Gentlemen,” began Clay, but he was stopped by a man who came pushing his way through the crowd impetuously.

“None of that, gentlemen,” he drawled. “If I want any shooting done, I’ll do it myself. What seems to be the trouble?”

“I don’t see where you get cards in this game,” sneered a bystander.

“I can tell you where this man was last night,” put in Alex, who was resolved not to lose his steak. “He was up the river about thirty miles helping four boys load a wounded boy on a motor boat.”

“What of that?” demanded the spokesman of the party. “Last night wasn’t Monday night.”

“That’s so,” said Alex, looking very much ashamed, “it was Tuesday night. Pardon me.”

“Where’s the wounded boy and the motor boat?” inquired a man who stood in the crowd.

“Yes, where be they?” asked another. “I fail to see any motor boat, or boat of any kind, with them. In fact, I know that they came swimming up to the landing like a lot of dock rats. I’m in favor of locking the whole bunch up.”

“Do it, Mr. Officer,” urged several men in the crowd.

The constable stepped forward as if to make the arrest, but the man who had spoken against any shooting, offering to do it himself, if any was done, stepped in front of him.

He was an alert looking fellow, with a businesslike air which seemed to proclaim that he would be as good as his word.

“You heard what I said about doing the shooting myself if any was started,” he said, with a drawl. “I’m from Missouri and you’ve got to show me.”

“What kind of a bluff is this, anyway?” demanded the constable, but he put up his weapon, as if he had decided not to call the bluff at that time.

“I’m looking for that steak,” suggested Alex, wrinkling his nose. “When does it come?”

“I’m Buck Eldred,” announced the man with a businesslike air, “and I know this man,” pointing to the giant of a man, with a smile on a clean-cut face, “just as well as if I had helped wheel the dirt to make him. Anybody in the crowd that knows Buck Eldred?”

No one seemed to know Buck Eldred, and the chances for a battle seemed very good. At that moment, however, an interruption took place which put an entirely different face on the incident.

A posse of officers came in from the East with the man who had robbed the bank in custody.

Instantly there was a friendly sentiment, and the men who had denounced the boys in savage terms could not do enough for them.

To all such offers, however, the boys turned deaf ears.

“We might have had a load of beefsteak by now,” said Alex, “that a dog couldn’t bite through. Just wait until I get to the table and watch my motions.”

“You’ll be there directly,” said Rube, with a chuckle. “I feel as if I could enjoy a snack myself.”

The tavern sought by the men seemed to be the best in the town, but that was not saying much. However, it was neat and clean, and the steaks were soon sizzling over the coals.

“Will you tell me how you got down the river so soon?” Clay asked as soon as the first edge was off the appetites. “We leave the Point, get here in time to have our boat stolen, and then we run across you. How did you make it? We haven’t been here over two hours, and you show up like a Christmas present—all the more welcome because unexpected.”

“Now, son, just remember this: It ain’t all the questions that are asked that are answered. What you don’t find out you can’t repeat. And there you are.”

“I didn’t mean to be inquisitive,” answered Clay, with a flush of vexation. “It is none of my business how you got here, so long as you are here.”

“Now don’t misunderstand me,” continued Rube, in an apologetic tone, which seemed to be something new for him. “There’s reasons for keeping my mouth closed tighter’n a drum. Enough that I got here in time to help you out with a little cash, which you may return at any time most convenient.”

“Thank you for the loan,” replied Clay. “I hope to return it almost immediately—just as soon, in fact, as we hear from Chicago.”

No more was said on the subject at that time. The boys were busy plying their knives and forks, and, the meal over, there was the visit to the telegraph office and then the search for the *Rambler* was begun.

To tell the truth, the fate of Paul Stegman troubled the lads not a little. They had no idea what disposition the robbers would make of him. They might toss him overboard, and they might leave him to die of his wounds. It would be just as the mood seized them.

There was no news of the *Rambler* at first. The boys were becoming discouraged when a telegram from a point thirty miles down the river gave them courage.

A boat answering the description of the *Rambler* was anchored off the mouth of a small creek which ran into the Rio Grande just below the Mexican line.

“Of course it’s the *Rambler*!” shouted Case. “No other boat looks like the *Rambler*. Wonder what’s been going on since we left the boat? Seems like a week.”

“How are we going to get to her?” inquired Jule. “Thirty miles is a long distance—when you have to swim.”

“And the robbers may be up and away long before we are anywhere near them,” Alex cut in. “Is there a boat of any kind that we might borrow, beg or steal in the town?”

“There ought to be,” Clay contributed hopefully. “This is a river town, and there ought to be plenty of boats in sight.”

“Can we get one that will speed up?” asked Case.

“That’s to be found out,” said Clay.

"I hope we find Paul Stegman all right," Case said, rather dubiously. "It would be just like the robbers to pitch him overboard. Their time of reckoning will come."

A search of the town revealed nothing available in the boat line. There were rowboats and skiffs in plenty, but not a thing in the line of a motor boat.

"We've just got to get down to the Mexican line, and get there in jig time," declared Alex. "The baby bear needs my care."

"That's poetry," Jule announced. "Baby bear needs my care. It scans, too. First thing you know, Alex, you'll be selling your verses at the rate of a dollar a yard."

Alex grinned, but made no reply.

"I wonder where Rube and Buck Eldred took themselves off to?" asked Case in a moment. "They seem to have mysteriously disappeared."

"Here they come now!" cried Jule.

The two men came from the direction of the river, only higher up than the boys had penetrated. They now approached the lads with their faces wreathed in smiles.

"Got a boat, boys?" Buck asked.

"Not so you could notice it," Alex answered.

"See here, kids," Buck went on, "Rube here has been telling me something of your story, and we've decided to make common cause against the pirates. How will that suit you?"

"Fine!" cried Alex.

The other boys were equally frank in their pleasure at the announcement, and Buck went on.

"Now, we've got a little motor boat down the river which—"

The man got no farther than that.

The boys set up such a hubbub that it was impossible to hear a thing. They ended by giving three cheers and a tiger for Rube and Buck.

"This is great!" exclaimed Clay.

"Great is no name for it!" Alex declared. "Say, fellows, in order to celebrate this event properly, we ought to have another beefsteak. This good news makes me hungry."

"I'd like to see something that wouldn't make you want to eat. You certainly have a whale of an appetite," was Clay's comment.

"I know what I'd like right now," Alex went on, regardless of the laughter of Buck and Rube, "and that is a 'possum pie. I can see myself on board the *Rambler*, feasting on one right now."

"That's all right, but you're not on board the *Rambler* yet," Case complained. "We're a long ways from it, worse luck!"

"That reminds me that I haven't had anything to eat in about two hours," said Rube, with a grin, "and that it is about time we met at the festive board."

"But how are you going to get a meal cooked in the middle of the forenoon?" asked Buck. "It strikes me that the cooks will be busy at this time. Better wait until noon."

"Not much," laughed Alex, with a prodigious wrinkling of his nose. "Not when I've got a man back of me that stands six feet and a half in his stocking feet!"

"Go to it," said Clay, with a grin. "If this thing keeps on you'll swell up and burst."

"I guess I'll take a chance on bursting myself," announced Jule. "Two bust-ups won't make any more noise than one, and no more mess, either." The three started away toward the tavern, while the others set out to walk to the motor boat, which was some distance away.

"Tell you what I think," Buck observed, as they passed a clothing store where about everything was sold from handkerchiefs to threshing machines, "you boys have been walking the street undressed about long enough. I'll buy you good suits if you'll come inside. You won't make any hit with the natives by going around in that rig."

Clay looked down at his scanty apparel and laughed. The suit did look inappropriate for use on the street.

"All right," said the boy. "If you want to take chances on losing your investment, go ahead."

"How do you know that you'll ever get the money back?" asked Case. "Perhaps we only borrowed the *Rambler* and turned it over to the owners here."

"You didn't borrow the faces you have, did you?" answered Buck, with a smile. "If you ever set out to be robbers, you've got to get new faces."

"You may be mistaken in regard to the faces," replied Clay. "You can never tell by the looks of a porcupine how far he can throw his quills. What is that man looking at?"

He certainly was as evil-faced a fellow as one could come upon in a day's walk.

CHAPTER VII

STOLEN—A MOTOR BOAT

"I've seen that face before, unless I am much mistaken," was the reply. "It must be Mad Rowell, a person who just thinks he's the toughest man that ever came down the pike."

The boys were in the store by this time with a meager supply of clothing in front of them. Mad Rowell was evidently looking for trouble. He kept his evil eyes fixed upon the party in an effort to stare them out of countenance.

"This looks like a mix-up with the fellow," whispered Case. "I wish I had my gun with me."

"No need of a gun, son," was the reply. "You wouldn't get a chance to use it if you had it," with a quick motion toward a breast pocket.

"Hands up!"

The command was given in the usual tone, but Mad Rowell obeyed instantly. His hand, already bringing a weapon from his pocket, dropped to his side, the weapon clattering to the floor.

By this time the store was in confusion. Customers were getting out of range in any way they could.

They were hiding under counters, and rushing to the door in a panic which threatened to depopulate the place of business.

"Leave the gun where it is," came the voice of Buck.

His tone was low and musical, but there was a glitter in his smiling eyes which commanded obedience.

The fellow stood sullenly awaiting the next move.

"I ought to fill you full of lead," went on the voice, "but I can't find it in my heart to shoot such a low-down coyote as you. Got another gun on you?"

The man shook his head.

"I'll find that out for myself, I reckon. Cattle like you ain't to be trusted."

When the search had progressed as far as the pistol pocket a wicked looking knife was discovered.

"You cur!" said Buck. "I make you a present of your life, and this is the way I'm paid."

The blow which followed the remark had nothing to break its force. Mad Rowell was lifted clear of the floor by the force of it, whirled around a couple of times, and fell unconscious to the top of a heap of green wood.

Then Buck turned to the counter and proceeded with his bargaining as if nothing had occurred. Gradually the customers returned to the store, but not until Buck and the boys had made their purchases and left the store was there any comment whatever.

Then opinions, both for and against the unknown man who had dealt with the man known as Mad Rowell so summarily were heard.

"Served him good and right," said the storekeeper, lifting the fallen tough

in his arms and throwing him out of doors. "The fellow has run this town too long already."

And that was the general sentiment, though Rowell had his friends too.

Clay and Case, clothed in new suits, proceeded on their way to where the motor boat had been secreted.

"Tell you what," Buck suggested, "I think some of us had better remain on the spot, in case prowlers should take a fancy to the *Esmeralda*. Nice name, eh? Named for an old sweetheart."

"Who'll be the one to stay?" asked Clay, looking keenly at his chum. "You know the money was ordered in my name from Chicago, and no one else can receipt."

"That puts it up to me, I take it," Case replied. "Have you any idea when the other boys will be along?"

"When Alex gets full to the neck," replied Clay. "If you want to see an eating contest that is a corker, just get Alex and Jule pitted against each other."

Alex seemed to be a long time getting "full to the neck," and Buck and Clay finally left for the town, leaving Case to watch the boat.

When they reached the tavern there seemed to be nothing unusual going on. There were no people standing about, and everything appeared normal and in place.

"Now, I wonder where the boys and Rube are?" Clay said. "They ought to be here, making a noise!"

The two found no one in the front of the house, so they made bold to invade the kitchen. Before they reached that apartment, however, they heard Alex's voice. They stopped and listened.

"And you take a fat 'possum and fix it up for the pan," he was saying, "and when you've done that, take strips of fat pork and lay them lengthwise through the dressing. Oh, yes, about the dressing! I didn't tell you how to fix that, did I?"

Clay was so full of laugh that he exploded right there.

"Tell the cook about the sweet potatoes!" he reared, half choking with laughter. "Perhaps you'll make a pretty good cook of him before we have to leave the town."

Alex opened the kitchen door and looked out.

"Oh, you!" he said with a broad grin.

Then he caught sight of the new suit worn by Clay and looked toward Jule with a wrinkling of the nose.

"Don't you wish you'd been present when they were passing 'em around?" he said. "Now go away and let me continue my lesson to the cook. He got up a peach of a steak for us, and I'm giving him a few instructions to guide him in future years. Go away, now, and leave us alone. Skedaddle!"

The cook was black as the ace of spades, and was evidently a native of the South. He stood by the cook stove with a broad grin on his face. If he knew a lot about roasting 'possums that Alex had never heard of, he said not a word about it!

Rube sat in the corner of the room holding his sides.

"You sure take the whole bakery!" was his comment.

"Perhaps you don't think I can cook a 'possum?" Alex announced. "Well, just you bring on your 'possum, and I'll show you that I can! The idea!"

This was greeted with a burst of laughter.

"All right!" declared Alex, "just you bring on your 'possum! I'll show you a thing about cooking the bird!"

"There isn't a 'possum within a thousand miles!" roared Buck.

"Now, don't yo' make too sho' o' dat!" grinned the cook. "Yo' sho' got to show me!"

The cook went to a woodshed just outside the door and produced about the fattest 'possum ever seen.

Immediately there was commotion in that little kitchen.

Alex bounced up and down like a rubber ball, while Jule showed his excitement by rolling over and over on the floor.

"The cook called your bluff!" shouted Buck.

"Think that was a bluff?" asked Alex.

The lad took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves.

"I'm going to make good right now!" he explained.

The cook looked nervous about turning the 'possum over to Alex. He finally made up his mind that the boy couldn't make much of a failure of the cookery with him there looking on, so he permitted him to go ahead. Buck looked dubious and Rube only laughed.

"Now you fellows get out of the kitchen!" ordered Alex. "How do you think I can cook this 'possum with you standing around? When the meal is ready to serve, I'll tell you."

"You don't think of eating again, do you?" asked Clay.

"Do you think I'm going to miss that 'possum? Not much, I ain't! No, sir, that 'possum's going to be cooked, and cooked right! Then it'll be eaten right!"

The two boys left the kitchen, accompanied by Buck and Rube, leaving Alex and the cook to do business with the 'possum.

After leaving the tavern Clay and Jule went to the railroad station, hoping to find a money order there. They were doubly disappointed. Not only was there no money for them, but that was not a money-order office.

"Now what?" asked Jule as they turned away from the little station house. "This seems to be one of our lucky trips. Anything else likely to happen?"

“Tell you what I’d do if I was in your place,” advised Rube. “I’d let the consarned money go and borrow enough to see me through to El Paso. That’s the way I look at it.”

“That’s what you’d better do,” said Buck.

“Guess we’ll be obliged to,” Clay said in a disgusted tone.

“Why didn’t the clerk tell us that it wasn’t a money-order office at first?” demanded Jule.

“Perhaps he didn’t know,” laughed Buck. “There’s sometimes a heap o’ ignorance connected with these way stations.”

“I should say so!” agreed Jule.

“Now who shall we borrow of?” asked Clay.

By way of an answer Rube took the roll of bank notes from his pocket and began stripping them off.

“How much did you say you wanted?” he asked. “Better take enough for emergencies while you have the chance. I may be broke flat as a flounder by to-morrow.”

“This will give us a chance to get away at once,” said Clay, placing the money in his pocket. “If Alex was here, we could be on our way immediately.”

Jule broke into a laugh at the idea of prying Alex away from that ’possum.

“You’ll not do it,” he announced, “as long as there is a bone left. Alex is some feeder.”

“There’s no hurry,” Buck said, looking at his watch. “The men who stole the boat will lie in hiding all day and go on at night. They will be on the lookout for officers, and will do a lot of skulking. They may even abandon the boat for a time, but they will come back to it.”

“And they may put up a fight,” Jule argued. “For one, I’d like nothing better than taking a shot at them.”

“They won’t do much in the fighting line,” Buck contended. “It all depends on how many of us there are. There seems to be four of them and they won’t stand for more than that in the attacking party. You see,” he added, “there’s the Colorado penitentiary in sight, and they’ll make a desperate run to keep out of it.”

“But they may fight,” suggested Clay.

“Oh, of course,” answered Buck, “but we’ll be on the spot, ready and waiting for them.”

It seemed to the waiting boys that there never was such a long day. Alex, of course, had his ’possum to attend to.

When served at dinner the ’possum was declared to be the best ever. Rich and juicy, and done to a turn, it left nothing to be desired.

The cook declared on his word of honor he had not even made a suggestion

regarding the cooking of the dainty.

“Ah sure don’t need to,” he insisted, “for dat lad he know all there is to know ’bout cookin’ ’possum! ’Deed he do!”

This endorsement was music to Alex’s ears, and he tried hard to accept it modestly. His three chums knew, of course, his skill in the culinary line, but there were Rube and Buck who had to be shown.

Case had been relieved of his watch at the boat in order that he might join the boys at dinner, and immediately after the meal was served started away to resume his guardianship, accompanied by Jule.

Alex and Clay remained with Rube and Buck, who had provisions to buy. They did not know how long the chase might be, and were determined to be prepared for it.

After making their purchases they set out for the motor boat, but were met halfway by Case and Jule with the statement that the boat had been stolen while the ’possum was being discussed.

CHAPTER VIII

ALEX CLIMBS A TREE

The boys looked into faces which had lost the ruddy tinge of health. For a second not a word was spoken.

Then Clay laughed. This seemed to set the pace for the men, for they all laughed in unison.

Then Case grew sober.

“I had a grumble at the end of my tongue,” he said, “but Clay’s laugh made me forget it. What’s the next move?”

“Find the boat,” contributed Buck. “As we don’t know which way they went, we’ll split the party, and go in both directions. They can’t be very far away.”

“They went upstream,” said Alex. “I had a seat at the table from which the river was in sight, and I’m positive that no motor boat passed in the other direction.”

“Still, one might have gone downstream when you were otherwise engaged,” replied Buck. “I’ve noticed that boys have a habit of overlooking many things when the ’possum is cooked just right.”

Alex grinned but made no comment.

"This is some of Mad Rowell's work," said Rube, as the party passed on upstream.

"You bet it is," Case added. "Twice I thought I saw him in the underbrush, but finally decided that it was my imagination working overtime. I wish now that I had investigated."

"If Mad Rowell knows how to operate a motor boat," said Buck, "the chances are against us. That boat can go some!"

The party advanced up the stream half a mile or more without seeing anything in the shape of a motor boat.

"Hopeless case, I reckon," suggested Rube. "It strikes me that we are only wasting time. We should have gone directly to the village and used the wire.

The man had hardly ceased speaking when an exclamation from Jule attracted the attention of all in the party.

"There she is!"

It was indeed true. The *Esmeralda* lay rocking in the river some distance farther upstream. Mad Rowell was nowhere in view from where the party stood. The boat was, however, on the opposite bank of the river.

Buck appeared lost in a brown study for a moment, and then he said, speaking in his usual drawl:

"This may be an ambush."

"If they ever got one of us into the river, they could fill him so full of lead that he'd sink of his own weight," Clay went on. "The thing to do now is for all to take to the water at once. They can't kill all of us!"

"They might do even that," put in Rube, "but it seems that we have to risk it. I wish I had my two hands on the man who is responsible for this!"

"Well, what's the decision?" asked Case.

"Yes," answered Alex, "who's ready for a cold bath?"

"If there's anything I just love to do," laughed Jule, "it is to go swimming. This water is fine!"

"Suppose we all strip?" suggested Case, who did not care to get his new suit wet.

"Then we'll have to leave someone on this side to watch the clothes," said Jule. "That will be a good job for me."

"In a pig's wrist," Case said. "We'll draw lots to see who stays behind."

Fate decided in favor of Alex, much to the disgust of that young man, who was really anxious to try conclusions with the men who had stolen the boat. He tried his best to get a substitute, but did not succeed, and so was obliged to sit idly on the bank of the stream while the others took to the water.

"Come on in. The water's fine!" taunted Jule.

Notwithstanding the optimism of Jule, the water was wretchedly cold. At that time, however, the people in the stream were too much occupied with other matters to pay any attention to the temperature of the water.

They spread out in the shape of a fan and made for the opposite shore with no thought of the chill of the water. When at last their feet struck the shelving shore, they kept the old formation.

To their great surprise there was no one in or about the boat. They advanced cautiously, not knowing when they might be attacked.

They did not see the evil face of Mad Rowell peering out upon them from a clump of underbrush. As a matter of fact, the man had been caught off his guard.

He had gone back down the river looking for an old crony to keep him company in the journey he proposed to take. He had returned to the *Esmeralda* just a minute too late.

This accounted for the boat being in such good condition. If Rowell had abandoned it, it is a sure thing that he would have broken the motor and done other damage which would have made its use impossible, for a time at least.

If Rowell had been possessed of a revolver, the chances are that he would have taken a shot at Buck, but, it will be remembered, his weapon had been taken from him at the store.

So, weaponless as he was, the tough was obliged to see the *Esmeralda* taken away by its owner. He resolved, however, to "get even" at the first opportunity.

"Now, what do you know about this?" demanded Clay, looking over the boat critically. "The motor is in fine form, and I can't see a thing the matter anywhere."

