

ARUNDEL LOUIS

MOTOR BOAT BOYS
DOWN THE COAST; OR,
THROUGH STORM AND
STRESS TO FLORIDA

Louis Arundel

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Through Storm and Stress to Florida**

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CHAPTER I. AFLOAT ON THE LOWER DELAWARE

"Toot your horn, Jimmy, and let everybody know we're off at last!"

"Sure, there's the ould *Wireless* coming up on us, hand over fist. It's a broth of a bhoy George Rollins is for speed!"

"Yes, he always starts out well, and with a rush; but generally manages to have his engine break down; and then even the wide old tub *Comfort* gets there ahead of the narrow speed boat. Now give 'em a blast, Jimmy. The coast cruise is on!"

Accordingly, Jimmy Brannigan, who served as cook and crew aboard the staunch motor boat *Tramp*, some twenty-three feet in length by six feet wide (the boat, not Jimmy), and with Jack Stormways as pilot, puffed out his cheeks and blew.

It was a necessary method for sounding the conch shell horn, which, if blown like a bugle, would send out a screech that could be heard a mile away.

Answering toots came from the two other crafts that had just left Philadelphia astern, and were heading down the old Delaware River, bound for Florida.

Here were six of the happiest young chaps on the face of the globe; and, indeed, how could they help it? Blessed with good health; three of them owning motor boats that had served them now for two seasons, and with stores aboard for a "bully" voyage down the Atlantic coast, taking the inland passage, what more could the heart of a real boy, with red blood in his veins, sigh for!

These six lads lived in a town "out Mississippi way." They had long ago ceased to be novices in the management of motor boats, and the great benefit they seemed to have secured from previous trips on the water, both down the wonderful Mississippi and on the Great Lakes, had convinced their fathers that they were to be trusted under any and all conditions.

Hence, when a calamity befell the high school of their native place, which all of them attended, fire destroying the main part of the building, so that there could be no session until some time after Christmas, and a brilliant scheme dawned upon the mind of Jack Stormways, they were not long in convincing those who controlled their destinies that the opportunity for a run down the Atlantic coast before winter set in, with possibly a similar cruise along the Mexican gulf to New Orleans, was too good to be lost.

And so they had come to Philadelphia, with this object in view.

As to the money part – for it takes a heap of cash to transport three motor boats a thousand miles and more by fast freight – that was the easiest part of the programme.

It happened that the treasury of the Motor Boat Club was quite flush at that particular time. On one of their former cruises, up on the Great Lakes, and in the vicinity of the Thousand Islands, these lads had been instrumental in bringing to justice a set of rogues, for whose apprehension a large reward had been offered by the authorities.

That sum, with others picked up in various ways, had been lying at interest all this while. They had intended using it for their next cruise, no matter where that might happen to take them.

Various indeed had been the suggestions made from time to time; and some of them bordering on the ridiculous. Strange to say, it was Nick Longfellow, the companion of George Rollins on the narrow beam speed boat *Wireless*, who gave utterance to most of these absurd propositions.

Nick was fat, and a tremendous eater. As a rule he could not be said to be at all bold by nature; and yet he declared that nothing would please him half so much as that they explore the Orinoco River in South America, and discover things never before known by white people.

Then there had been Josh Purdue, the tall and thin assistant of Herbert Dickson on the beamy and steady if slow *Comfort*, who wanted them to lose themselves for an entire month in the depths of the swampy country to be found along the St. Francis River.

But when Jack sprung his sensation about the long trip down the coast, and around to New Orleans, it took like wildfire, and every other idea was speedily forgotten. Preparations were hurried, the boats shipped, and later on the boys turned up in Philadelphia, where they found their craft waiting for them.

And now, here they were, at noon on this late September day, with the prows of their beloved boats turned toward the south, and plowing the waters of the Delaware, the Quaker City left far astern.

Doubtless many aboard the bustling tugs, and the vessels that came and went, smiled as they heard the merry tooting of horns exchanged between the three little power boats that were speeding along toward the wider reaches of the lower river.

They easily guessed that the boys had a good time ahead of them; but truth to tell not one could have imagined the extent of the voyage upon which the Motor Boat Club had now set out, with so confident a mien.

Taken as a whole, a merrier set of young chaps could hardly have been assembled than the six who constituted this same club. They had, of course, their faults; but by now they were so accustomed to each other's society that seldom was a discordant note heard.

Jokes abounded, tricks were sometimes played, and accepted with good nature; and without exception the boys had become very fond of each other.