Rube pointed to the place where the rowboat had been kept.

"The skiff is not here," he remarked, "and it looks like they had gone away in it."

By this time all the boys were shivering, so they made a hasty departure for the other shore. When only a few yards away they observed Captain Joe acting in a suspicious manner, and turned on more electricity.

"What's that fool dog up to?" asked Case.

There was quite a commotion on shore, and the boys did not wait to see that the *Esmeralda* was anchored, but sprang into the river and swam ashore. When they reached solid ground neither Alex nor the dog was in sight. And neither were the clothes!

"Well, of all the——"

Clay stopped right there. All he could say did not half express the situation.

A few articles of clothing were scattered about, but they did not represent the five suits which had been left there only a short time before. In fact, a good share of the clothes had disappeared.

The shivering lads gathered on the river bank and pondered over the new turn of affairs until joined by Rube and Buck.

"Where's your boy who was watching the clothes?" asked Buck. "I don't seem to see him anywhere about!"

"And where's your dog?" demanded Rube.

"Blessed if I know what's been going on here!" exclaimed Case, his teeth rattling as with the ague.

"Oh, this is a bad dream," declared Jule. "Turn over and get off your back! You'll be dreaming of pie in a minute!"

"I wish I had any old thing to put on," grumbled Case.

"You know what Eve did when she found herself naked?" remarked Jule. "She made an apron of fig leaves."

"Bring on your fig leaves!" ordered Clay. "Here, waiter, one order of fig leaves."

"Something must be done at once," declared Rube. "I'm that cold that life in an ice house would be a pleasant recreation!"

A movement was now heard in the underbrush which lined the shore of the stream, and Captain Joe made his appearance.

The dog was greeted with exclamations of disgust.

"Come here, you mongrel cur!" shouted Case, at the same time making a rush for the canine. "What did you do with our clothes?"

Captain Joe wagged his quarter of a tail and said in his best dog talk that he would show them later.

"Where's Alex?" asked Case, talking to the dog as if he had the gift of speech.

Captain Joe climbed up on his questioner, much to the latter's annoyance, he being nearly naked, and made further demonstrations which said in plain dog talk that he knew what was being said, but considered it beneath his dignity to make reply.

"You're a naughty dog, and you shan't have a bit of supper," threatened Case.

Captain Joe got down from his elevated position and walked with great dignity toward the fringe of trees which grew along the east shore of the stream.

"He wants us to follow him," Clay declared, "but how are we going to do it? The wild men of Borneo have us beaten to a frazzle when it comes to clothes."

"It seems as if we might get one good suit out of this mess," Clay said. "Who'll be the man to try?"

"It seems to me that we all ought to be getting a move on," said Jule. "For all we know, Alex may be having all kinds of trouble. We appear to be children of fortune this trip! Everything comes our way—in a horn!"

It was finally agreed that Jule should remain at the *Esmeralda*, and that the others should follow the dog, who was still hanging around, in the hope that some of the boys might follow him.

When they reached the fringe of trees which stood along the shore of the river, Clay paused and doubled up with laughter.

Alex was in sight—up a tree.

There was a bear at the foot of the tree—a bear that evidently thought he had a cinch on the boy—a Colorado mountain bear, small but fierce. And Alex was playing a mouth organ with all the energy he possessed for the benefit of the bear!

The boys laughed until their sides ached before attempting any interference. Only for the fact that the wind was blowing from the east, while the place where the clothes had been deposited was to the west of that point, the noise of Alex's shouting for assistance and the music of the organ might have been heard from the first.

The bear moved away sullenly, taking an extra swipe at a pair of Buck's trousers as he did so. He had evidently scented the clothing during a temporary absence of Alex and began work on them.

"What you doing up that tree?" Clay called out, as he approached the spot, from which Alex was now descending. "We left you guarding the clothes."

"He had to entertain the bear, didn't he?" put in Case. "Bears just love music."

"Where was your automatic?" asked Rube, breaking into another fit of laughter at the general appearance of the party.

Buck had succeeded in finding a vest and a pair of drawers, Rube was dressed in an undershirt and a pair of trousers, Clay wore a ruined sweater and a pair of trousers, while Case sported about in a coat and trousers and a soft felt hat.

"The bear made new business for the merchant," laughed Clay. "How's your money holding out, Rube? Big contract you took when you set out to supply this bunch with clothes!"

"Don't you worry about the money," Rube answered. "I've got a roll that would choke a cow yet."

The man suddenly clapped his hand to his side with an anxious look and brought it away empty.

"Well, I'll be—"

He never completed the sentence, but dashed off in the direction of the place where the clothes had been.

Alex had remained silent under all the chaffing to which he had been subjected. Now, however, with an exclamation of dismay he started away after Rube.

“What’s coming off?” asked Buck.

“Blessed if I know,” answered Clay.

“I’ll bet that Rube has lost his money!”

It was Clay who made the remark, and it served to set both boys and Buck in motion.

“This a fine trip, I don’t think!” grumbled Case, as they ran for the spot where the clothing had been left.

When the party gained the spot they had so recently left, neither Jule nor the *Esmeralda* was in sight!

“Where’s the boat, and where’s Jule?” demanded Buck. “We appear to be having the time of our lives!”

“Well,” said Clay, “the boat got away, not being anchored, and Jule set out to catch it. The time of our lives, well, I should say so! Did you find the roll. Rube?”

Rube, who was down on the ground turning over everything in sight, looked up with a comical grin on his face.

“Say,” he said, with a chuckle, “if we don’t find that roll, we’ve got someone to lay it to. Eh? We can charge it to the bear!”

“You may charge our present plight to me!” Alex said. “If I hadn’t laid my automatic aside for a minute, I might have killed the bear, and all these complications never would have happened.”

“It was to be!” observed Clay.

“You bet it was!” Case added.

“You just say that to make me feel better,” Alex replied, almost in tears. “I’m a blunderer, anyhow.”

“We wouldn’t know what to do without you!” responded Case, tapping the boy on the shoulder. “Now, brace up. Things have got to change for the better before long!”

At that instant they saw Jule walking dejectedly up the river.

“I don’t see any boat with him,” Case commented.

CHAPTER IX

THE RAMBLER HEARD FROM

“He’s got the motor boat in his pocket—perhaps!” Clay said, dejectedly. “We’ll

have to walk back to Chicago, I take it! Well, we may as well laugh as cry, so here goes for the merry side of things. It might be worse, you know!”

“I fail to see how it could be much worse,” Case observed. “We are shy clothes and everything! Right now we look like a lot of monkeys dancing about in the forest!”

Jule was by this time within hailing distance, and Buck called out to him, asking where the boat was. For answer the boy pointed down the river.

“I knew it!” said Case, with a shiver.

“How did it happen?” asked Buck.

“It drifted away,” replied Jule, when he came within speaking distance, “but some men down the river caught it. It will be up here in a few minutes.” “Whoop-ee!” shouted Case.

“I’ve got a picture of our walk back to Chicago!” Clay exclaimed, dancing about in his ruined sweater and trousers. “Not yet—not for your Uncle Zeke!”

“Why didn’t you get into the boat and ride up?” asked Buck.

“There was no place to land,” was the reply. “There comes the boat now, with three men aboard of her.”

“I give it up,” declared Rube, rising to his feet. “At the present time if cows were selling for a cent apiece, the whole party couldn’t buy a piece of cheese an inch in size!”

“Don’t you be too sure about that!”

And Jule took the missing roll from a pocket in his shirt and presented it to the owner. The moment of blank amazement over, the boys placed the roll of money on the ground, and, joining hands, circled around it until they were all out of breath.

“I found it on the ground where the bear left it,” said the boy in explanation. “Wasn’t he a good, kind bear to leave anything at all?” he added, whimsically.

“How do you know there was any bear?” demanded Case. “The fix the clothes were in might have been the work of mischievous boys, for all you knew.”

“Not much,” Jule replied. “Boys wouldn’t have a nest in that hollow tree, would they? And boys wouldn’t be sliding down, and raking the bark off the tree, would they?”

“Then you knew just what we were to meet?” demanded Clay.

“I thought Alex had been caught without his automatic, and that the bear had chased him away,” answered Jule.

“That’s exactly what happened,” said Alex. “The bear came out of the tree and I had to run for it. When I got to the tree I found the bear close to my heels. I think he would have got me only for the mouth organ. How I did long for my automatic!”

“Why didn’t you run while the bear was attending to the clothing?” asked

Rube, who was so glad to get his money back that his face wore a chronic and perpetual grin.

“To tell the truth,” replied Alex, with a sly smile, “I wasn’t here when the brute showed up! I was away on a little trip of my own. Now you have the whole story.”

“Well,” said Rube, “as we have to make another trip to the village, and it’s getting along toward the middle of the afternoon, perhaps we’d better be deciding who’s to go. We can’t all go in the rigs we have on, that’s a sure thing. The bear didn’t leave us too many clothes—not enough to hurt any.”

“I’ve got an idea!” suggested Alex. “It will save us a trip to town and, at the same time, expedite matters. What’s the matter with my going to the burg and buying for us all?”

“Well, if you’ll promise not to follow off any bears; that’s the ticket!” said Buck.

“The bears are likely to follow Alex off!” laughed Case.

The motor boat now dropped anchor in front of where the boys were standing, and the party was subjected to no end of “roasting” because of their disreputable appearance.

“Looks like the Garden of Eden!” roared the man who seemed to be in charge. “Where are your clothes?” he went on. “If I was the proprietor of that layout, I’d be looking around for a rag man!”

“The bear caught sight of our clothes first,” Clay answered. “Got time to take one of the boys back to the store?” he asked. “As you see, we are in need of clothes.”

“I should say so!” replied the other.

The story was soon told, and the men were off for the town in a hurry. For once, Alex did the job of buying the clothes as it should have been done, and was soon on his way back to the boys.

As he understood the motor thoroughly, it was not necessary for the boatmen to return with him. They left him with many expressions of good will, and many admonitions to give all members of the bear family a wide berth in future.

It was fortunate that the provisions purchased by Buck and Rube were intact, they having been hidden in a separate place.

The clothes fitted all the boys very well indeed, but Rube, owing to what Alex called “his length of beam,” was forced to don a suit about a foot too large for him and a foot too short.

“These clothes are all right, only they don’t fit!” said Rube, looking down at his protruding legs. “They fit me too quick the long way, and they are about the size of an elephant the short way.”

“You shouldn’t notice it!” volunteered Alex. “If this thing keeps on, you’ll

be short in your bank account.”

“How much is there left in that roll?” asked Clay.

“Now, don’t you worry about the roll wasting away,” replied Rube, “for there’s more where that came from.”

“Glad to know it—we may want to make another touch!” was Alex’s reply. “We’re pretty deep in that roll now, if anybody should ask you,” he added, with a wink at Jule.

“Now, see here,” Rube responded, “don’t you ever think I take any chance whatever in losing this money. You boys haven’t said a word to me about how you are hooked up! We’ve been too busy for that. But don’t you ever suspect that I don’t know. You haven’t mentioned any names, except Clay, Alex, Case and Jule, but I read all about you and the *Rambler* in a Chicago newspaper, and the minute you referred to the *Rambler* I had you located.”

“It seems that we are getting notorious,” suggested Clay. “We can’t make a move that some newspaper don’t record.”

“Lucky for you that it is so,” Rube continued.

“Why is it lucky for us?” demanded Jule, interrupting.

“Well,” Rube went on, “when you picked up Paul Stegman last night in the rain, and began talking about the *Rambler* and Captain Joe, I had you sized up. So when Buck came down the river in his motor boat, I got aboard, thinking you kids might need a little lookin’ after. Now you’ve got the whole story.”

“And so, without knowing it, we had a bodyguard from the time we rescued Paul from the river?” Case interrupted. “It was mighty good of you both.”

“I wonder how Paul is faring?” Clay suggested.

“Oh, the boat thieves probably threw him overboard,” Case declared. “I’d like to wring their necks!”

“Now,” Rube said, “I’ve got a hunch that you boys are able to look out for yourselves, so I’ll ride as far as the *Rambler* and quit you there. I have a little work to do for myself. If you are as level-headed in future as you have shown yourselves to be in the past, you won’t need any watching.”

“How do you know we’ll catch the *Rambler*?” asked Jule.

“I’m just supposing a case,” replied Rube with a grin.

“You just bet we’ll catch her!” Alex contributed. “And when we get her next time, we’ll keep her. This chasing after boats all the time ain’t what it’s cracked up to be.”

It was late in the afternoon when the *Esmeralda* got under way, just as Clay had planned. A close watch was kept on both shores as the boat proceeded downstream.

Naturally, the *Rambler* would take the easiest course, which was downstream, but for this very reason the boys decided to search every foot of water

until they came to it. As soon as it was dark enough, the thieves might seek to baffle pursuit by heading up the river.

At last darkness settled down on the water. Had the night been made to order it could not have served the purpose of the boys better. If the *Rambler* had crept into some hiding place along the stream her lights would show them where she lay.

In case her lights were not burning and her motors were not running it would be a difficult thing to locate the boat, and for this reason the *Esmeralda* was kept slowed down.

From the first Clay had not believed the story told by Rube. He might be interested in a ranch, and Clay did not doubt that he was, but that was not the reason for his appearance on the scene just at that time. The boy did not care to make himself disliked by prying too openly into the affairs of the others, yet he was positive that there was a hidden motive back of the one reason given.

Clay talked the matter over with the other boys, but could not reach a satisfactory conclusion.

"Perhaps he's an officer," suggested Jule.

"In that case," replied Clay, "he would be apt to know some of the other officers."

"From first to last," answered Jule, "we haven't met a single man who has shown any authority. I guess he's just helping out for the fun he's getting out of it."

"And Buck? What about him?" asked Case.

"Give it up, boys," cried Alex. "You're all tangled up now, and the more you guess the more you'll get tangled."

The *Esmeralda* slipped downstream with no lights in sight. Whenever they came to a long stretch of river the motor was set in motion, but ordinarily it remained silent.

Of course the boys were unable to pick out the localities for speeding, they being strangers to that section of country, but here Buck and Rube proved very capable guides.

They knew the upper Rio Grande as the schoolboy knows his primer. In fact, knowing the stream so well, it was remarkable that they had never before landed at Hayes. But Hayes is a small place, and, besides, they had never had occasion to visit the burg.

At ten o'clock a slow rain began falling, and, the boat at the time being just around a point of land from a creek, Buck, who was in charge, shut off the power and permitted the craft to drift.

"Do you see anything that looks like a light?"

It was Rube who asked the question.

At that instant, almost before the words were off his lips, came a low whistle of warning.

“There they are!” said Case.

“Keep still,” admonished Clay.

The boat drifted on, past the mouth of the creek, and let an anchor drop silently into the water.

“I don’t know what we’ve struck, but we know that wasn’t no coyote’s call,” declared Case.

“It had a human sound,” interrupted Jule.

“Listen!” warned Buck. “We’ll hear it again in a moment. I thought I heard it then.”

“That was only rain,” explained Alex. “The first one might have been that, too.”

At that instant, before another word could be spoken, a great light flashed out, followed by a shrill scream.

CHAPTER X

A BIT OF DYNAMITE

“That’s Tommy!” whispered Jule.

“But the light? Who turned that on?” Alex whispered in reply to the suggestion.

“It doesn’t seem to be the thing to do—showing a light just at this time,” Clay commented.

“Well, what’s the next move?” asked Case. “Shall we board the boat? Or shall we wait for the next move of the robbers?”

“Give him some Peter Pratt,” suggested Clay. Rube and Buck, who had remained silent during this conversation, nearly jumped out of the motor boat when Jule opened up with:

“What are you doing in my boat? Get out, and get out quick, or I’ll knock your block off!”

“Who was that talking?” asked Rube.

The boys snickered.

“Sounds like he meant business, whoever it is!” suggested Buck. “Say, but he gave me a start!”

"You've got a heap of nerve, taking my boat without my consent! I think you've got a trimming coming!"

"Who's doing all this talking?" demanded Rube. "It ain't his boat, nohow."

Before anyone could reply, a figure, strongly outlined against the light of the *Rambler*, rushed to the deck and crouched down behind the railing, from which position only his head could be seen, his body being concealed by the framework of the railing.

"What's coming off here?" Jule's voice went on. "If you don't get away from that railing, I'll shoot, and shoot to kill!"

Whoever the man was who had sought shelter behind the railing, he was game. He never moved, only the watchers could see the gleaming barrel of an automatic.

"Now if Tommy would only lip in," Clay suggested, "we would have quite a menagerie. I wonder if that fellow we see is the only man aboard the *Rambler*?"

There was a fringe of bushes along the shore, and, clearly outlined against the light of the prow lamp, a figure could now be seen making his way through the shrubbery in the direction of the boat.

The watchers being in the shadows were not visible from the position occupied by the prowler.

"He'll be aboard the boat in a minute if something ain't done to stop him," remarked Rube, "and then there'll be a mix-up that will be worth the price of admission."

The two men had evidently been completely deceived by the talk put up by Jule. They really believed that another claimant for the *Rambler* had put in his appearance.

"That talk you heard was made by Jule," explained Case. "He thinks nothing of being two or three people at a time!"

"Not that talk in which the intruder was ordered off the boat, under penalty of having his block knocked off?" Buck answered.

Jule laughed softly.

"That's the size of it," he explained. "Made the fellow get a move on, eh?" he added.

"How do you do it?" asked Rube.

The question was never answered, for Tommy called for the attention of the entire company.

"Get off the boat!" he croaked. "Eat 'em alive! He eats 'em alive! Out of the way!"

"What's that?" demanded Buck. "Sounds like the devil has come to town!"

The watchers could hear the man on the deck swearing under his breath, and could see the man prowling in the bushes advancing toward the *Rambler*.

"Now's the time to get the *Rambler* back," whispered Case. "I am positive there is only the person in sight on board."

"But where have the others gone?" asked Buck. "There were six on board."

"There is a man in the shrubbery," said Rube. "Well," Case said, getting to his feet, "who's going to make the first break?"

"Look here," Alex put in, "what's the matter with the rear deck? I can get to that in a jiffy."

"Seems to me that you have all the fun," Jule expostulated. "Why don't you give someone else a chance?"

But Captain Joe settled the matter of priority in his own way. He had been roaming about the deck of the *Esmeralda* like a lost spirit ever since the conversation had opened.

He evidently knew that he belonged on board the *Rambler*, and was peeved at the idea of being kept out of his rights. At any rate he sprang into the river and struck out for the shore.

In a moment all was confusion on board the *Esmeralda*. Knowing that the dog would be recognized as the canine which had made the attack on the robber at the bank of the river higher up, the boys all sprang to their feet and started pellmell for the railing of the boat. It was Rube who stopped them.

"Now see here, boys," he expostulated, "you'll only get cold lead in your systems if you make the attempt to board the *Rambler* now. The robber will see the dog coming and, doubtless, shoot at him. The dog will give him about one shot, then there'll be a mix-up.

"The chances are about even the way I've got it figured out, but I'm betting on the dog. He has the speed and—"

Rube got no farther. The dog had by this time reached the boat and mounted to the deck, clearing the railing at one leap, aided by driftwood which gave him footing.

The attack was so sudden that the robber fired only one shot and that one an ineffectual one, and then the dog was upon him.

"Come on, boys!" shouted Alex.

"And the grit," continued Rube, picking up the sentence, "and I'm bettin' on the dog!"

There was no time to reach the *Rambler* by boat, so the boys plunged into the river and started to swim. But the man in the bushes had to be reckoned with.

No sooner were the boys in the river than he opened fire. In a moment, however, he turned his attention to the *Esmeralda*, which had been left unguarded.

Before the boys in the water saw what he was up to, he was climbing over the prow of the boat. Then it was too late, and, leaving his chum to his fate, the

man in the boat started the motor and was soon around a bend in the river.

Buck gave a regretful look at the *Esmeralda* as she disappeared from sight, but kept on toward the *Rambler*. His regret was that someone had not been left on the boat, but that was now a past issue. The *Esmeralda* was gone, and would undoubtedly be annexed by the pirates who had captured the *Rambler*.

In the meantime, Captain Joe was having the time of his life with the robber, who happened to be the identical fellow the dog had sampled up the river. It being necessary to leave someone on board the boat, the fellow's mates had chosen him as the one to remain, he being still suffering from the wounds made by the dog.

Alex was the first one to mount the deck of the *Rambler*, and the sight he saw sent him off in peals of laughter, in which he was soon joined by the other members of the party.

Tommy, the parrot, having been long parted from the dog, was standing erect on his back, talking all the words he knew, which were not a few. Teddy, the baby bear, was curled up a few feet away, sound asleep.

Alex's first act on gaining the deck was to lift the robber's revolver from the place where it had been thrown in the struggle and place it in a secure position on the prow.

Next he gave his attention to the robber, who by this time was hurling all kinds of oaths and imprecations at Captain Joe, who, by the way, paid not the slightest attention to what was being said.

The dog had taken the robber by the back of the neck, so his throat was in good working order, and he filled the atmosphere of the rainy night with such a collection of oaths as one seldom hears.

"Swear away if it makes you feel any better!" laughed Alex. "You certainly are a peach at it."

"Call the dog off!" roared the prostrate man. "Wait till I get hold of him!"

"All right!" replied Alex. "I'll wait as long as you like, but in the meantime you'll be eaten up!"

"For the love of Mike, call him off!" cried the prostrate man. "He's killing me!"

"That's just the fate you deserve!" commented Buck. "One of your chums stole my boat."

"And the whole crew will be on top of us if we don't get a move on!" declared Case. "Let the man up, and let's get out of this."

The fallen man was assisted to his feet, and Alex rushed to the cabin to see what had become of Paul Stegman. Much to his surprise he found him there, alive and thriving.

"Hello, Paul!" the boy shouted. "You don't appear to be much the worse for your association with the robbers!"

“Do you know what one of them did for me?” asked Paul. “Bet you never can guess!”

Alex gave a number of guesses and then gave it up.

“He set my leg!”

“What’s that?”

“Sure thing!”

Alex sat weakly down. This was too much to believe.

“Yes, sir! He set my broken leg!”

“He must have been a surgeon, wanting practice!” Alex said, with a wrinkling of the nose. “I’ve heard of such people before now.”

“No, sir,” insisted Paul, with a shrug of the shoulders, “he wasn’t any such thing. He was a regular surgeon, duly qualified, and all that. Yes, sir, he was a regular practitioner.”

“This thing is too good to keep!” exclaimed Alex, ducking out of the cabin door. “I’ll have to spread the glad tidings!”

When the boy got to the deck he found it in confusion. Captain Joe was occupying the center of the stage, with Tommy a close second. The parrot was talking and the dog was barking.

In the distance the *Esmeralda* was shoving her nose through the rain. The thieves, it seemed, were not satisfied to let the *Rambler* go in that way.

Her cabin lights were ablaze, and her deck was crowded with people. Her appearance at that point effectually blocked the entrance to the creek.

Tommy was doing his best to scold the intruder away, while Captain Joe was exerting himself to get away from Clay, who had him by the scruff of the neck.

“Giving a party?” asked Alex.

“Yes,” Buck replied, “and it’s likely to be a necktie party before it’s over. The *Esmeralda* looks right pert with all those people on board! I suppose we’ll have to wade in blood to get out of this hole they’ve got us into!”

“The *Esmeralda* is stopping,” said Case. “I wonder what’s next on their program?”

A hail now came from the boat.

“Hello!” the voice said.

“Hello yourself!” came the reply.

“What you doing with that boat?”

The answer was a baying of the dog and another scream from the parrot. The hailing party consulted together for a second and then called out:

“Guess you’ll have to submit to capture, boys.”

“You don’t see anything green, do you?” was Alex’s answer. “If you want us why don’t you come and take us?”

“We can do that, too, but we thought we’d give you a chance for your lives.”

“Never mind the chance,” Jule called back. “If you have nothing more to offer, perhaps you’ll get out of the way. We’re going to want the space you occupy in about a minute. We’ve got business down the river.”

“All right!” the robber answered. “Have it your own way, but you must not expect any favors from us if you keep up your impudent talk. We’ve had about enough of that already.”

“Go as far as you like,” was Jule’s reply.

“It beats the Old Scratch that we have to get into the clutches of river pirates wherever we go,” said Case. “One would suppose that some one of the rivers visited would be free of them.”

“Now,” said Clay, “suppose we give them a little fireworks. It will be just the thing for their systems, don’t you think?”

“Sure!” exclaimed Alex.

The boy ran into the cabin and returned almost immediately with several sticks of dynamite in his arms.

Buck and Rube did not wait for the stuff to be placed on the deck. They began climbing over the railing.

“Just you wait a second,” Rube began, “until I get out of this boat! I’m not ready, yet, to lead a procession to the cemetery! I prefer to live a spell longer.”

Again a hail came from the *Esmeralda*.

“We’ll give you five minutes to decide!”

“That’s about four minutes too much!” shouted Clay. “If you object to being blown to Kingdom Come, just lie still when we are passing through the opening.”

“Make ’em give up the *Esmeralda*!” said Buck.

CHAPTER XI

ALEX GOES FISHING

“Never thought of that!” Clay declared.

“Give ’em five minutes to vacate!”

It was Rube who made the suggestion. By this time both Buck and Rube had climbed back into the boat, and had gathered around the dynamite, though taking good care to keep near the boat’s rail, so they could leap overboard in case

anything went off prematurely.

"I don't like that stuff, nohow!" Rube declared, backing away, as Clay prepared to throw a stick. "Why don't you give 'em a chance to leave the boat?" he added.

"I thought I'd give them a taste of the stuff first," was the reply. "Not enough to hurt—just a little boat-rocker!"

"The five minutes are about up!" came a voice from the *Esmeralda*. "What is your decision?"

"Here it is!" shouted Clay.

He threw the dynamite as he spoke against a log that lay in the stream just under the bow of the *Esmeralda*.

The boat rocked viciously for some time. Clay waited for the motion to cease and threw again, coming a little nearer the hull of the *Esmeralda* this time.

"How do you like it?" Case queried.

The only reply was a shower of bullets, which bounded from the armor of the *Rambler* like so many grains of rice.

An effort was now made to back the boat out of the reach of Clay's arm, but, the craft, having been run into the creek prow first, this could not be done without the person who attempted it coming within the range of the boy's steady aim.

"If you try that," warned Case, "the boat will be blown up! We have dynamite enough on hand to do the business."

"The best way out of this scrape," put in Alex, "is for you to stop shooting and also get out of the boat! If you don't, the craft will be destroyed. Do you get that?"

"The first man who tries to get to the anchor-chain will regret it," Clay put in. "That will be the signal for the blowing up of the *Esmeralda*."

"The best thing you can do is to quickstep off the boat!" Buck suggested. "The lads have you too dead to skin."

"And no shooting after you get ashore, mind," added Rube.

Had there been a man in the crew with the nerve of either one of the boys, or of Rube or Buck, there would have been "doings," but all feared the sticks of dynamite in Clay's hands.

While the outlaws consulted together, not knowing what course to pursue, one of their number fired a shot at Clay.

The boy staggered and would have fallen had not Alex sprang forward and caught him. Blood was pouring in a stream from a wound in his arm, and he sat down behind the railing to catch his breath.

"Close call, that!" he said, with a faint smile.

Buck seized the dynamite, which had fallen to the deck, and hurled it across

the water in the direction of the *Esmeralda*.

It struck the bow of the boat and shattered it to splinters. The next instant marked an exit from the boat.

The robbers fell over each other getting out. In a minute all were out, and the *Esmeralda* lay rocking in the river.

“Turn the motors on—quick!”

Clay was on his feet, with the blood still pouring from the bullet hole in his arm, making suggestions for the guidance of the others. It was well that he was quick to speak.

Before the motors could be brought to use, a storm of bullets was flying at the *Rambler*.

“Turn off the lights,” said Clay.

Then he fainted from loss of blood and the pain of the wound.

The command was obeyed, the *Esmeralda* was taken in tow, and the *Rambler* moved slowly into the stream.

As the *Rambler* drew up to the *Esmeralda* and passed her, Buck sprang aboard over the wrecked prow and switched off the lights. All was now in darkness, but the robbers continued to fire as long as the boats were in sight.

Half a mile down the river the lights were switched on again, and Clay’s wound examined. The boy was still unconscious, an artery having been severed.

While the examination was going on a hail was heard from the east shore, and the motor boat checked her speed.

“What’s wanted?” asked Buck.

“Want to come aboard,” was the reply.

“Are you alone?” was the next question. “Stand out where I can see you.”

The stranger moved to a position where the rays of light fell full upon him, revealing a slender man of twenty-five or under. He was neatly dressed in black, and wore a slouch hat.

“Why do you want to come on board?” Buck demanded.

“To get out of the rain,” was the answer. “My shoes are wet through, and I’m chilled to the bone.”

“Shall we take him aboard?” Buck asked.

“Sure thing!” said Rube, who was the only other person on the deck, the three boys being in attendance on Clay. “I reckon we can handle one man! Besides, the fellow really looks civilized. Anyhow, we’ll give him a chance to tell his story.”

“All right!” Buck shouted back. “We’ll give you a chance to dry out, but you’ll have to swim for it.”

“I fail to see how I could get any wetter than I am now!” answered the stranger, plunging into the river and striking out for the boat. “In fact, I think

the river water an improvement over rain water.”

The stranger climbed up on deck and shook himself.

“When I had the honor to associate with the crew of the *Rambler* before,” the man began, but Buck seized him by the shoulder and ran him into the cabin.

“You look to me,” he declared, “like the man who recently did a job of surgery. ’Cause why? There ain’t been no other people on board the boat, except you and the river pirates and the boys.”

Paul struggled into a sitting posture and almost shouted out his recognition of the stranger.

“Just in time to save a life!” he said. “Clay must have bled to death in another hour!”

Without speaking a word, the surgeon stripped off his coat and set to work on the wounded boy. The men gathered about the lad held their breath while awaiting the surgeon’s verdict.

“A bad wound,” he finally said.

“Is it fatal?” asked Alex in a whisper.

“Not necessarily so,” was the answer. “If I only had a tourniquet,” he added, “the job would be an easy one, but the boy has lost considerable blood, and—”

Alex interrupted the surgeon by shouting that there was such an instrument in the medicine box, and dashing off to fetch it.

“I guess I’m getting dippy,” the boy said, as he laid the instrument down. “I knew that the tourniquet was in the medicine box. I’m sure getting balmy in the crumpet.”

This was slang of the worst kind, but the boys were too excited to remark it. The surgeon took the instrument and put it in position, remarking as he did so that the boy had already lost enough blood to run a mill.

“Can you bring him through now?” Jule asked eagerly.

“It is simply a question of good care,” was the reply.

The surgeon worked over the lad for a long time before he returned to consciousness. When at last he opened his eyes there was a smile in them.

He was still very faint, but he was very nervy.

“Where did you come from?” he asked the surgeon in a whisper.

The surgeon laughed.

“I came out of the rain!” was the reply.

“That’s Theodore Rand, formerly of the pirate craft *Rambler*,” said Paul. “He’s the quickest man at a broken leg I ever saw! I’m going to have him promoted. He’s going to be Chief Surgeon in the army before he dies!”

“Were you really aboard the *Rambler* before?” asked Case.

“Of course he was,” interrupted Paul. “Didn’t he set my broken leg? That’s some surgeon!”

"But I don't see how you got away from the pirates," Jule exclaimed. "They don't let go when they get hold of a man like you. They cling to him like a puppy to a root!"

"Well," said Theodore, known forever thereafter as "Thede," "you see, the outlaws had need of my services. They had a man shot through the lungs, and I came along in my skiff just in time to be too late. They rewarded me by stealing my instruments and putting me off the boat just below the spot I set this boy's leg."

"Then you must have had a long walk in the rain," Case remarked. "And you must be good and hungry."

"I could eat a rhinoceros right now!" said the surgeon. "I have been waiting for an invitation to eat."

Alex sprang to his feet.

"That makes me think that I haven't had a square meal since I left the *Rambler*!" he exclaimed. "Now, if the river thieves haven't cleaned out the refrigerator, I'll get you a supper that'll make you sit up and take notice!"

It was pretty poor picking in the refrigerator, but there was plenty of tinned goods, and the boys managed to get a very satisfying meal. Alex washed the dishes under protest!

"Where do you want to get off?" asked Case, as the *Rambler*, still with the *Esmeralda* in tow, headed toward the Gulf of Mexico.

"I'm going to any old point in the South," was the answer. "You see," explained the doctor, "I didn't do very well at the town I set up my office in, so I took my instruments and started to walk to the next place."

"I was having rather a pleasant time of it when hailed from the *Rambler*. It seems that there had been a row on board, and that one of the gang had received a bullet through the lungs."

"Of course I did what I could for the man; but that was not much. He died just before I was put off the boat."

"And was buried on the river bank," explained Paul. "That must have been about dark."

"It seems longer ago than that," laughed the surgeon. "Anyway, it appears to me that I've been walking in the rain ever since the Deluge! Now I haven't got any more tools to work with than a rabbit! And the scamps took what little money I had with me, too!"

"That is easily fixed," said Rube, producing his roll. "Just have one of the boys go good for it, and tell me how much you want!"

"I'll go good for \$10," declared Case. "The doctor has certainly earned that much."

Rube peeled off a bank note and passed it over to the surgeon, who took it

hesitatingly.

“But this is a \$20,” he explained.

“That’s all right,” Rube announced. “You may pay me the other \$10 when you get on your feet.” The surgeon expressed his thanks, and Rube put away his roll and asked Case to slow down so he could board the *Esmeralda*.

“You see, Buck,” he explained, “we’ve got to be getting a move on if we get the *Esmeralda* in shape again.”

“Tell you what,” Alex proposed, “suppose we have a fish breakfast. I just know there’s bullheads in this river.”

“Bullheads in the Rio Grande!” scoffed Jule.

“Just you wait!” replied the boy.

So Alex and Jule went over the *Rambler’s* side after fish.

CHAPTER XII

A QUEER PASSENGER

There was a faint flush of dawn in the east when the rowboat left the *Rambler’s* side and struck out into the river. The motor boat had been slowed down to the pace of the other, and the surgeon and Case watched the boys from the deck.

As the prow light was still burning, their view of the scene was exceptionally good. The rain had ceased, and the morning stars were shining. The day promised to be a fine one.

Clay was asleep when the rowboat was launched, so the two boys had nothing to worry over. They had every confidence in the surgeon, and believed in the ultimate recovery of their chum.

“It is a trifle light to fish for bullheads, but the burning of the prow light will make the fish think we have a torch especially for their benefit, so they may bite after all!”

It was Jule who emitted this bit of wisdom about fish thinking, and Alex laughed him to scorn.

“Fish can’t think,” he laughed. “They haven’t the machinery for thought in their make-up.”

“Much you know about fish!” Jule answered. “I’ve seen fish that would come to the surface when their master whistled! And there is a fish at Lincoln Park which—”

There is no knowing how much longer the fish story would have continued if just at that instant Alex had not seen his bobber, making little circles in the river.

"You've got a bite, Alex," Case shouted from the deck of the *Rambler*. "Look out or he'll pull you under!"

"Never you mind about his pulling me under!" Alex answered. "This is a pet fish, and he knows his business! When he gets done playing with the hook, he'll come to the surface and give himself up, like a good little fish!"

But the fish did not come to the surface and give himself up as he was scheduled to do! Alex leaned too far over the edge of the boat and went down to meet the fish!

Jule doubled up with laughter, and Case gave advice from the deck of the *Rambler*.

"Dive under the fish and bring him to the surface when you are on your way up!" he shouted. "You don't often get a chance to embrace a live fish!"

Alex paid no attention to this advice, but kept his hold on the line. He took time, however, to wrinkle a freckled nose at his tormentor. He seized the rowboat by the prow, and drew himself up.

"I always take a bath in the morning," he said, "it's good for the health."

"Do you always employ a fish to pull you in?" asked Jule. "I should think you'd run shy of fish!" "See! He never got off the hook!" exclaimed Alex. "Didn't I explain to you that this was a pet fish? I'll have him giving a song and dance in a second."

"I hope the song and dance will be given in the frying pan!" contributed Case, speaking from the deck of the *Rambler*. "I'm hungry enough to eat stones out of the river."

"Just you wait a second and I'll have this one simmering in the frying pan!" Alex said, getting a better hold on the line by winding it around his wrist. "Wonder what kind of fish this is? He's a corker for weight, anyway."

When the "fish" was at last brought to the surface it proved to be a long and vexatious snag!

"Hi!" laughed Case, from the *Rambler's* deck, "how do you work it when you want to exercise that fish? Pet of yours, eh?"

Alex scratched his head and joined in the laugh.

"Anyway," he declared, "if there's a fish in the Rio Grande I'll introduce him to you! We've got to have that fish breakfast!"

By this time Rube and Buck, having inspected the *Esmeralda* and discovered that the injury to the prow was not as serious as at first supposed, had joined the surgeon and Case on the deck of the *Rambler*. The two boats were now tied together, so that the prow of the *Esmeralda* ran flush with the aft deck of the *Rambler*.

"What's that about a fish breakfast?" asked Buck.

"You just hold your horses for a couple of minutes, and you'll see!" was Alex's reply. "I'm so hungry, right now, that I'm turning black in the face."

"How would you like to have a good, steady job driving a pie wagon?" questioned Case. "That might suit you as long as the pie held out! Of all the nice, good-looking, long-distance pie-destroyers you take the cake."

For reply Alex wrinkled his nose and pointed to Captain Joe, who had left the deck of the *Rambler* for the river, and was now swimming round and round the rowboat.

"He's taking his morning bath," he said. "Go away, dog, don't spoil my fishing," he added, as Captain Joe attempted to get into the boat.

"Captain Joe!" called the parrot. "Good Captain Joe! Come to me, you cur dog!"

If the dog had any objections to being called a cur dog he said nothing on the subject, but continued to swim round and round the rowboat.

"What's the matter with the dog?" Alex asked, moving over to a side of the boat where he could get a full view of the dog, "I wonder if he isn't going crazy."

He called to the dog, but he continued to swim round and round the boat.

"Well, of all the fool capers that I ever came across, you certainly are the whole biscuit! What do you see down there in the river, Captain Joe?"

The thing Joe saw took the form of a man. So far as the boys could see, he was rather neatly dressed in clothing which was wet with the wash of the river.

He was clinging to the side of the rowboat when first seen, but let go his hold and struck out for the shore. Evidently an expert in the water, he was halfway to the land before the occupants of either the *Rambler* or the rowboat recovered from their amazement and thought of stopping him.

Taking advantage of the darkness, the fellow had traveled for perhaps an hour, perhaps two, in the bottom of the rowboat. Then, when the boys had use for the boat, the only thing he could do was to take to the river.

They remembered that the rowboat had not been used since the robbers had been driven off with dynamite. The man might be a river pirate for all any member of the party knew.

The *Rambler*, being nearer to the swimmer than the other boat, at once turned her prow in his direction, but he reached shoal water before they overtook him, and disappeared in the thicket.

"Wouldn't that frost you?" exclaimed Alex, bending over the edge of the boat and looking as if he expected to see more men where the swimmer had released his hold. "Say, but that man, whoever he is, can go some in the water!"

"I should say he could!" said Jule. "Where did he come from? Where did he go? If that act of his was a disappearing one, he certainly did it right!"

"I guess the *Rambler* obstructed our view," explained Alex. "I'd like to know how long we've been carrying passengers, anyhow."

The *Rambler* now returned from her fruitless quest of the stranger and anchored by the side of the rowboat.

"How long have you been leaking passengers?" Case demanded. "How many more have you got concealed in the boat?"

"Go ahead and get that fish!" said Rube, rubbing his stomach. "I feel like the Mammoth Cave!"

"Lock him up in a bakery, then, for I don't think there's any fish in the blooming river. If he's hungry enough to chew buns, turn him loose on em!"

It was Alex who gave this advice. For the next few minutes he busied himself making a closer examination of the boat.

"Look here," he exclaimed, "who is there in this party that can read Greek? There's a lot of queer writing on the rear end of the boat. I'd like to know what it means."

All was excitement after this announcement, and Case and Buck climbed down into the rowboat.

The writing was in pencil, and was already half obliterated.

"Can you make anything of it?" asked Case, bending over the side of the boat.

"Not a thing," was the reply. "I think it must be Hebrew! Anyway, it's some sort of warning. Or it may be a threat."

"Much you know about it!" laughed Case.

"What about that fish breakfast?" Rube called out from the motor boat. "I'm so hungry I could eat nails."

"Well, I presume that means me," Alex replied. "If I've got to catch a fish for breakfast, you've got to get out of this boat. How can I get a fish with all you people on board?"

"But we haven't read the writing yet," urged Jule.

"That can wait for a time. Rube will be crying his eyes out in a minute! Anyway, the writing will keep."

"No, it won't," Buck cut in. "If you're ever going to read it, it strikes me that now's the time."

"All right!" declared Alex, "if you want to delay the fish breakfast, give me a knife, and I'll cut the letters out."

"Better use a saw," advised Buck.

"Happy thought!" said Alex. "But where's your saw? Do you happen to have one in your pocket?"

Case clambered to the deck of the motor boat and soon returned with a saw from the tool-chest.

Buck took the tool and fell to work so vigorously that the rim of the boat, where the writing was, soon lay in his hand.

"Now you can order your fish breakfast as soon as you like," he said, putting the piece of wood he had removed into a pocket ... "I suspect that Rube will be referring to it until he gets fed."