For instance, there was stout roly-poly Nick, who could never tear his mind away from his favorite subject of eating, and whom thin and cadaverous Josh liked to tantalize whenever the occasion offered, because he himself, while a great cook, seldom found much appetite for his own messes, being troubled from time to time with indigestion.

Then Jimmy, who, it can easily be understood, had sprung from the rollicking Irish race, possessed a fine voice, as sweet as that of any girl; and many the time did he beguile an evening at the campfire with his songs and his clever dancing. Jimmy, by the way, happened to have a fiery thatch, a multitude of freckles, and upon occasions lapsed into the brogue of his ancestors, although he could talk as well as the others when he chose.

George had the speed mania. This had developed early in his career, for his one delight was to outstrip others in a race. Consequently, when he had his boat built, he sacrificed lots of things to have it narrow in beam, and naturally it was anything but a pleasure to be aboard the cranky craft.

His mate, Nick, had suffered in the past from this condition of affairs; and the log of former cruises would show that he had met with more than one mishap because it was necessary to perfectly balance the *Wireless* at all times. Poor Nick often declared that if he chanced to fail to part his hair directly in the middle, trouble was sure to follow.

The *Comfort*, as its name would indicate, had been fashioned on just the opposite plan, and speed was the last thing considered. They made all manner of fun of Herbert's boat, and called it such derogatory names as "The Tub" and "The Ark"; but all the same, when hurry was not an object, those aboard certainly had the best of the controversy. And then the quick-going boats always had to wait for Herb and his "life-raft," so they did not gain anything in the end.

Then about the third craft, called the *Tramp*, and owned by the recognized leader of the sextette, Jack Stormways. It united the good qualities of both the other boats in that it was fast and at the same time steady. While on occasion the cigar-shaped *Wireless* could leave Jack in the lurch, and the beamy *Comfort* give more elbow room, taken as a whole the *Tramp* was the ideal cruiser; and both the other skippers knew it away down in their secret hearts, though always ready to stand up for their own boats.

It was close on the beginning of October when they made their start from the City of Brotherly Love. For some time they would have to dodge the many vessels that were moving hither and thither before the busy port; but later in the afternoon they could expect to have clearer weather, where the river widened out, with the shores farther apart.

For once George moderated his pace, and hovered near the others. He felt so joyous over the sensation of being once more afloat, and with such a glorious voyage ahead, that he wanted to be where he could exchange remarks with his chums, and hear what they thought.

George had been doing considerable pottering with his engine lately. He claimed that he had been able to increase its speed several miles an hour.

"Wait till I get a good chance to show you, fellows," he now remarked, with a satisfied air; "why, I expect to make rings around your blooming old *Tramp*, Jack; and as for "The Ark," why, it'll be figure eights for hers."

"Wow! don't I just see my finish, then," wailed poor, fat Nick, shaking his head sorrowfully. "The vibration always was just fierce, and now it'll just rattle me, so I'll be only skin and bones. You'll be calling me the Living Skeleton before we ever get to Jacksonville, I bet you, boys."

"Oh, when it gets so you just can't stand it any longer, call on Josh here to change off with you, like he did once before," laughed Herbert. "Josh is built on the order of a match, and seems to be especially suited for a narrow-beam boat."

But the party mentioned did not seem to like the prospect any better than Nick, to judge from the protest he immediately put out.

"Me to stick to the *Comfort*, fellows. One thing sure, if you are last, you always know where you're at; and that's what I never did when on that broncho of a *Wireless*. Why, it threw me twice; and souse I went into the drink."

"But just think, Josh," insinuated cunning Nick, "all this shaking would be the best thing ever for that indigestion of yours. It rattles up the liver, and does a heap of good. I don't need that sort of thing, you see. Last time you bunked with George you know you improved a hundred per cent."

"Huh! mebbe," grunted Josh, "but it wasn't worth it, I tell you."

"Look at that tug bucking up against the tide, will you?" exclaimed George just then – being humiliated by all this talk about the cranky qualities of his pet, and anxious to call their attention elsewhere in order to change the subject.

"Must be a greenhorn at the wheel, or else the fellow's had more drink than he had ought to tackle," declared Nick.

"He sure does wobble a heap," admitted Jack, keeping a wary eye on the approaching craft, lest it foul his own boat, and bring sudden disaster on the cruise which had begun so auspiciously. "But perhaps that's a trick these river pilots have when heading up into an ebb tide. They know all the wrinkles of the game, I guess, and how to save themselves from wasted efforts."

"Say, that rowboat had better look out; if he makes a quick turn with the tug he's apt to run the little punkin seed down," George declared, with a note of anxiety in his voice; for he was nervous by nature, as his love for racing and making high speed would indicate.