"You bet he will!" came from the deck of the *Rambler*.

"Could you eat a piece of cherry pie?"

Jule asked the question, and was answered in a quick affirmative. Then he said he'd see about getting one when he got to El Paso!

"You're a fraud!" laughed Rube. "I don't want anything to eat, anyway."

"No, you don't!" Alex said, with a wrinkle in his nose. "I've got a photograph of you refusing food!"

Case and Buck soon left the rowboat for the deck of the *Rambler*, and Alex went ahead with his fishing, with such good success that a fine string was carried on board the *Rambler*.

"Now," said the lad, "if you'll get me some butter, I'll see what I can do with these fishes! You put the '-es' on when you want to put on style."

"Look at this translation Paul made of the writing on the boat! He says it's French."

Buck came out on deck with a paper in his hand and handed it to Case. The boy took it and read:

"The meaning of 'a l'outrance' is to the death."

"Who furnished the translation?" questioned Jule.

"Paul did," was the reply.

"Can anyone give the meaning of the translation?" asked Case.

"Why, it means just what it says, 'to the death,'" said Jule.

"Is that a threat or a promise?" asked Buck.

"It may be either," was the answer.

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE MEXICAN SIDE

Alex's fish breakfast was a culinary success, but over it hung the shadow of that threat. But was it a threat?

The boys discussed it from every possible angle only to come back to the

original question:

Was it a threat or a promise?

"Well, he'll have a fine time catching the *Rambler*," said Case. "He's got to go some if he does. And he'll need an aeroplane in order to do it."

"He may have an aeroplane secreted in his pocket," Jule said.

However, two days passed and they heard nothing of either the river thieves or the stranger. When El Paso was reached Buck and Rube prepared for departure.

"You boys started out with accommodations for four," said Buck, "and you've kept collecting about every person you came across until you've doubled the crew."

"I can't see what we should have done without you three men," Case answered. "In the first place, we never could have got through without Rube's roll! He was perfectly willing that it should be used, and we accommodated him."

"Then what should we have done without Thede? There's a man that knows how to set a leg or bind up an artery! We certainly couldn't have left him out. I think, when you come to size the whole thing up, we carried just enough people to do what had to be done. How does that strike you, Alex?"

"Right you are," answered the boy addressed. "We haven't been a bit crowded, and we've had plenty to eat. I wish Rube and Buck were going on with us."

"I'd eat you out of house and home," laughed Rube. "I presume you boys noticed that I have quite an appetite."

"Just about the size of mine!" said Alex.

El Paso was the scene of great activity a year ago, when the Rio Grande was the dividing line between the United States and Mexico. Streets were crowded with men in uniform, and restaurants and saloons contributed their full quota to the general confusion.

The city, however, was quieter now, and the boys had no difficulty in finding their way about. Troops still guarded the Mexican line, but they were inconspicuous.

Clay had, in a measure, recovered, though he was still weak. He was able to sit on deck and watch the moving panorama which is to be seen in all frontier cities.

The first trip taken by Case and Alex was to the bank, where they found the money waiting for them. As the telegram had instructed the cashier to pay the money over "without identification, at the risk of the remitter," the boys had no difficulty whatever in securing it. They paid Rube in full, and insisted on his taking an extra \$20, for being "a good fellow in the time of trouble."

The *Esmeralda*'s prow had been repaired on the way down, and she was

now in perfect condition. The boys saw her disappear around a bend in the river with sincere regret.

They had been friends in need, and "a friend in need is a friend indeed," as the old saying runs. But they had not seen the last of either one of them.

Thede, the surgeon, decided, at the earnest solicitation of the boys, to remain on board the motor boat. Clay was still in a feeble condition, and Paul's broken leg needed constant care, so it was decided that the doctor should remain on board.

Captain Joe, the parrot, and even Teddy Junior, the bear cub, seemed to extend a welcoming paw and claw to the doctor and Paul. Provisions for the remainder of the trip were laid in at El Paso, and on the second day the *Rambler*, as trim a boat as ever plowed the waters of the Rio Grande, lifted her anchor and sailed away.

Those were glorious days for the *Rambler* crew. The time was late in May, and at that season Nature is at her best in the South.

The boys fished and loafed about the deck of the motor boat until Clay was almost well again, and Paul insisted on being taken to the deck to watch the life on the river.

They heard no more of the river thieves, and everything moved along as placidly as if they had never interfered with the current of their lives. But this was only for a time.

One brilliant night when the *Rambler* was given just sufficient motion to give steerage way, when Alex and Jule were on watch, the former asked, abruptly:

"Was it a threat or a promise?"

"I've been thinking the matter over," was the answer, "and I find there is not a thing the river robbers had to give or offer. So we may as well cut out the promise part. On the other hand, we know pretty well what the devils would do to us if we again came into their power.

"Therefore," he continued, "we don't welcome a meeting. Still, if it comes, I don't think we'll dodge. That wouldn't be good form, would it now?"

"No," replied Alex, "I don't think it would. But we ought to do everything in our power to avoid a collision with them. Some day, if we don't watch out, we'll get the worst of it. We can't expect to win out in every encounter."

"Right you are!" declared Jule.

"I wonder how those Greasers, over there, live?" asked Alex. "Dirty and greasy as ever, I presume?"

"You bet!" answered Jule.

"Some day when we are not on watch, and the boat is lying at anchor. I'll stump you to go and see," continued Alex. "Some of the sights in a Mexican town must be worth seeing."

“You’re on!” answered Jule.

“I have the meaning of that French writing,” decided Alex, after a long pause. “It is this: ‘Wait until I catch you!’ How’s that for a free translation?”

“It’s free enough,” laughed Jule. “Only I don’t see how we can wait, as the river insists on bearing us along on its noble and rather muddy bosom.”

“I’ve got a hunch,” said Alex soberly, “that the next time we run afoul of the river thieves it won’t be so easy to get away. In other words, I’ve got a premonition of approaching danger.”

“Nonsense!” Jule exclaimed. “You’ve got a case of indigestion, if anybody should ask you! I thought at the time that you were making rather free with that potato salad.”

“Oh, all right! Make fun of the hunch if you want to, but it is a really, truly, warranted-not-to-shrink-or-fade-in-the-washing hunch. Just you mark that down and keep for future reference.”

Captain Joe now came out to Alex and stood rubbing his nose against the boy’s hand.

“Look here!” the dog appeared to be trying to say, “if you’ve got anything important coming off, produce it. I have a few hours which are hanging rather heavily on my hands.”

“Want to go to shore, Captain Joe?” Alex asked.

The dog said that he did as plainly as ever a dog said anything and Alex got to his feet with a yawn.

He whistled about the deck for a time with hands in pockets, as if about to say something which he was positive would not meet with the sanction of his chum. At last, however, he found words for it.

“I suppose I’ll have to go and give the dog a run on the bank. That seems to be about the only way I can keep him quiet.”

“No, you don’t!” laughed Jule. “If you get ashore that will be the last of you until someone comes and looks you up. The last time you got away—”

Alex, followed by the dog, sprang to the rail and leaped into the river. Pausing only long enough to turn a laughing face toward his chum, very much wrinkled as to nose, the boy, closely followed by the dog, struck out for the Mexican shore.

“I’ve a good mind to jump in after you!” Jule called out. “You have all the fun!”

“Come on in!” Alex called back. “The water’s fine! I’ll just give Captain Joe a run on shore and come right back.”

Jule hesitated only an instant. What boy can resist a night in May, when the moon shines, and the waves make music on the beach? It is a shame to tempt a boy with a stream of water which ripples and murmurs on such a night.

Jule was tempted—and fell.

The Rio Grande is quite wide at the point where the boys entered the water, and the *Rambler* was about in the center of the stream, making the swim a long one. The lads, however, struck out bravely and soon landed on a swampy tongue of land which formed a peninsula at that point.

“Say, but this is great!” cried Alex. “I wish Case was here to enjoy it with us.”

Captain Joe seemed to think his frolic in the moonlight about the correct thing. He dived under the surface and pretended to catch the boys by their legs; he brought chips and driftwood from the stream and invited the boys to play tag with him.

At last he lay down on a bit of grass, signifying that his play spell was over, and that he would like to return to the boat.

But there was no boat in sight.

Then, and not until then, did the boys recollect that the boat was in motion—under steerway motion, it is true, but even steerway motion will sometimes carry a boat a long way, especially when the boys who should be guarding it are giving their attention to something else.

“The boys will wake up and come back after us,” said Jule.

“Of course they will,” agreed Alex.

Alex and Jule waited a long time, but there were no signs of the boat coming back after them.

“If we remain right where we landed,” Jule finally said, “they will be certain to find us.”

“That would be all right if they knew where we landed, but they don’t. The thing for them to do is to look along the shore until they see us. What a fool trick that was, leaving the boat unguarded. Unless someone on board wakes up, they may sail half the forenoon. I feel like giving myself a swift kick.”

“I reckon you don’t feel that way more than I do,” replied Jule. “I suppose the boys will think we have deserted them.”

“Or that we have been lured from the boat and murdered,” added Alex. “What’s the matter with you now, Captain Joe? What have you found in the bushes?”

The thing which showed in the bushes where the dog was looking was the pointed hat of a Mexican.

“Look there!” Alex said, not in the least alarmed, but with the notion that in some way the man could assist.

The next moment a gun was leveled at the two boys and a voice said in excellent English:

“Throw up your hands!”

As the boys were without weapons, the command was instantly obeyed. Then four rough-looking men came out of the thicket in single file and stood in front of the astonished boys.

“What is the meaning of this?” Alex demanded. “Is it a hold-up? If it is, we haven’t got a cent.”

Daylight was coming now and the moon was sinking in the West. The faces of the four men were in the shadow, but still it was plain to be seen that they were not out for a morning stroll.

The man who appeared to be the leader of the party gave a significant motion and instantly both boys were turned bottom side up while their pockets were being examined.

CHAPTER XIV

A SERIOUS SITUATION

It was six o’clock when Case awoke that morning. He was dressing when he discovered that the boat was not running.

He listened but could hear neither voices nor footsteps on the deck. The other boys were still sleeping soundly, and he did not awaken them. Thede, the surgeon, was stirring, and the boy asked him:

“What’s the matter with the boat?”

“I hadn’t noticed anything the matter with her,” was the surgeon’s reply.

“She has stopped,” explained Case.

“Then we’d better see what’s up,” responded Thede.

The two finished dressing and went out on deck. Then they saw what was wrong. The *Rambler*, with no one to guide her, had kept on a straight course until she had reached a bend in the river, and had then tried to climb out on the bank.

How the boys slept through all that followed was a mystery.

The chain which connected the motor with the rudder was broken and the boat had stopped when the power went astray. There were numerous other things the matter with the boat—enough to keep her in the repairer’s hands for a full day.

Case stood looking at the broken rudder for some minutes before he made the discovery that the surgeon and himself were the only persons on the deck.

Then he whistled for the dog, but no Captain Joe came at his call. He took a seat on the railing of the boat with a look on his face which told as plainly as words could have done how disgusted he was. He was not at a loss to account for the condition in which he found things.

"The boys have left the boat, taking the dog with them," he said. "But what I want to know is why they didn't come back."

"They left the *Rambler* when she was in motion," said Thede, "and there is a mystery about it which can be explained only by the boys themselves. You can see for yourself that the rudder was never broken except by accident—by collision with the bank."

"It seems that way to me," answered Case. "Now the question is, what has become of them?"

"And that is a question that I give up," answered the surgeon. "You see, we don't know where to look," he continued. "We slept soundly all night, and the boys may have left the *Rambler* as early as midnight, for all we know."

That was a serious time for what remained of the *Rambler* crew. The uncertainty of the situation was baffling.

Clay and Paul were soon awake, and the former walked out on deck to discuss the best means for finding the truants.

"If we only knew what time they left the boat," Clay said, "we could start in on the search with more confidence in the ultimate result. But that is just what we don't know," he added, with a discouraged look on his pale face.

"If I knew that the young scamps were safe and sound," Clay continued, "I should be in favor of leaving them alone for a couple of days. We've got to draw the line somewhere, and I think it should be drawn at the desertion of a boat in midstream."

"I'm in favor of that," Case said, eagerly, "but perhaps we should learn what excuse they have for their strange conduct before deciding what course to pursue."

"The first thing to do is to find them," said the surgeon.

"Correct!" said both Clay and Case in a breath. "The first thing is to find them."

The *Rambler* was beached on the American side of the river, and very soon a delegation of loafers and waterside characters gathered around. Suggestions were offered in plenty, but none were to the point.

The loungers were principally Mexicans, black-eyed and swarthy of skin. They were clad in nondescript garments of all sorts, and they gazed longingly at the trim little motor boat.

They talked fair English and were profuse in their offers of assistance, but their covert glances at the *Rambler* were not to be mistaken. Their eyes lit up

with greed whenever they fell upon it.

"Where can we secure boats in which to cross to the other side of the river?" asked Case, reluctant to use the rowboat belonging to the *Rambler*, and realizing that the boys would be without the means of transportation if they had crossed to the opposite side.

If they had landed on the American side, a searching party would be effective.

The man questioned pointed to a rude rowboat lying on the bank of the river not far away.

"Will that serve your purpose?" he asked.

"Will it float?" asked Case, in doubt as to the buoyancy of the craft.

"Like a bird in the air," answered the fellow. "But the motor boat? Do you leave it? It will be perfectly safe. We are all honest men, Señor."

"Oh, of course," answered Case, noting with disgust the greedy glance the fellow cast toward the motor boat. "No one doubts that you are all honest men. However, we have to leave two men on the spot, and they may as well guard the boat."

The fellow gave a quick glance at Clay, who was still on deck, as if estimating the amount of resistance he could offer in case the boat should be taken, and smiled.

"Oh, yes, Señor, we are all honest men," the man continued, with a leer. "You may leave the motor boat here with the assurance that you will find it upon your return."

"How much for the use of the boat?" asked Thede.

"A trifle," said the other. "Perhaps twenty dollars."

"It is not worth it," replied Case, in a tone of disgust. "I will pay you five, though that is more than the old tub is worth."

The boat was indeed a "tub." The sides were broken and it leaked badly. The owner, however, insisted on the price named and would not consider a smaller sum.

At last, tired of the seemingly endless bickering, and anxious to be away, Case consented to the terms and the rowboat was brought to the side of the *Rambler*.

Case took Clay into the cabin of the *Rambler* and warned him to be on his guard.

"We may be away three or four hours," he said, "and you must, under no circumstances, leave the boat for a minute. My opinion of these men is not a favorable one. I think they want the motor boat. Don't shoot unless you have to, but shoot to kill if that should be necessary. A shot fired in defense of property is lawful."

"All right," Clay replied. "I hate like the dickens to have you go, but I suppose there is no help for it. Hurry back and we'll repair the *Rambler* and get out of this rotten hole so quick that it will set the heads of the natives swimming."

"Right you are," responded Case, and with an additional word of warning the leaky boat was pushed into the river.

After the departure of Case and the surgeon the boys sought the cabin of the *Rambler*. They had no idea how long the boat would be gone, so they decided to make themselves as comfortable as circumstances permitted.

The half-breeds gathered in a group on the bank of the Rio Grande and consulted together for a long time. The conversation was still in Mexican, and of course the boys, being ignorant of the language, could not understand a word of it.

As a matter of fact, the tongue spoken was a mixture of Mexican Indian and Spanish, an especially hard combination.

"I wish I had the use of my arm for about five minutes," Clay moaned, "I'd make a scattering up there on the river bank."

"And if I had the use of my leg for the same length of time, there'd be doings," observed Paul.

"Well, we are poor old cripples," Clay went on, "and can't help ourselves. One thing we can do, though, we can shoot the tar out of anyone who attacks us. That's one consolation."

There was silence for a time, each boy being occupied with his own thoughts. Clay was first to speak.

"What is your notion about the disappearance of Alex and Jule—mysterious, eh?"

"Decidedly so," was the reply.

"Still," Clay continued, "the fact that Captain Joe went with them gives the affair the appearance of an excursion to the shore. If they left the boat, clothed as they were, intending to be absent only a few minutes, the boat, being under steerway, might be too swift for them and get beyond their reach before they realized what was going on. Anyway, it is a bad mix-up, and I wish we were safely out of it. Now, what's that?"

"That" was a movement of the mob on shore. They were headed for the river bank and looked dangerous.

"Here's where the automatics come into play," Paul suggested. "I can shoot, if I can't walk."

But right here a new factor entered the case. "Tommy," the parrot, opening the conversation.

"Seven men on a dead man's chest! Ho! Ho! Ho! And a bottle of rum!"

The parrot, wandering from perch to table, from locker to window ledge,

lifted up his voice in an uncanny jumble of words until the cabin rang again.

The voice was hoarse yet shrill, and the Mexicans paused in wonder and amazement. They, of course, were unaware of the existence of the parrot, and the voice came to them as a distinct shock.

They paused and retreated a few steps and listened. The voice of the bird went on, hoarser and lifted higher than before.

“Ho, ho, and a bottle of rum!”

The Mexicans turned and fled, almost falling over each other in their eagerness to put as much space as possible between themselves and whatever it was that was making the talk.

At what seemed a safe distance they paused and gathered in a group for the comparing of impressions regarding the voice which all had heard. Some declared it to be the devil, and some said that there was a man who had not been seen concealed in the cabin.

While the arguments were going on the boys were not idle. The revolvers and guns were placed where they could easily be reached, and ammunition belts were buckled on.

The river pirates had not disturbed the arms while they were in possession of the *Rambler*, so the weapons, which they intended to appropriate later on, had not been molested.

“They seem to be losing their courage!” Paul exclaimed. “It is a good thing! If they come an inch nearer, they’ll receive the contents of this automatic.”

“They will soon be here,” Clay reasoned. “When they discover that it is only a bird they are running away from, they will rush the boat. You will have to shoot fast then!”

“All right!” was Paul’s reply. “I’ll shoot fast, and shoot to kill. I think they are getting ready to charge the boat right now! Shall we go to the deck and get behind the bullet-proof railing?”

CHAPTER XV

DEAD IN THE FOREST

When Alex and Jule were seized they naturally put up a hard fight, but the men who had attacked them were muscular, and, besides, had the advantage of taking the lads by surprise, so they were compelled to submit to the indignity of being

searched.

After they came to their feet again, and after their heads had stopped whirling, Alex's first motion was toward his pistol pocket. Then he remembered that the automatic had been left on board the *Rambler*. They were absolutely without weapons of any kind.

The outlaw saw the motion and smiled grimly.

"So," he said, "you carried weapons. Some fancy little toy, I presume. What would you say to a weapon like this?"

As he spoke he displayed a revolver of enormous size. It was, however, patterned after an old model, and not at all similar to the improved automatics carried by the boys.

Alex, however, pretended great admiration for the gun and asked the privilege of taking it into his hands.

"I'd like to have one like it," he declared. "How much do they cost?"

All this, of course, to draw the attention of the outlaws away from Jule, who was getting ready to spring Peter Pratt.

"What does this mean?" asked Jule, in as hoarse a voice as he was able to assume.

The outlaws, who had seated themselves on the turf, instantly sprang to their feet.

"Throw up your hands!" went on the voice.

But, instead of obeying this command, the men dropped to the earth again and prepared to fight. The attempt was a failure.

The boys, however, were on their feet, and the instant the outlaws crouched down they were off, being closely followed by the bulldog, who had all along looked with disfavor upon the proceedings. Captain Joe hesitated for a second, looking longingly at the exposed leg of one of the outlaws and then sprang forward.

In a minute the outlaw was on his feet, thundering great oaths at the dog, and doing his best to release his leg from the teeth of the animal. His efforts proved ineffectual, serving only to throw him to the ground again, where he lay foaming with rage.

"Call off the dog!" he shouted, writhing about on the turf in agony. "He is killing me!"

Hour after hour Jule had spent teaching the dog to obey his Peter Pratt, and now it came into play.

"Let go, you cur!" he cried. "Don't kill the man! Let go, or I'll have your hide for a foot rug!"

By this time the outlaws, regardless of their companion's oaths and cries for help, were crouching lower in the bushes, mindful only of that first command

to “throw up your hands!”

Captain Joe, in obedience to the command, released his hold on the outlaw and started after the boys. No sooner was the man released from the jaws of the dog than he drew a weapon and fired, the bullet cutting a long furrow in the dog’s side.

“I wish I had a gun with me,” said Alex in a rage. “I’d teach that robber better manners!”

“Come here, Joe!” Jule exclaimed. “I don’t think he is seriously hurt,” he added, as Joe came limping to his side.

“Find out as quick as you can,” advised Alex, “while I see that the men in front keep in the underbrush. They won’t hold the position long.”

As the man who had ordered them to throw up their hands did not appear, the outlaws were already growing suspicious. They cast inquiring glances at each other and moved about restlessly.

In the meantime Jule was making as close an examination of the dog’s wound as it was possible to make under the circumstances.

“There’s an ugly cut in his side, but that will soon heal,” he reported. “The thing to do now is to get away from here—quick! We are without weapons, and the outlaws will soon begin to smell a rat. They are getting suspicious already, and the fellow Joe bit is prowling about with blood in his eye.”

Owing to the underbrush which obstructed the view, the fellow could not locate the boys for a moment, but he was soon on the trail, vowing vengeance at every bound. Of course the boys took to their heels, but the blood from the dog’s side furnished a clew which was not to be mistaken.

“Something must be done or the man will catch us!” Alex panted. “Suppose you try Peter Pratt again?”

“Nothing doing!” Jule answered. “Do you want the other outlaws to know that they have been tricked?”

“That’s a fact,” replied Alex. “They would know that the man had shifted his position, even if they did not suspect trickery. But something must be done and done quick! Poor old Captain Joe is nearly all in.”

Although the lads were running at a swift pace, they were still hampered by the dog, who appeared to be growing weaker with every leap he took. The footfalls behind came on regularly and swiftly.

“Go on ahead with the dog,” Alex whispered at last. “I’ll stop that fellow! Judging from the way he acts, he is running blindly, and it ought to be easy to trip him. He’ll see the trail of blood and follow that.”

Without waiting for Jule to give his consent to this plan, Alex dropped down in the shrubbery. The outlaw came forward on a run, passing the boy without a knowledge of his presence there, which was not at all to the liking of

the lad.

The boy had planned to trip the fellow as he went by.

The next best thing was to take after the fellow, and so divert his attention away from the wounded dog. Captain Joe must be saved in spite of everything!

The other outlaws, becoming suspicious that they had been tricked, were now on their feet, running toward the point which was the goal of Alex, the fourth outlaw and the dog.

It looked pretty serious for Alex, situated as he was between the three men at the rear and the one man in front. For a moment he trailed the man ahead, not knowing what course to pursue.

Then a plan came to him—a plan which might result in placing weapons in the hands of Jule and himself. It was a desperate chance to take, but it appeared to be the only one worth considering at the time.

He slackened his pace so as to permit the three in the rear to approach, and then dropped into the underbrush. The men came on at good speed and were promptly tripped.

They were running almost breast and breast, so they fell in a heap. Before they could get to their feet again Alex had the huge revolver out of the pocket of the leader and had the three covered.

“That’s right! Hands up! That’s the game you made us play a short time ago!”

Alex could hardly conceal a grin of triumph as the outlaws hastened to obey the command.

“Take the weapons from your pockets and throw them on the ground!” was the next order.

“Oh, see here, kid, isn’t this going too far?” said the leader, with a smile. “We were only joking with you.”

“That’s all right,” was the reply. “But, you see, I’m not joking with you. Throw the weapons down!”

The words were spoken so peremptorily that the outlaws lost no time in complying, and the weapons clattered to the ground together. Alex at once took possession of them.

In the meantime Jule was making as good time as was possible, hampered, as he was, by the dog, who insisted on stopping every few rods to note the progress made by his pursuer. The fight was not yet all out of the dog.

At last he stopped abruptly and refused to budge. While Jule was doing his best to force him along the sound of pursuing footsteps ceased. The boy listened intently, but could hear nothing of either Alex or the men he believed to be in pursuit.

“What’s coming off now?” he mused. “If this is a trick, I’m in bad, being

without weapons and with this confounded dog on my hands. Captain Joe, why can't you behave yourself?"

Captain Joe gave an extra tug at the collar and broke away, disappearing almost immediately in the thick underbrush, with Jule in hot pursuit and a trail of blood showing where the dog had gone.

The dog was out of sight in a second, but the trail of blood, instead of leading directly to the rear, wound off to the right. The trail was growing fainter every minute, which demonstrated that the wound was closing, or that it was becoming filled with clots.

While Jule hesitated about following on after the dog, thinking that he had gone crazy, the sound of a revolver came to his ears, and the pursuit was taken up again.

The lad reached an opening in the shrubbery just in time to see the dog and the outlaw in what seemed to be a death struggle. The man had evidently fired one shot at the dog and been too late to fire again. He had been seized by the dog and thrown to the ground.

His revolver lay by his side, just beyond his reach. The fellow was already in the agonies of death.

Jule sprang forward, but it was too late. The blood which was scattered liberally over the rank grass told him that. The dog had severed the jugular vein.

"I don't blame you, Captain Joe," the boy said, kneeling by the side of the fast-failing outlaw, "not a little bit! He shot you while you were running away from him, and you got even in the only way you knew; still, I wish you had let him live."

There came a gurgle of blood at the throat, the wounded man struggled for a second for breath, and all was over.

Jule laid the head of the man back reverently. Whatever he had been in life, death had canceled. The record was of his own making and must be judged by One wiser than the combined wisdom of earth.

Captain Joe, to tell the truth, did not appear in the last downcast by the manner in which the incident had terminated, for he frisked about the boy as if expecting to be praised for what he had done. Seeing that words of commendation were not likely to be forthcoming, he darted away down the river.

Jule followed on behind, leaving the dead outlaw to be cared for later on. He reached an opening in the tangle of underbrush just in time to witness Alex's capture of the three outlaws.

When he approached the spot where Alex stood the lad was facing the three men about.

"What's doing?" he asked. "Likely pair and a half you have there! How did you manage it—the capture, I mean?"

"They just came and gave themselves up!" was the reply. "Got a rope or anything to tie 'em up with?"

"Nothing doing in that way," answered Jule. The leader of the outlaws now appealed to the newcomer for release.

"This lad," he said, "is inclined to take the incident which took place recently rather seriously. I can't make him understand that it was all a joke."

"Joke, was it?" asked Jule. "Well, the joke cost the life of your chum!"

And the boy related the scene he had just witnessed.

Just how it was done the boys never knew. One minute the three men stood facing the lads, the next they were crunching their way through the underbrush. And Alex had not fired a shot. He had been too busy listening to Jule's recital of the scene in the forest.

The boys knew the outlaws would lose no time in making an effort to regain possession of the weapons, so they took to their heels.

"Why didn't you shoot?" demanded Jule.

"I was too much interested in the story you were telling," was the panting reply. "I think I must be a chump!"

The river was not far away, and the boys struck out for it with all the running ability they possessed, halting only when they stood on its southern bank.

The outlaws had not yet made their appearance, and the boys fancied they, too, were running only in an opposite direction.

"Now what?" asked Jule. "We can't swim across, can we?"

"I should say not!" was the reply, as Alex threw himself down on the turf. "To tell the truth, I'm about all in! Do you see anything of Captain Joe?" he added. "I presume the fool dog followed the outlaws away."

Jule grinned, thinking of the figure cut by Alex as he stood with the huge revolver, threatening the three men.

"I wonder if the gun is loaded?" he said, taking it into his hand. "I have known men to carry empty weapons. For the love of Mike, it sure is empty!"

The boy rolled over and over on the grass, making faces at his chum and laughing softly.

"Nice time you would have had if they had turned on you!" he said tauntingly, but just at that moment the chum was too busy watching the dog to pay the slightest attention to him.

The dog had again made his appearance on the bank of the river showing all his teeth, and back of him came the outlaws!

They were laughing uproariously, because they, too, remembered that the weapons were empty, all save the one in possession of the outlaw who had set

off in pursuit of the dog. They had discharged them and forgotten all about it.

CHAPTER XVI

JULE IN GREAT DANGER

Case and Thede made the most of the leaky boat, but the most was not fast enough.

“If we only had the *Rambler*, and had it in as good condition as it was at midnight, we could soon learn something of the missing boys, but there is no knowing how far the boat sailed after they left it, and so it is all a guess,” said Case, as he set to work bailing out the boat. “I guess this trip settles the excursions of the *Rambler*.”

Thede laughed. When Case was blue he was always ready to cancel all the dates made for the motor boat.

Thede let him sputter away until he was tired of grumbling, and then suggested:

“The chances are that the *Rambler* ran only a short distance after the boys left her. If the boys have the good sense which they have previously shown, they will follow on down the river, and so make the distance we shall be obliged to travel in this old tub all the shorter. In fact, I am looking for them at every bend in the river. We ought to meet them in a few minutes now.”

“But if they are on the opposite shore, we are going the wrong way about it,” replied Case. “The river is very wide here, and we never could paddle this old tub across it in the face of the current. I don’t see what the boys ever left the boat for. But some people never will learn by experience.”

Thede’s view of the case was certainly a hopeful one, but it was hours before they saw any signs of the lads. Then Case saw Captain Joe running along the river bank barking furiously.

“There’s the first signal!” Thede exclaimed, turning the prow of the boat toward the south shore. “And the dog seems to be in trouble. He seems to be wounded and is just about all in.”

“It strikes me that we had better get to the shore just as soon as possible.”

As Case spoke Alex came out to the river bank alone. Jule was nowhere in sight, and Alex’s clothing was so torn that he looked like a ragman.

“Alex has been up against something pretty strong to give that tired look

to his face," Thede exclaimed as he turned the boat toward the south shore. "Did you ever see a more disreputable human being?"

"Never!" was the reply.

The old tub of a boat struck the beach at last, and was promptly boarded by Alex, who was gasping for breath.

"Did you bring your automatics?" was the first question.

"Sure!" was Case's answer.

As the boy spoke he took a weapon from his pocket and handed it to the lad.

"What's doing?" he asked as he did so. "And where is Jule?"

"Come with me and I'll show you where Jule is," was Alex's reply. "Walk softly! There are others with him. When I give the word you just rush, and rush to some purpose."

Without knowing what they were to meet, Case and Thede swept down into a thicket and, in obedience to a motion from Alex, drew up for a minute and waited.

The three outlaws had captured Jule and were about to burn his feet if he did not tell where his chum was.

"Oh, he'll answer fast enough as soon as he feels the flames tickling his toes," the leader said. "We're going to exterminate this nest of vipers, and don't you forget it!"

"Go as far as you like," Jule answered. "I still refuse to tell. Nice boy I'd be, if I betrayed my chum!"

"We'll see about that!"

One of the outlaws was evidently opposed to what was about to be done, for he drew the leader aside and whispered in his ear for several minutes. At the end of that time the leader shook his head and turned, with a sharp order, to an evil-faced, scowling outlaw who appeared equal to any piece of devilry.

The man addressed was quick to obey the command. He took a handful of matches from a pocket and proceeded to light one of them.

All the time there was a grin upon his face which told how much he enjoyed the assignment.

Jule did not believe that he would be deserted by his chum. He had no idea in what shape the assistance would come, but he was perfectly well satisfied that it would come. Alex had broken away from the robbers and taken to his heels and would be sure to return at the critical moment.

As Jule saw the preparations for torture going on he wished that Alex would hasten to the rescue, but he had no doubt of the final result. Alex was loyal.

"Now," said Case, taking out his automatic, "you see what the intention is. I have a notion that it is the deliberate intention of the devils to torture the boy

to death. How should he know where Alex is? It is a subterfuge to make the act appear more humane. This being the case, what ought we to do to the outlaws?"

"If you don't decide on something pretty soon Jule will get his feet cooked!" interposed Alex. "What ought we to do with the devils? Kill 'em, I say!"

"It does seem that drastic measures should be adopted," the surgeon put in. "Of course, we can't decide what to do with them while they are still at large, but we can make up our minds. It ought to be an easy thing to catch them."

"Oh, we've got 'em now!" Alex added. "None of them has a weapon in sight! It will be just like taking candy away from babies! See! they are taking his shoes off! Mother of Moses! What was that? Looked like a white flash!"

Captain Joe was once more in evidence.

The dog had appeared astonished at the inaction of the rescuing party and reached the conclusion that if anything was done he must do it himself.

As the dog charged in between the leader and the man to whom the duty of burning the boy's feet had been assigned the former drew a revolver and fired, missing the canine by a foot or more. The others drew their revolvers, too, but did not discharge them.

A peremptory order came from the bushes and they dropped the weapons as if they had been red hot.

"Up with your hands!"

Almost before the words were out of the speaker's mouth, the firearms were on the ground. But the leader still retained his huge revolver and was about to use it when the dog seized him by the leg in a vise-like hold.

The revolver dropped to the ground while the man tumbled about in agony, saying many things against the character of the dog. To all of which the dog, who was performing what he regarded as a sacred duty in defending the boy, paid not the slightest heed.

"Call him off!" the leader cried. "If you don't want him killed, call him off!"

By way of reply Alex picked up the long weapon and used it to such good purpose on the head of the fellow that he was soon quite unconscious. In fact, so enraged was the boy that there is little doubt that the man would have been beaten to death if Case had not interfered to prevent his murder.

"What are you doing?" Case demanded. "Do you want to kill the man? I think you would better take a rest and cool off a little."

"Look what was done to Jule by his orders!" answered the lad, still struggling to continue the attack. "Killing is none too good for the likes of him!"

"Save him for the hangman!" advised Jule as he cut the cords which bound him and regained his feet. "We'll tie the bunch up and if they get away all right. If they don't, why that's all right, too!"

"We ought to kill him," was Alex's rejoinder.

"Oh, let him live," laughed Case. "We can afford that much, seeing Jule escaped with whole feet. The chances were against that at one time."

"What shall we do with the others?" asked the surgeon. "They are all equally guilty, I presume."

"The fellow who lighted the match deserves to have his head knocked off," Alex answered. "Did you notice the diabolical grin on his face when given the order?"

One fellow protested in broken Spanish that he had been opposed to the leader all the time, and it was finally decided to bind all three outlaws and leave them on the river bank.

"If we should leave the one who interfered in the interest of mercy," Thede insisted, "he would release the others as soon as our backs were turned, so we may as well treat all alike."

So the outlaws were tied up good and tight, and the four took to the boat again. It was necessary to bail the row boat out frequently as it was still leaking badly, but in time the long stretch of river was passed and the boys came in sight of the *Rambler*.

The last thing the boys heard of the outlaws was a volley of curses from the lips of the leader of the party, who had regained consciousness and was stating in strong words what he would do to the boys if they ever came in his way again.

"What's doing on the *Rambler*?" Jule asked, as they came in view of the motor boat.

There certainly was "something doing," for the deck swarmed with men, and only the cabin was held by Clay and Paul. When the boat came nearer the boys could hear the voice of the parrot ordering the men off the boat.

"Cut it out, cut it out!" he cried. "Get back, get back! You ain't wanted here! Cut it out!"

"Tommy seems to be doing his part, all right," said Alex. "I wonder how long this has been going on?"

"How are we going to get on board the *Rambler*?" asked the surgeon. "All the seats seem to be taken." The men who had taken possession of the boat were now shaking their fists at the boys in the rowboat and offering to beat them up on the most liberal terms.

"The boat now belongs to me!" one of the river thieves shouted, waving his arms in the air. "I take it as abandoned property."

"We'll soon show you!" Alex shouted back.

"Go chase yourself!" shouted Jule. The rowboat kept steadily on her course toward the *Rambler* and some of the more timid of the occupants of the deck began climbing over the rail, but others stood their ground, making a display of firearms.

The boys were all armed now, Case having thoughtfully provided himself with arms for all, and for a moment it looked serious. When the boats touched, however, the *Rambler* was abandoned by those who had taken possession of her and not a shot was fired.

“Had a little mix-up?” asked Case.

“It looked serious about the time you arrived,” Clay responded. “They had us cooped up in the cabin, and there is no knowing what would have happened if you had not come.”

“Now,” said Alex, “suppose we celebrate with a good, square, all-to-the-good meal! It seems about a month since I had anything to eat.”

“You’re always hungry,” commented Case.

“Always hungry!” responded Alex. “Look here! If you get up without going to bed, and butt into a crowd of river thieves, and come near having your feet burned off, wouldn’t that make you hungry? I’ll bet you it would!”

All this time the men on the shore had been shaking their fists and shouting out oaths and cuss words.

CHAPTER XVII ON MEXICAN SOIL AGAIN

This continued for perhaps an hour, the boys paying little attention to the racket made on the river bank. Then a shot was heard and the ragamuffins disappeared as if by magic.

Directly a detachment of United States soldiers made its appearance. The soldiers were warmly welcomed and Alex insisted on giving them all the food he had prepared.

“It’s only to cook more,” he argued.

“But I’m hungry enough right now to eat one of the outlaws,” Jule declared.

“If we’d waited a few minutes longer,” Alex laughed, “you might have had feet fricassee! That was a close call, young man! We got there in the nick of time.”

In time the soldiers were all fed, and then the boys began the work of getting the dinner over again.

The lads were warmly thanked for their hospitality.

“You may get into a place it won’t be so easy to get out of,” said the young

lieutenant in charge of the squad. "If you do, and we are anywhere within reach, don't hesitate to ask for help."

The boys thanked the lieutenant for his offer, not even dreaming of the time when the words so casually spoken were to be made good.

"They about cleaned us out," said Alex, glancing ruefully at the trampled greensward where the soldiers had eaten. "I don't know what to do now! The tinned goods are about gone, and there aren't any vegetables to speak of."

"What's the matter with falling back on the river?" asked Clay, getting out his fishing tackle with his one well arm. "We have taken many a fine meal from the river, and I don't think it will go back on us now!"

"Who'll catch the fish?" asked Jule. "I'm actually so hungry that my stomach is wishing my backbone good afternoon, and I don't feel equal to the effort!"

"Suppose we get the *Rambler* off this mud bank first?" Thede suggested.

"That's a good idea!" Alex cried out.

"Wonder we couldn't have thought of that when we could have had the help of the soldiers!" grumbled Case.

"Kicker!" laughed Jule. "It will be an easy job to get the boat into the river again. She went against the bank with very little force, I take it."

The lads who were not crippled worked together to such good purpose that the boat was soon in the water again. Not a thing was broken except the steering-gear and that was soon repaired.

"Now, about that fish?" Case said. "Who's going to try for it? I might be one of the boys to make the effort."

"I think you had better remain on board," said Alex, "and let Jule and I see about the fish. We are the only old and original fishermen in the party!"

"Go to it, then," Clay agreed, "but don't get into any nest of pirates and get your feet burned!"

The boys were glad to be away on the water again, for there were things they wanted to talk over. Jule was the first one to open the conversation.

"Alex," he began, uncertain how his communication would be received, "what is going on on board the *Rambler*?"

"Why do you ask that?" came the quick reply. "Have you noticed anything unusual?"

"About Paul and Thede," Jule went on, "I have a notion that an understanding of some sort exists between the two."

"And Rube, too?" asked Alex.

"Yes, and Rube also!"

"What do you know about it?" demanded Alex. "What have you seen—or heard?"

"You have suspected, then?" asked Jule.

"Sure!" answered Alex.

"Well?"

"There is certainly something between them," was the reply. "We must keep a sharp lookout."

"But it can't be any plot to capture the *Rambler*," suggested Jule. "They have had plenty of chances to do that."

"How did they get together so soon?" said Alex. "Why, Rube was scarcely on the boat before it began."

"So you noticed that, too, did you?"

"Of course I did!" was the answer. "When you see a man acting as if his very life depended on that of a boy, and that boy apparently a stranger, anyone would suspect. The fellow was too eager to know all about the case! Then, when Thede came on board, didn't you think he got to the side of Paul pretty quickly?"

"Yes, I noticed that, and thought it very strange," was the reply. "Now, what's going to be done about it?"

"All we can do is to watch," declared Alex.

"And where does Buck come in?" Jule asked, after a thoughtful pause. "You noticed that he had an electric boat handy when we needed one, and that the boat made pretty good time for an ordinary river boat! I'd just like to get to the bottom of this thing!"

"And Rube always had his roll out," added Alex.

"But he explained that by saying that he knew all about us boys and knew that we were as good as gold," Jule cut in.

"Well," laughed Alex, "we've got into another mystery! I'd like to take just one plain adventure trip."

"The mystery is all right," Jule concluded, after rather a lengthy pause. "We shouldn't know what to think about if there was no mystery."

"Perhaps you are right," was the reply, "but I'd rather not have the mystery so dense! There's something going on, and that's no joke. But this ain't catching fish!"

"That's right!" Jule agreed. "The others will be getting hungry. As you say, all we can do is to wait for developments and watch Thede and Paul."

"Paul appears to be such an innocent little chap that the very idea of spying on him seems preposterous," added Alex. "Still, the innocence may all be assumed."

"I dislike to think that," was Jule's reply.

The boys talked as they fished, but could make nothing of the situation. As a matter of fact, Rube had appeared out of the darkness that first night in rather a mysterious fashion.

And he had expressed great solicitude for the wounded boy. And he had

always been ready with his money. And, another thing, he had had such a pile of it!

And Buck had had the *Esmeralda* quite ready on short notice! Of course the episode of Alex being treed by the bear was entirely unexpected and just happened.