"That pilot must be watching us all the time, wondering whatever we're heading for down the river, because the duck shooting below isn't on yet. There! he's swung about again! I hope he don't knock that rowboat galley west!" called Herbert.

"Hey! look to your starboard – you're running down a boat!" shouted Jack, dropping his wheel for three seconds in order to make a speaking trumpet with both hands.

There was a brief interval of suspense. Then came a plain crash, accompanied by loud shouts, and more or less excitement aboard the tug that was heading up river way.

"He did it!" bellowed Josh, fairly wild with eagerness. "Oh! I'm afraid the poor fellow will be drowned before that tug can come about and go to his rescue. Turn your bally old tub, Herb, can't you? It takes a whole day for you to get around."

"No use of our trying it," declared the skipper of the big roomy *Comfort*, calmly, for nothing could start Herb out of his customary condition of mental poise, because he is as steady in his way as his boat; "he'd be drowned twice over before we reached him. Besides, there goes Jack in his *Tramp*, shooting straight for the smashed rowboat. Unless the poor fellow was injured and has already sank our chum will get him all right, Josh."

"That's right," declared Josh. "George has gone and got flustrated, so that he turned the wrong way; but if anybody can save that fellow it's Jack Stormways. Oh! I hope he does it, because I'll take it as a good sign that our new voyage down the coast is going to have a lucky start!"

CHAPTER II.

A GOOD OMEN FOR THE START

Jack Stormways was always prepared. He never lost his head in an emergency, for which more than one of his chums had had reason to be thankful in times past. So, on the present occasion, when he saw that the tug could not make a complete circuit against the running tide and reach the wrecked rowboat in time to be of any assistance to the unfortunate who had been hurled into the Delaware, Jack instantly headed the little motor boat for the spot.

"Get up in the bow with you, Jimmy, quick now, and take the boathook along! I'll slow down when we get there; and perhaps you can grab him in!" the skipper called out.

Accustomed to obeying, Jimmy made haste to snatch up the implement mentioned, and which had many the time proved its value in recovering things that had been swept overboard in a wind storm.

Then he hurried to gain a position near the bow of the boat, where he crouched, after making sure of his footing, so as to guard against a shock when he clapped the boathook into the clothing of the drowning man.

"I see him, Jack!" he bawled immediately. "He's holding to the boat, so he is!"

"All right, Jimmy," echoed the skipper, calmly; "I glimpsed him before you did, I reckon. Steady yourself now, and try not to make a fozzle of it, old man. There you are. Jimmy; get him!"

And Jimmy did the same, catching the coat of the man in the water with his boathook, and holding on tenaciously. Jack, meanwhile, turned his engine backward, so that the momentum of the boat was promptly checked.

The man had been clinging to the rapidly sinking wreckage. In another half minute, no doubt, he would have been left without any support; and as he did not seem able to swim a stroke, his end must have speedily come.

Jimmy drew in with the haft of the boat-hook, until he could stretch down and seize upon the collar of the man's coat. As the Irish lad was brawny and nerved just then to mighty deeds, he managed to hoist the fellow into the little motor boat.

The unlucky man was white, and pretty nearly drowned. He had just had enough sense to cling desperately to the wreck of his boat, and then allow Jimmy to do the rescue act.

"Did you get hurt when that tug struck your boat?" asked Jack, for that was what he feared.

The man was blinking at him, for his eyes had taken in more or less of the brackish water of the river; but he shook his head in the negative. This relieved Jack more than a little. Like Josh, he had been hoping that in the very beginning of their new cruise a wet blanket might not be cast over the spirits of the party by their witnessing the drowning of a poor chap.

"Here comes the tug down after us," remarked Jimmy. "I suppose the omadhauns 'll be expressing their regrets for the accident. Sure, it was criminal carelessness, if ever there was a case. And ye'll be silly, sor, if so be ye don't make 'em pay for the boat they smashed."

By degrees the man seemed to come out of the half stupor into which his sudden immersion in the waters of the river had thrown him.

"They just got to," he grumbled, shaking his head; "for 'twas a borrowed boat, an' I can't pay for a new one."

"We'll try and see you through," said Jack. "If they think we're ready to tell what we saw, they'll not only pay you good damages, but take you ashore in the bargain."

"That's the ticket!" declared Jimmy, quite taken with the idea of frightening the captain of the tug into doing the right thing by his victim.

Presently the tug came alongside, and an anxious voice called out:

"Was he much hurt, boys? I'm sorry it happened. Second accident of the week, and such things don't do a man's reputation as a pilot any good."

"Well," replied Jack, promptly, "suppose you whack up for his boat, and a suit of clothes for the man; then take him ashore, and none of us will say a word about the accident, as you call it, but which looked mighty like criminal carelessness to us."