It interfered somewhat with the plans of the party, and somewhat with Rube's bank roll, but, as Alex declared, "it made the company all the tougher, and did no harm in the long run." It was only incidental, and did not count for or against Thede or Paul.

The lads fished while they discussed every phase of the matter, but at last they were obliged to give it up.

"We'll have to watch and wait," Jule finally said. "If there is mischief afloat, it will show itself in time."

And with this they had to be content.

The *Rambler* was running downstream very slowly, so as not to get ahead of the rowboat; still, as the boys took their time, doing more talking than fishing, it gained on them, and finally turned a bend in the stream and passed out of sight.

"Where's the *Rambler*?" asked Alex, looking up from the contemplation of a fine string of fish.

"I guess she passed out of sight around that bend," was the impatient reply. "Somehow that boat seems to delight in leaving us behind. Wonder why she didn't slow up when the boys saw that she was passing us?"

"We'll catch her in two jerks of a pig's tail," replied Alex, laying down his fishing tackle and picking up the oars. "There does seem to be a fatality about the thing, though—the way she sails calmly away and leaves us!"

The boys had spent a longer time than they had suspected in the discussion of the mysterious movements of the others, and the row was a long one. When they finally came in sight of the boat they were surprised to see no signs of life on board.

And they were amazed at the speed which she had gained. The lads looked at each other with questioning eyes.

"There's something wrong!" almost shouted Jule. "The *Rambler* is running away from us!"

"That's right!" was the quick reply. "Do you think we can catch her at the pace she is going?"

"Never!" was the discouraged reply.

There was silence for a moment, a silence broken only by the rippling of the Rio Grande and the call of a bird a-wing. Then Alex made a hopeful suggestion.

"The river makes a long bend just below," he explained, "and, if we can get to the bottom of the turn, perhaps we can catch her. Nice thing, to run away and

leave us like this!”

“There is evidently something wrong on board, though I can’t for the life of me see what it is,” Jule answered.

“If we cut across this point of land, we’ll have to come back for the rowboat,” suggested Alex.

“Provided some river character doesn’t see it first we may find it,” wailed Jule.

“Well, there’s nothing like trying,” Alex returned.

The boat was turned toward the left bank of the stream, but in a few seconds’ time, before the boat had proceeded more than a few feet, Jule, who was at the helm, changed her course so as to make the right side. In answer to Alex’s questioning look he said:

“The current sweeps across to the opposite shore after we round the bend. The *Rambler* will naturally follow that.”

“That’s right,” was the reply, “the south side for us. How would you like to bump into the river thieves again? Say, kid, but that was a close call for your feet!”

“Well, as long as they didn’t accomplish their purpose, I fail to see why we should be everlastingly sobbing over it.”

The boat’s keel soon grated on the south shore, and the boys left her, pausing only long enough to cast a parting glance at the trim little craft “The chances are that we shall never see the boat again,” Alex remarked.

“Rats!” was Jule’s reply. “If we find everything all right on board the *Rambler*, why can’t we come back and get her? I have a notion that the boys thought we were a long time catching these fish, and sent the boat ahead faster than usual just to give us a scare.”

“That’s all right,” replied Alex, “but I’ve got a hunch that you are wrong. Case would never sail away from his breakfast,” he added with a laugh, “and I don’t think there’s much left on board in the eating line.”

“What about the fish?” Jule asked. “We may as well tote them along, don’t you think?”

“Of course,” replied Alex. “We ain’t going to leave this nice mess of perfectly good fish in the boat. There may be people along here who like fish.”

The lads lifted the string of fish out of the rowboat, and, taking them in

hand, struck across the point of land toward the river.

CHAPTER XVIII

A SLIPPERY CUSTOMER

The Rio Grande makes a long bend where the boys left it, and almost returns upon itself after winding in and out for many miles. The land is swampy in places as the river approaches Painted Cave, but mountains show, too, and the country is without any population to speak of. Its general features are rugged.

As the lads alternated between rocky soil and swamp, they had little leisure for conversation. It took about all their strength and agility to make their way, leaping, now, over pools of water, now climbing over rocky elevations.

The Southern Pacific runs close to the river here, and the boys could hear the trains moving along the line, on the American side. Now and then they caught sight of moving cars.

"I'm pretty nearly all in," Jule complained, as they halted on a dry elevation to catch their breath. "I don't suppose we could have chosen a rougher country than this if we had looked for a thousand years! It's fierce!"

"Oh, it's good enough—for a mountain-climbing goat!" Alex answered, wrinkling his nose. "What do you think about our being able to catch that boat?"

"I give it up!" Jule said, beginning to whistle.

He broke off after a minute and remarked:

"In the light of recent developments, what do you think of the situation? Clay and Case are true as steel, and, between them, they ought to be able to put Thede and Paul on their backs, especially as the latter has a broken leg!"

"What's got into you?" demanded Alex. "You talk like Case! And Case in his bluest moments! I've not given up yet. Thede and Paul are all right! I'll bank on it!"

Jule laughed heartily.

"So will I!" he said. "I'll bank on it, too! If there is any mischief afloat, they are not in it. Only, I wish they would come out into the open, and tell us frankly what it is they are up to. It seems to me that that would be the honorable way."

"Let's not pass judgment until we know all about it," replied Alex, taking up the string of fish and going on again.

The way was even rougher than before, now, and the lads were soon

obliged to stop for a breathing spell. In the distance they now could see the Rio Grande, shimmering under the setting sun.

"We've got to make better time if we connect with the *Rambler* before night sets in," Jule said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "If there ever was a rockier road than this, we have never found it I think we would better dump the fish. They are a good deal of a burden to carry."

"There they go!" Alex exclaimed, suiting action to the word, and tossing the fish down a rocky incline. "I wish we had some of them cooked! I'm so hungry that I could eat two pirates!"

"Well, here we go, in light marching order!" volunteered Jule. "If you get there before I do, just tell 'em I'm a-coming!"

The boy hummed the words of the old song over to himself, and assumed a cheerfulness he did not feel. It was fast growing dark, and the way was rocky, with pools of river water in places where the rocks pushed back from the shore.

And so, the lads pressed forward, with Jule still humming his tune and Alex laughing himself red in the face at thought of the plight they were in.

"Might as well laugh as cry," was his comment on the situation.

At last they came to smoother ground, with the river showing under the setting sun, and paused to study the scene.

Directly their glances, following the windings of the stream, came upon the *Esmeralda*! They regarded each other with eyes which asked many questions but found no answer.

"How did that boat get here?" asked Alex. "We left her far up the river."

"Don't ask me!" was the reply.

"Well," continued Alex, "it's up to us to find out!"

The boat lay rocking in the river only a short distance from where the boys had halted. The prow light was on, and the craft gave other indications of occupancy, so the theory that she had broken loose and drifted to where she lay was not to be thought of.

The motor boat lay close to the right bank of the stream, and the question how she got there could not be easily answered, so the lads made haste to gain the little landing where she was tied.

The Rio Grande is a very shallow stream, often spreading out over a large stretch of country. Indeed, it is navigable for boats of medium size only below the city of Matamoros.

Therefore Alex and Jule were obliged to wade out to the boat when they came opposite her. Their first sight of the deck was rather a surprise.

Instead of showing excitement, it was calm as a morning in May. Buck sat on the railing of the craft, with his back toward the shore, pointing out the beauties of the landscape to Rube, who was standing not far away.

They both turned face about when the noise made by the boys in climbing to the deck attracted their attention, and advanced to meet them with hands extended.

"This sure is a sight good for sore eyes!" cried Rube, and the greeting of Buck was not less friendly.

"Now, will you explain just how the *Esmeralda* come to be here?" Jule said, after greetings had been exchanged. "We left her a long way upstream."

"And how is it that we find you here, out of reach of the *Rambler*, and walking across country?" asked Buck.

"That's just the point," Alex answered grimly, "we haven't seen the *Rambler* for several hours, and are walking across country to try and head her off!"

The boy thought he saw a quick glance of understanding pass from Rube to Buck, but he could not be certain.

Then he explained about the fishing trip and the flight of the motor boat. Rube and Buck listened attentively, but with the air of men who had heard all that story before.

"And so," Buck said, at the completion of the narration, "you want to catch the *Rambler*?"

"That's precisely the idea," answered Jule. "But you haven't told us yet why you are here. You must have passed us on some dark night, when there was no one on watch."

"You are taking it for granted that the *Rambler* has been passed," laughed Buck.

"Well, has she?" questioned Alex.

"Yes, she has, and under the most peculiar circumstances," was Buck's reply. "She had another visit from the man who left the 'To the Death' written on her rowboat."

"But I don't understand," exclaimed Jule. "How did he overtake us, and why did he run away?"

"Perhaps your curiosity will be satisfied before the end of the trip," Buck replied, significantly. "By the way, here comes the motor boat we were speaking of."

As he spoke he pointed to the *Rambler*, already drawing up to the *Esmeralda*.

"Do they know about our crossing the point to come out ahead of them?" asked Alex. "If they don't I'll give them a surprise."

"Go to it, then," laughed Buck.

Both boys hid under the rail of the boat and waited for the crew of the *Rambler* to speak. Both boys were giggling at the thought of the joke they had on the other boys.

“Boat ahoy!” came the call.

“Boat ahoy yourself!” was the answer.

“Come aboard!” cried Buck. “I have something I want to show you. It’s a peach!”

“Not a really, truly peach?” demanded Case’s voice.

“You’ll see what it is when you come on board,” replied Rube with a chuckle.

The boat drew up alongside and both Case and Thede crossed over to the deck of the *Esmeralda*. Then Alex and Jule sprang out and seized them.

At the termination of a friendly struggle, when all four were out of breath, the surgeon held Jule off at arm’s length and claimed to be inspecting him with great gravity.

“You’re the boy,” he finally said, “who went out to catch fish for starving men! Give an account of yourself!”

“Oh, the explanations ought to come from your own side!” said Jule, struggling to get away. “We didn’t sail away and leave you.”

“So that’s it, is it?” laughed Thede. “Well, under the circumstances, you are forgiven, but don’t do it again!”

“What about this desertion of us on the rolling deep?” asked Alex. “You’ve got to square that, you know!”

“Well, then, here goes!” replied Case, his face taking on a serious expression, “as soon as you boys got well out into the river, we felt the boat give a little dip to one side, but thought nothing of it. We must have been drifting an hour or more when we heard a rustling in the cabin, and Captain Joe, who had been growling at the side of the boat for the better part of half an hour, ever since he woke up, in fact, grew furious.

“Then he sprang through the open window which leads to the after deck and disappeared in the river. The jarring of the boat we had felt came from the impact of a human body against it! The dog had followed the intruder into the stream!”

“Did he get him?” asked Jule and Alex, in a breath.

“He did not,” was the answer.

“Too bad!” Alex answered. “That dog isn’t any good. If he had been he wouldn’t have slept when the boat was invaded!”

“Is that all the story?” asked Jule.

“Well, we followed on after the fellow until we were around a bend in the river, and then came on, thinking that you boys would find us, never thinking that we should find you here,” replied Case.

“What do you think that fellow means by following the *Rambler*?” asked Jule. “For no good purpose, I’m certain!”

“Did he leave any writing on the boat anywhere?” questioned Alex. “You

know what he left the last time he paid us an unfriendly visit. I'd like pretty well to get him by the neck!" he added, with a tightening of the fists which boded no good to the fellow, whoever he might be.

"And now," Jule cut in, "will you kindly explain how those on this boat knew that the stranger had paid the *Rambler* a visit on his way downstream. There is something mysterious about this whole business! Something I can't get to the bottom of!"

"And I'd like to know when you passed us!" said Case, looking at Rube.

The giant only grinned.

"Out with it!" the lad commanded.

"Well," was the reply, "I suppose I'll have to tell! When I said the *Rambler* had been passed, I didn't mean that we had passed her in the original channel of the Rio Grande. We took a side channel!"

"A side channel!" exclaimed Jule. "We saw no side channels! Where is it?"

"Just above the route you boys followed there is an island. Didn't you notice it?"

"We thought it was nothing but a false alarm, leading nowhere," replied Jule.

"The channel is rather narrow, but the water is deep enough to take in a boat like the *Esmeralda*," was Rube's reply.

"Still, I can't see how that helps you out," continued Alex. "The island may be there, all right, but the island can't talk! It didn't tell you that the fellow had paid another visit to the *Rambler*, did it? Who did tell you?"

"He told me himself!"

"But how did he tell you, and where?" demanded Alex. "You are getting me all balled up!"

"Well," replied Rube, with a grin, "we drew aside in the channel I've been telling you about, thinking to catch some fish for dinner. You see we had the fish idea, too! The *Rambler* was ahead of us at that time, but we knew of the island channel and thought we could come out in the main channel just a little ahead of her."

"Which you did!" cut in Case.

"Exactly!" was the reply. "Just as the *Rambler* passed the mouth of the channel, you boys were launching the rowboat!"

"You fellows must have had a late dinner!" commented Alex.

"Not so awfully late!" Rube replied. "You boys took more time fishing than you realized. Well, while we were hidden in the entrance to the channel we saw a man leave the *Rambler* and strike out for shore.

"We were lucky enough to intercept him when he was nearly exhausted with his swimming, and so we've got a surprise for you!"

In the meantime Clay had been helped over to the deck of the *Esmeralda*, and was investigating the cabin. He was still very lame from his wound, his left arm being in a sling, but was on the road to recovery.

Captain Joe, too, came on board, and was promptly forgiven by Alex. He patted the dog's head and said to him:

"I know that you are an old sleepy-head, but you're a darling just the same!"

And Captain Joe nodded his head, just as if he understood all the boy said.

At that moment Clay appeared in the doorway of the cabin. He was greeted with looks of inquiry by both Rube and Buck.

"Did you find him?" Buck asked.

"Find him?" repeated the boy. "Who is there to find? I discovered only a badly mussed cabin.

What's been going on in there? Looks like a tornado had passed through it. You must have been having quite a merry time on board."

Both Rube and Buck sprang for the cabin.

"What's doing?" asked the astonished Alex. "Has everybody gone daffy, or have Rube and Buck discovered an oil well in the bottom of the boat?" The boys hastened to enter the cabin, where they found Rube and Buck bending over a broken strap.

"Now, what do you know about that?" the former was asking.

Buck shook his head, looking very much disgruntled.

CHAPTER XIX

RUBE TELLS A STORY

For a moment Buck and Rube looked as if they could not believe the evidence of their senses, then both broke into a hearty laugh. Then they shook hands and laughed again.

"Well," said Clay, "I hope, when you fellows get done with your monkey-work, that you'll condescend to tell us what you find so funny. It won't take long to give it a name."

Buck and Rube rushed out of the little cabin and gazed long and earnestly into the fast-gathering night. They walked to the side of the boat and looked over into the water. Then they roared again, to the disgust of the boys.

Alex tapped the top of his head significantly.

"They've gone mad!" he said.

The boys had followed Rube and Buck out to the deck, and now stood in a little circle about them.

"I don't see any evidences of insanity," laughed Thede, "but they will doubtless become raving mad in a moment!"

"Too bad!" cried Jule.

In the meantime Rube and Buck had had their laugh out and settled back on the seat which ran along the inner side of the railing. The faces of the two men were blank with amazement.

"Did you tie him tight?" asked Buck.

"You know it!" was the reply.

Again the men arose and walked into the cabin.

"He's sure gone!" Rube said.

"He's gone, all right!" answered Buck.

"When you have had your fun out, perhaps you'll tell us who it is that's gone!" ventured Alex, wrinkling his nose and attempting to speak very sternly, and, of course, making a failure of it, "because, you've had quite a time at this foolishness."

"Well," replied Rube, "we had a surprise for you, but there don't seem to be anything doing in the astonishment line! We had little old 'To the Death' nicely trussed up in the cabin, but it seems that he got away!"

"Got away!" exclaimed Case and Jule in a breath.

"Yes, sir, got away!" replied the giant.

"Nice fellows you are!" exploded Case, sourly. "Why didn't you tie him up so he wouldn't get away?"

By this time Buck and Rube were almost as well acquainted with Case's temper as were the other boys, so no attention was paid to this outburst of grouch.

"Where do you think he went?" asked Thede.

"You know as much about it as I do," answered Rube. "Just take a look into the cabin."

The cabin was a sight! Clothing was scattered over the floor, the mirror which hung above the sideboard was in tiny pieces, and the general appearance of the place was "on the bum," as Alex expressed it. The boys gazed at the disorder for a moment and then returned to the deck to think it out.

By this time it was quite dark. A storm was coming up, and the boys decided to tie up for the night where they were.

There was plenty of provisions on the *Esmeralda*, and the hungry boys made a hearty meal. Thede and Clay shortly returned to the *Rambler* to acquaint Paul with what was going on.

"It seems to me," said Buck, straightening up the disordered cabin, "that

you boys have something in your minds that we ought to know, being as we are to sail together for a few days.”

“I don’t think we have anything on you, if we have!” Alex replied. “What’s it about those private interviews between Paul and yourselves?”

“You caught on, did you?” asked Rube, with a laugh. “Well, it is about time for a show-down, I reckon, don’t you think so, Buck?”

Buck nodded, and Rube continued.

“I don’t know whether I can tell this story accordin’ to Hoyle, but I’ll try. Once upon a time, as the story books say, there was an old miser who wanted the earth and the fullness thereof. Is that O. K., Buck? Does she start out right?”

Buck laughed good-naturedly, nodding his head again, and Rube went on.

“This old gazabo was the uncle and administrator of the estate of a minor heir. Don’t I get any help in this narration?”

Rube waited a moment for a reply, but, none coming, he went on again, stammering and making a great mess of it. To tell the truth, Alex and Jule were too much interested in the story which was still coming to do anything to interrupt it.

“The old uncle was also gardeen of this minor heir, and it is easy to guess what a life he led the boy. By the way, it may be well to state right here that this old man was next of kin, and would inherit a fortune if the heir should die.”

Rube paused a moment to wipe his forehead, and then went on, after casting an appealing glance in Buck’s direction.

“This lad, who was only sixteen, thought the gardeen’s plans all wrong, and, after thinking the matter over a long time, decided to elope with himself, which he did!”

“Why don’t you mention names?” demanded Jule. “The boy’s name was Paul Stegman, wasn’t it?”

“You just wait until the story is finished,” answered Rube, with a broad grin. “Well, the old geezer tried his level best to catch the boy and land him in a home for imbeciles, or some such shop, but the kid had disappeared.

“One day the old man thought of one kink that hadn’t been worked, and that was the West. So he entered into correspondence with three men—a surgeon, and two officers of the law.”

“Now, you’re getting down to brass tacks!” shouted Jule. “Did these men catch the kid?”

“Yes, they discovered his whereabouts, but they hadn’t the heart to disturb him. You see, he had fallen into good hands. After being robbed of his boat and beaten almost to death, one of the searchers found him, one wild night, lying on his back in the rain.”

“Thought it was Paul,” Alex announced. “Why didn’t these men take him

back to his uncle?"

"Not so you could notice it!" was the reply.

Alex and Jule both arose and gravely shook the hands of both men. Then they returned to their seats.

"But I don't yet understand how the surgeon came to be standing on the river bank in the rain," Jule cut in.

"He had just been put off the *Rambler*, then in possession of the pirates," Alex added.

"Not so fast!" Rube continued. "He had been put off the *Rambler* some time before, after setting a broken leg for the boy. At that time the pirates began to see that the boy was worth more to them alive than dead. In other words, they decided to hold him for ransom."

"But where does the surgeon come in?" asked Alex. "He says he was engaged in the practice of medicine in a little town up the river—was he?"

"Yes, I think he told the truth about that," was the reply. "I reckon he wasn't making any too much money though, and was about ready to quit when the miser offered his reward."

"Offered a reward, did he?" said Jule. "This will be news to Paul! How much is the reward?"

"Five thousand."

"Gee!" shouted the boy. "I'd like to get my hands on that sum myself."

"I think I've got all the parties in this story sized up now but I'd like to know if you ever had a ranch?"

"Now look here, kid," Rube answered, "don't get too personal in your remarks! Why, of course I've got a ranch! The only lie I told you boys was about that brindle steer! I've got a brindle steer, but I didn't lose him that rainy night."

"You're a fraud!" exclaimed Jule. "I infer, then, that Buck and yourself are officers of the law!"

Buck turned the lapel of his coat and showed the badge of a United States marshal.

"There you are!" he said "If you want any papers served, you have come to the right shop!"

"Now I see," remarked Alex, "how the *Esmeralda* came to be so handy! I never suspected it at the time."

"You are a pair of frauds! Just as Jule said," ventured Alex, speaking after a pause. "How long have you known each other?"

"A matter of ten years!" Rube answered, with a chuckle. "I reckon it's been about that time, eh, Buck?" he added, with a grin that spread over his face. "And we've been pretty good friends, at that, never went back on each other, eh?"

"I guessed that you had something to do with the law, yourself," cried Jule,

remembering a time when Rube had hastily put a silver badge out of sight. "Out with it!"

"Well, you see, the boys up in our neck of the woods seemed to think I'd make a fair sheriff, and so they elected me," Rube stated, coloring as he did so, for it had been no part of his program that the boys should know him as the sheriff of his county.

"Now, if you'll tell how you came to know Thede, we'll call it square," Alex suggested.

"Oh, he belongs up in my county, and of course I know him," was Rube's reply. "But," he added, "I'm afraid we've got to lose him, for the hard-luck story he told you boys was about right. He's a right pert boy, and we hate to lose him."

By this time the wind was blowing a gale, and Buck arose to make the *Rambler* and the *Esmeralda* more secure. Vivid flashes of lightning lit the sky, and presently the rain began to fall in torrents.

It was hot, too, and the boys were stripped to their shirts, Alex, who was short and fat, was fanning himself with a newspaper. He gave a little start of surprise at something he saw in the sheet, but said not a word.

Case and Thede called out that they were all right, and that Clay was in the cabin, sitting by Paul, who was sound asleep.

"We heard nearly everything Rube said," laughed Case, "and the parts he missed Thede told me! And so, you see, you are discovered—taken with the goods!"

"For the love of Mike!" shouted Alex. "Do you suppose Paul heard, too?"

"He's sound asleep," was the reply.

"It makes no difference if he did," suggested Buck. "He has been wise to the game since the first day."

"Oh, all right, then," was Alex's answer. "What does the kid think about your program? Is he enjoying this trip on the Rio Grande? He's in no shape, with his broken leg, to take much comfort."

"He thinks he's lucky to be alive, after the treatment given him up the river," Buck said. "You see, he got beaten up before they got the notion of holding him for ransom."

"I don't understand," interposed Jule. "If the old miser wanted him murdered, he must have gotten into communication with the robbers, and offered them a large sum to do the job!"

"That's just the point!" answered Buck. "That's what we want to find out! That's just what we are taking this trip for—to give the brutes a good chance to show their hands. Ordinarily, it would be enough to frustrate the old miser and the robbers, but someone must be punished for this mix-up, and we want to get the right ones."

“And so the robbers are double-crossing the miser?” asked Alex. “They are going to play the blackmail game? Well, if he bargained with them to do murder, they can get about all he has!”

Alex, cutting his talk short, and pointing to a rim of trees standing not far away. Through the slanting rain a low clicking sound, the clicking of metal on metal.

“What’s doing over there?” the lad asked. “Sounds like a machine shop.”

All listened intently for a time. The sound had ceased now, and there was only the patter of the falling rain.

Buck arose to his feet and stood just outside the cabin, regardless of the fast-falling rain. He was listening for the sound to be repeated. Presently it came again.

“Counterfeiters!” exclaimed Rube.

The spot was a lonely one, one to fit well with the making of illegal coin. A range of low hills lay close to the river on the Mexican side, where the two boats lay.

It was too dark to see them now, but Buck explained that they were there, and that the spot was one frequented by outlaws of every description.

“Suppose we land and make sure,” Alex suggested.

“Yes,” said Jule, in a whisper, “I vote yes on that proposition—it will be jolly to catch a gang of counterfeiters. We have never had any such luck!”

“You are likely to get a bullet through your anatomy!” Buck answered. “Counterfeiters are not river thieves.”

“We carry a surgeon to cut it out if we do!” laughed Jule. “I’m going anyhow! The idea of catching a live counterfeiter appeals to me. What do you say, Alex?”

“I’m game!” was the reply.

Buck and Rube laughed softly.

They knew that the lads would go, rain or shine, and were already making preparations to go with them. Thede was called over to the *Esmeralda* and given instructions, and the two men, accompanied by the boys, started away through the storm, taking the direction from which the sounds came.

CHAPTER XX

TAKEN AT LAST

Paul awoke shortly after Thede's departure for the *Esmeralda*, and Clay, Case and himself spent some moments wondering about the success of the night expedition in the rain.

Case and Clay only laughed at the idea of the counterfeiter being taken, declaring that the clicking sounds which the men had heard probably came from a long distance, and that, anyhow, there wouldn't be any counterfeiters present when they came, after a long tramp in the rain, to the locality where they had been.

"They are slippery people, these counterfeiters," Case argued, getting ready for supper, "and are not to be caught napping. When you get where you can put your finger on them, they are not there!"

"But suppose, for a minute, that they did catch them," urged Paul, "what are they going to do with them? They might be kept on the *Esmeralda*. She is not loaded down with people like the *Rambler*."

"Catch your men before you find places for them!" Case laughed. "If the boys do catch them, we'll find a place to store them!"

"Say," said Clay, sniffing at the rather meager supper cooking on the electric stove, "is that the best you can do in the way of supper? I could eat all that myself, and then want more! Suppose we go over to the *Esmeralda* for supper?"

"It is only a short time since you had your supper," Case laughed. "I was just preparing a little snack because there was nothing else to do. If you want a hearty meal, you sure will have to go to the *Esmeralda* for it."

"You know what Alex said about leaving the fish by the roadside," Clay laughed. "How would you like some of those fish right now? They would go pretty good, eh?"

"I wonder if I could find them?" Case said.

"In this storm? I should say not! Forget it!"

But Case seemed fascinated with the idea of getting those fish, and referred to the fact that they were lying there in the rain, doing no one any good, several times during the next few minutes. At last Clay said with a laugh:

"Oh, go on and get the fish, if you are so stuck on doing it! There won't be any peace on the boat until you have tried! I haven't any idea that you will succeed, but you can try!"

Case arose from the locker, where he had been sitting, and, going to the window, looked out on the driving rain. The night was sultry, and the rain splashing on the deck of the motor boat seemed rather attractive.

The boy threw off the light coat he had worn and stood in undershirt and light trousers. After looking critically at his feet for a second, he proceeded to put on a pair of coarse shoes, well calculated for walking in rocky places.

"So you are going, after all!" Clay laughed. "Well, good luck go with you!"

If a crazy notion ever got into a boy's head, one has entered yours now! The idea of going out in this storm! Why, it is raining some, I tell you!"

"Who cares for the rain?" was the reply. "I shall enjoy the trip immensely! If we had Alex or Jule here to explain their line of march, we'd have fish to eat!"

"But they are not here," commented Clay, "and one might as well look for a needle in a load of hay as to try to follow their footsteps. Better give the thing up!"

"No," was the reply, "I'll get a good bath, anyhow, and I may find the fish, though it's dollars to apples that I don't!"

The boy took up his searchlight and crossed over to the *Esmeralda*, which lay between the *Rambler* and the Mexican shore. There he had a hearty laugh at the idea of the lad venturing out in the rain.

"You've got the fish notion as badly as Rube and Buck have the counterfeiters' hunch," he said. "When they get where they are, they won't be there."

"All right!" was the reply. "If I can't get the fish, I'll get a good bath! Say, Clay is over there on the *Rambler*, starving to death! Can't you get him over here and fill him up?"

"Sure!" was the ready response. "I can stuff him like we do raccoons!"

"I guess that will hold him for a while!" laughed Case.

With that he left the boat, and the last seen of him was the round hole made in the night by his searchlight.

Clay and Paul were left alone on the *Rambler*. Clay told Paul what he had heard of the plans of the four adventurers, closing with the statement that they would succeed only in getting soaked to the skin.

They had a frisky time with Captain Joe, the cub, and the parrot, putting the latter through all his tricks, and the cub also coming in for a share of the frolic. The dog soon grew weary of the game, and took refuge out in the rain.

"What's the matter with Captain Joe?" asked Paul. "He doesn't appear to be in his usual spirits! Perhaps he's sulking because he was not invited to the counterfeiter hunt!"

The parrot was in a talkative mood, and reeled off such sayings as he had heard the boys repeat by the yard. At last he cocked his head on one side and shouted:

"Come out of that! Come out of that! What are you hiding for? What are you hiding for?"

"That's odd!" Clay exclaimed, looking about the cabin of the *Rambler* curiously. "I never knew the bird to act in that way before. He usually contents himself with shorter questions."

"I believe there's something going on," Paul declared, almost in a whisper. "Listen!"

Both boys listened for a moment, and then Clay stepped to the door, or window, leading to the aft deck and threw it open, remarking, as he did so, that it was a wonder it had not been open all the evening.

Then came the surprise of his life.

As Clay threw the window open a grinning face confronted him—a low, mean face, with small, black eyes, a bulldog chin, and a forehead which seemed like that of a snake, it sloped so, and was so narrow. The fellow, who was slender of form, extended a threatening revolver in his right hand and climbed through the window.

Clay was not armed, and he knew that Paul was in the same fix. Weapons lay all about him in the cabin, but none was within reach.

“What do you want?” demanded the lad, watching for an opportunity to get out of range of the weapon.

“You!” was the laconic answer.

“But,” Clay began, but the leveled revolver stopped him, for he saw murder in the little eyes.

The first work of the intruder was to collect all the weapons in sight and put them out of reach of the boy, who stood in the meantime with his hands raised above his head.

Then Paul received his attention. The fellow made a critical examination of the broken leg, smiling as he did so.

“You have taken excellent care of him,” was his only comment.

“What is it that you want?” Clay asked again, still watching for his chance.

“Your boat,” answered the fellow.

He paused a moment, as if considering, and then nodded his head in the direction of the place where Paul was lying, with his hands also well up in the air.

“And the kid,” he added.

“If it is money you want, name the sum,” Clay said. “He has been hurt, and can’t be moved.”

The fellow chuckled and made no reply. He took some strong cord from a pocket and proceeded to tie Clay. Was there no chance of escape? If Case would only return!

The tying went on, and Clay was obliged to endure it. If some of the boys would come!

Where was Captain Joe? Somehow, that dog never was where he was wanted! If he would only come now!

Perhaps he had been silenced by a blow on the head. But no; the dog was out on the front deck, and the intruder had entered the cabin from the rear.

The man who seemed to have taken undisputed possession of the *Rambler*,

first taking care to place the weapons beyond the reach of Paul, proceeded then to put the motors in motion. Clay watched him as he did so with anxious eyes, hoping to see him push the wrong lever, but the fellow did nothing of the kind.

All this time rain had been falling in great sheets, but now there came a lull in the storm.

The cords hurt Clay's wounded arm, and he uttered an involuntary groan of pain. As if attracted by the cry, Captain Joe appeared in the cabin doorway!

The dog was quick to take in the situation, and, before he could make a move to defend himself, had the fellow by the throat. He had not counted on Captain Joe!

The fellow gasped as the teeth of the dog tore at his throat, and he tried to cry out, but was unable to do so. Together they rolled here and there on the cabin floor.

The noise of the struggle attracted the attention of Thede, who lost no time in getting on board the boat. At a word from Clay the dog released his hold, and the man fell back in a faint.

"I wonder if he's dead?" Thede said, as he bent over the unconscious man. "It surely isn't the fault of the dog if he still has life in his body!"

Then he paused a moment and looked about. He saw the plight Clay was in and hastened to release him.

"It seems to me that you kept this little performance rather private!" he said as he cut the cords. "How did he get into the cabin?"

"Came in by the window, from the after deck," was the reply. "Strange you didn't see or hear him when he crossed from the *Esmeralda*!"

"The rain probably prevented the noise he made, if he made any at all, being heard, and the chances are that he didn't make any! The people who go forth on the mission he seems to have been on usually make as little stir as possible."

The surgeon now gave his attention to the man, who had been severely injured by the dog, who now stood close by to see that he did not escape. He was covered with blood, his throat being badly torn.

"It seems to me that I'm having a right smart practice on this boat!" he said, with a smile. "I'll have to go to the other boat for my instruments. That is a ragged wound!"

"Don't you recognize the fellow?" asked Clay. "Don't think I ever saw him before."

"You saw his back, and that was under water," Clay urged. "Now do you know what I mean?"

"Not little 'To the Death'? I never guessed that!"

"That's who it is."

Thede now left for the *Esmeralda*, and Clay busied himself stanching the

blood, which was flowing from the wound in the man's neck in a steady stream.

Presently he heard voices and listened to catch the words. It was Alex and Jule, talking excitedly, and evidently making good use of their legs.

"I'm going to get the *Rambler* and run down," Alex's voice said. "If Buck and Rube get the others, there'll sure be a load!"

The rain had ceased, and the stars were shining, lighting the rocks with a silvery radiance. There would be a moon later on.

"Now, what does the kid mean by that?" mused Clay, forgetting for the moment to care for the injured man.

CHAPTER XXI

A NIGHT OF WATCHING

Rube and Buck, accompanied by Alex and Jule, passed through the rain with no thought but that of capturing the counterfeiters in their minds. The rain fell steadily, making a great patter on the leaves of the forest trees, so conversation was difficult.

"They have chosen a fine locality for the job," suggested Buck, pausing to wipe the sweat from his face. "This certainly is a section of country where they are not likely to receive many visitors."

"That's right," Jule agreed. "This spot makes one think of graveyards and ghosts!"

The steady click of metal now came more distinctly, and presently a light was discernible through the trees. Then the party halted for consultation, standing close together to avoid being overheard. There was no knowing how many trees sheltered listeners.

It was finally decided that Rube and Alex should proceed to the right, while Buck and Jule took the opposite direction.

"We sure can surround 'em, anyway, and we may be able to capture a few of 'em!" Rube suggested. "Mighty slippery people, these gentlemen who make bogus coin!" he added, snapping off his searchlight.

The snapping off of the light made the forest as dark as a pocket, but this condition existed for only a few minutes, for the light of a great fire in a cave of large size shone out upon the stealthily advancing men.

"It strikes me," commented Alex, "that they've got a heap of nerve to build

a fire like that. How do they know who'll be passing along here?"

Rube chuckled softly.

"You are in Mexico now, son, where the people wink at all the crimes in the book of laws. Besides, these people are about as likely to have callers as pigs are to fly!"

"Well, we've got to the nest, now how are we to get inside?" asked Alex, wrinkling his nose in perplexity. "We might rush in on 'em, quick, and catch 'em with the goods!"

"Watch, and wait for Buck and Jule to come up," was the slow reply. "They may be able to suggest some plan. Whatever you do, be careful. These people shoot quick and straight. The first thing you know, you won't know anything!"

They waited a long time for Buck and Jule, but at last they came, having taken a route which led to the other side of the rocky elevation which formed the base of the cave. It was only by the quick display of a searchlight that Rube and Alex located their chums.

Then a long conference was held, Jule and Alex being in favor of rushing the place and taking it by storm, while Buck and Rube were more conservative.

"Don't you boys get us into any place we can't get out of," said Rube, with a little laugh. "If we go into that cave we are likely to do just that very thing!"

"All right," replied Alex, "if you want to sneak in just go on and we'll follow!"

There were four men in the cave, all so busy over their work that they did not have time to grab a single weapon for their own defense, so the fight which followed was very short.

Rube felled one of the four with a blow of his fist, and the others yielded to the persuasions of the automatics. When all were tied up, and after the boys had searched the cavern for more, another consultation was held.

"I wonder if they are all here?" Alex said, regarding the captured prisoners with a smile. "Call the roll, someone who knows all the names! I pass on these Mexican names!"

The boy's question called forth only sullen looks and scowls. It was easy to see what would have been the fate of the boys had the conditions been reversed.

Both Buck and Rube understood a few words of Spanish, and tried their best to enter into conversation with their prisoners, but all their questions were answered by scowling looks.

A search of the cave revealed a complete counterfeiter's assortment of tools and dies used in the work, together with considerable silver. The dies were destroyed, and as much of the silver as could be carried without inconvenience appropriated.

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

“Oh, it will come in handy, all right!” answered Buck. “Mexican law provides for turning it over to the government, but as there is no government to speak of, we’ll just geeze it! If we turn it over to the people who have charge of the government, there is no knowing whether it will ever get into circulation.”

Once more they tried to talk with the prisoners, but received only scowls in reply. So they gave up the attempt and began the return trip.

“This capture has been an easy one,” was Jule’s comment, as the boys walked along in the rear of the two men who were taking good care that the captured men did not escape. “A little bit too easy!”

“Why too easy?”

“Oh, we may have trouble yet,” was Jule’s reply.

It did look that way to the boys. The prisoners kept an eye out for a chance to make a run for it.

Now and then one of them halted for an instant to listen, but, hearing nothing, walked on again.

“That fellow is expecting someone to rescue him,” Alex said, after some distance had been passed. “Anyhow, we are too near the boats now for any attempt at rescue to prove successful.”

“How do you know that?” demanded Jule. “The boats are no protection. If we find them as we usually have, they’ll need help from us. What’s that?”

The prisoners had made a break for liberty, and, taking advantage of a rocky spot where walking was very difficult, had darted off, bound as they were. Buck and Rube fired several shots, but the men ran all the faster.

At last two of the men were found, lying hidden under a bush, but the others could not be discovered, though the lads searched all around.

“We’re lucky to have these two left!” Alex said with a grin. “If the others don’t attack us before we get to the boats, we’ll be lucky. Our searchlights make a good mark!”

“And they can hear the noise we make going through the bushes a mile off!” added Jule.

“Suppose we go on ahead and search the river?” proposed Alex. “We can run up and down the stream, anyway. The stars are shining, and the light is fine. Then we can take the *Rambler* and run her up and down stream. I’ve got a hunch that they will make for the river and try to cross to the American side.”

“I don’t see why they should do that,” was the reply. “There are plenty of mountains, or high ground at least, for them to hide in. But you may be right. We’ll try the river first.”

After searching the bank of the river, the boys made for the *Rambler*, crossed the *Esmeralda*, and went on board. There they found the surgeon bending over the injured man and everything in confusion.

“What’s doing here?” asked Jule.

Then Clay told the story of the attack on the boat and how Captain Joe came to the rescue.

“Good dog!” cried Alex, stroking the dog’s head. “Don’t you, none of you, ever call him a no-account cur again! This makes two men he has pulled down lately. That is a fair record for a cur dog, don’t you think?”

“Captain Joe is a peach of a dog!” cut in Jule. “I shall never forget how he jumped that river pirate who was lighting the match to bum my feet!”

“Do you know who this man is?” asked Clay, after a short pause, during which the dog was petted and caressed to his heart’s content. “Give a guess.”

The boys made a close examination of the man’s features, but they were so bloody that identification was difficult, if not impossible.

“I give it up!” said Alex.

“So do I!” chorused Jule.

Then the surgeon told who the injured man was, and the boys expressed great satisfaction.

“We’ll see that he don’t get away a second time,” Clay declared. “He’s a tricky chap, but he will stay put now. By the way, where’s Case—on the *Esmeralda*, I take it.”

Clay and Paul looked at each other with sober eyes.

“Case left the boat two hours ago,” answered Clay. “He said he was going to look for the fish you boys left, and should have been back within half an hour.”

“He seems to be setting up a rivalry to Alex,” laughed Paul. “That boy certainly can have more adventures in less time than any boy in the wide world!”

“Oh, Clay can go some in that line!” laughed Alex, “but where do you think the boy is?”

“Why didn’t Captain Joe go with him?” asked Jule.

“Because the dog needs rest,” replied Clay. “He has had a hard time of it, haven’t you, Joe?” caressing the dog as he spoke. “And your wound hasn’t healed yet, and you ought to be in the hospital! Tell him that you are in no shape to go chasing over the country looking for lost fish!”

The dog made the explanation as plainly as it could be made by one not having the gift of speech, and the boys all laughed and looked pleased.

“You are worth a dozen dead dogs yet!” declared Alex.

“I’d like to know which way Case went,” wondered Jule. “We saw nothing of him.”

“Perhaps Rube and Buck will bring him with them,” Clay said hopefully.

“Doesn’t it take a long time to bring those two captives in?” asked Thede, still busy over the injured man, who was now beginning to show signs of returning consciousness.

“That’s just what I was thinking,” Alex exclaimed.

The boys looked in every direction except at each other. There was in the eyes of every one of them a premonition of evil which he did not want the others to see!

“The moon is coming up now, let’s go and look for them!” suggested Jule. “I want to put on a dry suit, then I’ll be ready.”

“It strikes me that we have no time to waste, if we want to overhaul the United States Marshal and the Sheriff,” Alex declared. “And we might give a thought to Case while we are out looking the others up. Beats the dickens how we do get scattered!”

“All right,” agreed Jule, “if you want to start right now. I’m ready, only it won’t do you any good to tell how hungry you are before you’ve gone a mile. If you drag me off without a chance to change my clothes, I’ll see that you don’t get anything to eat until we get back!”

“But suppose I should find the fish, what about that?” Alex replied, starting away.

The moon was up above the tops of the trees now, and was at the full. It was a splendid night, and the boys enjoyed it greatly as they hastened along.

“Which way?” asked Jule.

“I don’t know,” replied Alex. “The counterfeiters’ cave is downstream, but the two men who were found in hiding under a bush gave them a run before they were caught, and I’m all at sea.”

“Which way did Case go?”

“Again I don’t know.”

“Well, we must decide on something pretty soon or it will be morning before we reach a conclusion,” Jule suggested.

That was a long night for those who remained on the *Rambler*. The hours dragged slowly, with no word from the boys.

Thede dressed the wounded man’s throat and got him into an improvised bed. Then he sat down to await news from the boys. The night passed and the sun rose in a cloudless sky.

“I feel like taking up the search myself,” Clay exclaimed. “The boys are probably doing all that anyone could do, yet I think I could do better. I’ve a good notion to see what I could do!”

“And leave us alone? I guess not!”

It was Paul who spoke, but the very next moment something occurred which gave a new light to the situation.

Rube came back, weary and worn, but he came alone!

CHAPTER XXII

A SURPRISE FOR CLAY

Clay and Thede met the bedraggled man at the rail. There were questions in their eyes which they dreaded to put into words.

“Mornin’,” came the cheerful greeting.

Clay looked him over critically.

“You’re a sight!” he said.

Rube looked down at his torn clothes, at his sodden boots, and smiled.

“They don’t look very spick an’ span, do they?” he asked. “But you ought to see the other boys!”

“Where’s Case?” asked Paul. “He went out to catch fish off dry land, and we haven’t seen him since.”

In answer to Rube’s wondering look, Clay explained that Case had gone in the hope of finding the string of fish dropped by Jule and Alex. Rube’s only reply was a grin.

“Where are the others?” asked Paul, as Rube climbed wearily aboard the *Rambler*. “Is Case with them?” he added.

Before making any reply Rube threw himself down with a sigh of relief and drew off his boots, sodden with water from the underbrush.

“Yes, Case is with the others,” he replied, then, “and the gang will be here in something like half an hour. Got any notion where we’ve been?” he added with a most exasperating grin.

“That’s just what we’re anxious to hear,” replied Clay.

“Well,” replied Rube, “we’ve been over to the United States—yes, sir, over to the good old United States!”

The boys gave the man an incredulous look, as if doubting his word. Perhaps he just thought he had been over there!

“Where did you get a boat?” asked Thede, after a long silence.

“The counterfeiter had one,” was the laconic reply, “and we geezled it. We had a fine time over there—not!”

“Well, why don’t you open up and tell us about it?” Clay said, irritated at the provoking deliberation of the man.

Rube looked hopelessly about, as if expecting aid from some unknown source, and was about to begin when there came a shout from the bank and Buck, Case, Alex, and Jule made their appearance. Rube looked very much relieved, and Clay stepped forward to meet the approaching men, his face wreathed in smiles.

"You're a nice boy to go after fish!" he said, giving the lad a friendly poke. "The next time we send you out, we'll keep you at home where we can watch you!"

Alex displayed a string of fish!

"Here's your old fish!" he said, with pardonable pride. "Now we'll have something to eat!"

"Are those the same fish?" Clay demanded.

"The same—the very same!" Case answered. "Say, but I could eat one, scales and all."

While the fish were cooking, and while Alex was bringing everything in the eatable line over from the *Esmeralda*, Case and Jule told of the adventures of the night.

"You see, it's just like this," he began, but Jule stopped him with a laughing remark.

"Tell about your adventures first," he said.

Captain Joe, who had been trying all this time to attract attention to himself, now sprang upon Alex and began licking his face. The boy stroked the dog's head affectionately. His side was still sore where the outlaw's bullet had cut its way through the flesh.

Case replied with a laugh, and went on with his story.

Alex and Jule had come across Case, it seemed, when he had given up all hope of finding the fish and was on his way back to the *Rambler*. The three had searched a long time for Buck and Rube, but had found them at last.

They had taken what they had believed to be a shorter way to the boat and had lost their way, being at the time of meeting Alex and Jule, traveling in the right direction.

"Why don't you get us over to God's country?" demanded Jule.

"All right!" was Case's answer. "The counterfeiter had evidently crossed over from the American side of the Rio Grande in a rowboat, for one was found in a little bayou near the point of meeting. This gave Rube an idea.

"Why not take the prisoners across the river without going to the *Rambler*?" he asked. "If we lock 'em up in a Mexican jail, the chances are that they will be out before our backs are turned. The people over here have little respect for the law."

"This was finally agreed to, and we bundled the prisoners into the boat. It

was a tight squeeze, getting us all in, but the feat was accomplished at last and we were across the river in a jiffy.

“We landed at a small village—a typical border town, with plenty of Mexicans in evidence. The streets ought to have been pretty quiet at that time of night, but they were anything but that.

“A company of United States soldiers—the same we had given a banquet to up the river—had possession of the town, and were making a search for the four counterfeiters! Of course we gave up the two we held, and were warmly thanked by the lieutenant in charge, who had not forgotten us by any manner of means.

“We had a midnight supper with the soldiers—a supper which took us far into the night. Then, after making a date with the lieutenant at the mouth of the Pecos river, we returned to the *Rambler*. Not much of a story, after all!”

“Well, we’ve got plenty of time to make the Pecos river, as the men will have a long walk, so I propose getting forty winks!” said Clay. “I didn’t get enough sleep last night to put in tea! Who’s for the feathers?”

“I’m afraid we can’t meet you boys and the lieutenant at the mouth of the Pecos river,” said Buck, after a short consultation with Rube. “You see, it’s like this,” he continued, “unless you boys want to stick around and watch us work, we’ll have to be on our way. It’s back up the river for us, but we may be at the mouth of the Pecos in time to greet you boys and the soldiers, though it’s rather doubtful.”

“Suppose we caucus on the proposition,” suggested Alex. “For one, I’m willing to remain with Buck and Rube.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to go to the mouth of the Pecos, and wait for them there?” Clay cut in. “I understand that the Pecos is a peach of a stream when it comes to crooks and turns, and I’d like to see it. If it is a sure thing that you will be there within a few days, we might go on and wait for you there.”

“Oh, we’ve got to be there, all right!” Rube declared.

“Then we’re all right,” cried Alex. “We’ll just drop down and wait for you there. Now, what will you have to eat?”

“Why, we have just had a whale of a meal,” Thede said. “Do you want to stuff us like they do hens for market?”

“That was just a lunch,” laughed the boy. “A little fish breakfast! Before the trip ends, I want a chance to show what I can do in the cooking line.”

So Rube and Buck went back up the river, while the *Rambler* turned her prow to the east. Of course Alex and Jule had to have another meal.

“Do you think,” smiled Jule, “that we came on this excursion to go hungry? Not much! When we get farther downstream, where we can get ’coons that are good and fat. I’ll show the gang how to cook one. My mouth waters at the thought!”

As the *Rambler* proceeded on her way, it was plain to be seen that Alex had something on his mind. He kept more than usually still, and the frown between his eyes grew more marked.

Clay noticed the change in the boy and waited for him to give the reason for it. He knew that in time the answer would come.

It came one night when Alex was on watch. It was a brilliant night in June, and the boy had been unusually thoughtful that day.

"Suppose," Alex began, "that a man died and left a big fortune—not a few thousands, but millions—and he had only one heir."

Clay knew that the thing which had been bothering Alex was on the way to the surface, and waited for him to go on.

"And suppose this man had a brother who was greedy for the big fortune, and suppose the brother also died, where would the fortune go until the heir became of age?"

"To whoever the court appointed guardian," was the reply. "Is there such a case?"

"Would the heir have any say about the appointment of the guardian?" continued the lad.

"I think he ought to," was the answer.

Alex was thoughtful for a short time and then drew from an inside pocket a folded newspaper, which he passed over to Clay.

"Perhaps you would better read the story for yourself," he said, "then you'll know all about it."

The newspaper contained a long account of the death by drowning of one Orlando Stegman.

"Where did you get this?" asked Clay, after running hastily through the article. "Is the Orlando Stegman, the person named here, the uncle of Paul?"

"Yes," was the answer. "Another part of the same newspaper contains an advertisement offering a reward for the discovery of the heir. Paul won't have to dodge about the country any more."

"Did you show him this article?" asked Clay, rising to his feet. "Tell me where you got it."

"It just appeared," was the reply. "I have no idea where it came from. It is a Chicago paper, and how a Chicago newspaper got down here is more than I can guess."

Clay turned the paper and read the date line.

"Why," he said in amazement, "the paper is over two weeks old. Well, it doesn't matter how it got here, it is here, and makes a millionaire of the boy we—or Captain Joe, rather—fished out of the Rio Grande! And a pretty good job he did, too!"

"I didn't tell Paul of the discovery," Alex said, after a pause, during which he blocked the door to the cabin, "because I didn't want to lose him. Just the minute he gets hold of that paper he'll want to be off, and I want Rube or Buck, or both, to get well acquainted with him so as to be appointed guardian. How does that strike you?"

"Fine!" exclaimed Clay.

"We might have guardians in duplicate!" Alex laughed. "Do they ever have guardians in duplicate?"

"Sometimes they have three," was the reply. "But why did you keep so sly about it? You might have told me!"

"Well," was the answer, "I was in doubt what to do about it. You see, I didn't want you to know about it until I had it all thought out. You would be apt to tell the other boys, and I didn't want to be bothered."

"What are you going to do now? It is still up to you to decide, you know."

Clay, having given up all idea of notifying the boy of his accession to great wealth, dropped down on the railing of the *Rambler* and looked at Alex with eager eyes. "Will you tell Paul?"

"No, I think not," replied Alex. "You see, I want to wait until Rube and Buck get here. They may not want to accept the trust."

"I haven't the least idea that they will; they are modest men, doubting their own ability. You will have to argue pretty hard to talk them into taking the responsibility."

"We'll find a way!" Alex insisted.

This was the third night of the trip to the mouth of the Pecos, the *Rambler* having been tied up the two previous nights because the gasoline tank had sprung a leak and there were no filling stations within reach.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHAT CAME OF A RAMBLE ON SHORE

The boat was only a short distance from the mouth of the Pecos when the discovery was made that the propeller had ceased to operate. The boat was drifting in the rather swift current.

Clay threw out the anchor and turned to Alex with a look of inquiry on his face.

"Shall we let her drift?" he asked. "It's not far to the town of Viaduct, which is at the mouth of the Pecos. It is likely that we can get a supply of gasoline there."

"Perhaps we had better wait until daylight," argued Alex. "We can then get a good night's sleep."

"Not much!" Clay returned. "I don't know how much sleep you want, but it appears to me that two nights ought to be enough!"

"Then let's get in the rowboat and go on shore!" Alex said, wrinkling his nose. "It seems a pity to lose this fine night. We can give Captain Joe a run on the bank and return before any of the boys wake up. The dog will enjoy the outing."

"The boat will watch itself. We won't go far, and we won't be gone long. Come on!"

Clay very reluctantly consented, and Captain Joe was brought from the cabin, much to his delight, and made a member of the party. The instant his feet touched the shore, however, he was off, taking a wide circle. Clay looked at Alex in consternation.

"How'll we ever get him back?" he asked, ruefully. "He will stay half the night. And we ought to be back on the boat. I'm sorry we ever left it!"

"Is that the *Esmeralda*?" asked Alex, pointing out into the river, where the lights of a motor boat showed. "It looks like it, and yet it doesn't. She seems narrower, and sits lower in the water."

"*Esmeralda*? Nothing! We'd better be making tracks for the *Rambler*! I don't like the looks of this!"

Clay's wounded arm prevented his taking an oar, but he could assist Alex immensely by sculling, and this he did. Captain Joe was left on shore until such time as would suit the convenience of his dogship to return, and the lads started for the *Rambler* at top speed.

But, fast as they speeded over the water, the strange boat traveled faster, and reached the *Rambler* first. Then the boys stopped rowing and watched the performance on their motor boat.

In a minute's time six husky men were transferred to the deck of the *Rambler*, and the boys could see that they were not at all welcome. They saw Thede bound and laid aside, then Case and Jule shared the same fate. The boys were helpless, as, by a strange circumstance, their automatics had been left behind.

They had intended bringing them, but they now lay on the prow of the boat, where they had been placed by Clay.

In a moment the men on board the *Rambler* caught sight of the rowboat and invited the boys to come on board. The invitation was declined, and the outlaws opened fire.

The boys dropped into the bottom of the boat and lay still until the men exhausted their charges, and then rowed with all speed for the shore, where they

took shelter behind a slight elevation.

“We’ve gone and done it now, after all we’ve been through!” exclaimed Clay, grinding his teeth at the thought of what might be going on on board the motor boat. “We’ve been captured a dozen times, but never like this! What shall we do now?”

“Give the thing up!” was Alex’s answer. “It’s all my fault. I dragged you ashore against your will, and against your better judgment. Yes, I did, and you know it.”

“You are mistaken, for I was just aching to come!” answered Clay. “Try to think clearly for only a second. I think my reasoning powers are wool-gathering.”

“I think mine are in the same boat,” Alex answered. “But look there! What’s coming off now?”

The boys saw, in the clear moonlight, Case and Jule led to the railing of the *Rambler* and released from the ropes which held them. Then they were unceremoniously kicked into the river!

Case at once started to swim for the shore, but Jule was not seen again. The boys looked long and anxiously, but he was nowhere to be seen. They looked into each other’s faces with eyes which held a suspicious moisture.

“Jule’s drowned!” Alex moaned, starting forward. “I hope I can get to the place where he went down in time to save him!”

“You will only throw your life away if you go out there now. The outlaws are looking for you to do something like that. Let’s wait for Case to swim in.”

“But we might be able to save his life if we went out with the boat,” urged Alex.

“Wait for Case,” was all Clay would say.

The outlaws, who had reloaded their weapons, fired volley after volley at the lad who was swimming, but their bullets all went wide of the mark, and Case was soon on shore, looking about for Clay and Alex. He saw them when they arose in the rowboat and came running to meet them.

“Where’s Jule?” asked Alex.

“I’m afraid he’s drowned,” was the sober reply.

“When did you see him last?” asked Clay.

“I never saw him after he went down. He just dropped to the bottom like a piece of lead,” said Case. “I guess the *Rambler*’s gone this time!” he added.

“If we only had Jule back it could go to the bottom, for all we’d care!” exclaimed Clay.

There were strange doings on board the *Rambler*. The parrot was calling shrilly for the outlaws to “Come off the perch,” and the baby bear was clawing an outlaw with all his strength, which, after all, was not great.

An outlaw seized the parrot and started for the side of the boat with him,

intending to pitch him to the stream below, but the fellow who seemed to be the leader of the gang stopped him.

The *Rambler* was near the shore, and every word spoken was distinctly heard.

“Cut that!” said the harsh voice of the outlaw. “Well keep him for a pet!”

“Nice pet!” snarled the pirate. “If I had my way, the doctor would go overboard, too.”

“The surgeon will be needed to care for the boy,” was the reply. “He can be attended later on.”

The man dropped Tommy to the deck with an oath on his lips, and stood watching him with malice in his glance. Paul and the surgeon were huddled close together in the cabin, not knowing when their own time would come.

The outlaws all seemed to speak good English, and the boys listened to their talk for several minutes without learning anything of their plans. Then the leader proposed going to the shore in quest of the boys, who were sure to hang around until the departure of the boat.

“We made a mistake in letting the two we had get to the shore,” he said. “We should have tied them up and then decided what to do with them. We can at least get the rowboat if they are not to be found.”

“Yes,” said another, “we don’t want the kids about, for they will put the officers on our track, and the officers will do a lot of hunting for that millionaire boy we have.”

“I’m thinking whether the old man will give down enough to pay for all this trouble,” said another. “Why not collect the reward and let it go at that?”

“It strikes me that is the better way,” declared another. “The fellow who didn’t know that the kid was good and dead, at the point up the river, made a mistake.”

“Well, who’s going to the shore?” asked the leader, giving an order for the rowboat to be brought from the other motor boat.

The boys did not hear the reply, for at that minute there came the sound of footsteps on the country road. In another second the lieutenant made his appearance, closely followed by a dozen men.

The lieutenant spoke softly from the heavy shade of the trees which crowded hard upon the highway at that point.

“Stay where you are,” he said. “I have plenty of men, and will capture the whole kaboodle. We have been watching you for a long time. Are you all right?”

“All except Jule,” was the grave reply. “The outlaws threw him out of the boat, and he’s drowned!”

“Keep still, now, here they come!”

There were four men in the rowboat, and they came on at good speed, the

leader standing up in the boat in order to get a better view. He stepped to the shore and stood talking with his men a moment.

“How do I know the boys are unarmed?” he said, evidently in reply to a question. “Why, I saw two automatics lying on the prow of the *Rambler*! Just as if the kids had intended taking them with them, and then forgotten them!”

Then his eye caught a movement in the shadow, and the next moment he was looking down the barrel of a loaded musket.

“Keep still!” a voice said. “Lay your weapons on the ground. Not there. Here!”

The men were tied almost before they knew what had happened, and the three boys, sitting in the boat behind the little elevation, were instantly on their feet.

After thanking the lieutenant over and over again, they turned their thoughts to the missing Jule.

“We’ve just got to find him!” Clay cried. “We have been chums too long to be parted so!”

Before anyone could make a suitable reply the *Rambler* again became the center of the scene. The lads could scarcely believe their senses. The outlaws were deserting the *Rambler*!

CHAPTER XXIV AND THE LAST

There followed a moment’s silence, and then, rising clear and high, came the voice of the parrot.

“A dead man’s chest! A dead man’s chest! Yo, ho, and a bottle of rum! And a bottle of rum!”

“The men who are deserting the *Rambler* certainly have heard the parrot before!” whispered Case. “What does it mean?”

While the boys and the soldiers wondered over the strange happening, another voice came from the *Rambler*.

“Up, boys, and at them! Drive ’em into the river!”

“Peter Pratt!” shouted Alex, dancing up and down in the excitement of the moment.

“Good old Jule! I knew they couldn’t kill him!” exclaimed Clay, leaping out

of the boat.

It was plain to be seen that the outlaws were returning to the boat which lay within reach, and in another moment would be off down the river. There were three of them now, the man who had been tied up in the cabin being the third.

“Now, what’s the matter with them?” asked the lieutenant, with a look of wonder in his eyes. “They surely are not running away from one man! Ah, I see now!”

What he saw was the *Esmeralda*, making record time.

“That boat stands about as much show of running away from the *Esmeralda* as the baby bear does of flying!” exclaimed Case.

The boys on shore watched the race for some moments, and then saw the pirate boat surrender. She was taken back upstream, where she was anchored beside the *Rambler*.

The prisoners were taken out and added to the collection on the shore. They were then turned over to the lieutenant, who at once started toward El Paso with them.

“Hope you’ll have a fine trip,” said the lieutenant, at parting. “You boys certainly deserve something good!”

“Good luck to you!” cried Clay. “Only for your help, we’d be in a bad fix right now. I don’t see how you happened along so opportunely.”

“We were patrolling the shore,” was the explanation, “and saw that help was needed.”

With which unsatisfactory reply the march northward was resumed.

There was very little conversation between the boys until the *Rambler* was reached. Then Clay tried to express the gratitude of the party, but was promptly headed off by Rube.

“We only did our duty!” he said.

Then the guardianship matter was broached, and of course both Rube and Buck declined to have anything to do with it.

“Oh, I’ll talk them into it!” laughed Paul.

And he did!

The remainder of the trip, which was shared by Rube and Buck, was one long dream of contentment. There were moonlight nights on the Rio Grande when all Nature seemed in repose.

When the Gulf of Mexico was reached, Alex gave many exhibitions of his skill as a fisherman, and the rivalry between the two motor boats was keen.

Captain Joe, who reached the shore at the landing near the mouth of the Pecos river just in time to be taken on board the boat, had many a race with the boys along the sands of the Gulf, and seemed to enjoy every minute of it.

Long before the *Rambler* returned to the North, Teddy Junior was playing with the dog, rolling over and over on the deck of the *Rambler* in many a mad frolic.

When at last the *Rambler* and *Esmeralda* returned northward, taking passage for both motor boats on a slow-sailing vessel, they were landed at New York, whence the boats were shipped to Chicago by rail.

When Chicago was reached, it was discovered that all the time of the two guardians would be required, so they reluctantly resigned their offices and devoted their time to the handling of Paul's large estate.

"Say, Buck," laughed Alex, after the boys were settled at school again, "what would we have done without the *Esmeralda*? We certainly should have lost the *Rambler*."

"And without Rube's bank roll we might have been obliged to walk back to Chicago!" put in Jule.

"But that is all past and gone," said Buck, "so what's the use of bringing it up?"

The newspapers, a few days later, contained the announcement that the counterfeiters and the band of river thieves who were working for the reward which had been offered by the old miser—now in his grave—had all been sentenced to long terms in prison.

When he read the announcement Alex only sighed.

"They deserved it all!" he declared.

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RIVER MOTOR
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