There was a brief interval of silence, during which the two men in the wheel-house of the tug seemed to be conferring.

"How much does he want, my lad?" asked one, presently thrusting his head and shoulders out, so that Jack could have almost shaken hands had he wished.

"The boat ought to be worth fifteen dollars; and say ten more to get him a new suit. That's letting you down easy, my friend," called the skipper of the *Tramp*.

"Oh, well, I guess I'll have to stand it, though I don't believe the old tub was worth five. Here you are, bub; and if you chuck the feller across to us, we'll dry him off, and land him somewhere above."

Jack eagerly took the proffered bills, and thrust them into the hand of the man who had been so happily rescued.

"Here you are, and good luck to you," he said, cheerily. "Do you think you can get aboard the tug now, my man?"

The other had gripped the several bank bills eagerly; but at the same time a look of caution came into his eyes.

"Say, mister, can't you manage to drop me ashore somewhere below here?" he asked, in a hoarse whisper.

"Well, it wouldn't be altogether convenient," replied Jack, hesitating; and then as he saw the pilot of the tugboat watching them, with a grin on his face, a sudden realization as to what the rescued man feared broke in upon him.

"They might make me give it back again, ye see, after I got dried off," continued the poor fellow, who evidently had not held so much money in his hand for many a long day.

"By George! that's so!" Nick was heard to exclaim; for the *Wireless* had crept up, and now lay right alongside the *Tramp*.

Jack was quick to make a decision, and as a rule his first thought was the right one, too.

"I'll land you myself!" he declared, sturdily; "it won't take much time. And I guess a good deed done in the beginning of the voyage ought to bring us luck to pull out of many a bad hole."

Then raising his voice and addressing the man at the wheel of the tug, Jack continued:

"We'll set him ashore below, Captain. You see, he doesn't want to ride up to the city; neither do you prefer to have him go. It's all right; we'll say nothing of what we saw to anybody. So long, Captain!"

And without waiting for an answer Jack simply started his motor, upon which the *Tramp* shot away from the tug. Looking back, Jack saw the two men conferring, but he felt sure they would allow things to rest.

"That negligence cost him twenty-five dollars, you see, Jimmy; and perhaps he'll keep his eyes about him after this, when he's on the move. It's lucky for him, as well as for our friend here, that a human life was not snuffed out in the bargain."

"And do we head for the shore now, Jack?" queried the mate and cook.

"As soon as I find out which side the wrecked mariner wants to land on," replied the skipper, turning to his passenger.

"Just suit yourself, sir," spoke up the man, into whose face the color was once more beginning to creep, as he looked frequently at the wad of greenbacks, which he continued to caress with his fingers, as though the very feel of them did his heart good.

"But which side do you live on?" persisted Jack, wishing to do the best he could for the fellow.

"Well, now, I live over in Jersey, near Bridgeport," said the man; "but I was goin' across to Lamokin in Pennsylvania, on a chance to get work. So if you'll put me ashore anywhere below here, I can walk up the railroad track to the junction."

Jack immediately headed shoreward.

"Take things easy, fellows, and we'll catch up with you before you've gone many miles," he called out to those in the other boats, since there seemed no necessity for all of them to leave the middle of the river just to land one man.

It was no trouble to get close in on the Pennsylvania shore; the case might have been different over in Jersey, where they could see that marshland abounded at this point.

"Here you are; just step ashore on that rock; and good luck with you, friend!" Jack sang out, as Jimmy piloted the boat alongside a section of the shore, using his favorite boat-hook in so doing.

"Shake hands first, please, young sir," said the other, who appeared to be a decent working man, for his palms were calloused with toil. "You sure done me a mighty good turn this day. I might a-died out there, only for the way you come to the rescue. I won't forget it in a hurry, I tell you."

"Well, pass it along then," laughed Jack, grasping the other's hand at the same time. "Perhaps you'll run across some poor chap who's worse off than you are. Give him a helping hand, and we'll call the thing squared."

"I will, just as sure as I live, I will, that. It's a good idea, too. And after gettin' me this money, I reckon ye saved it for me, by takin' me ashore. That tugboat captain looked like he'd a-made me fork over agin, once he had me aboard his craft."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you were right," assented Jack. "Shake hands with Jimmy too, while you're about it, friend. He yanked you in like a good fellow. If your life was saved, Jimmy had a hand in it."

After this ceremony had been carried out, the man managed to get ashore. Then the boathook was brought into use again to push off; and a minute or two later they were chugging along downstream, heading once more toward the middle of the broadening river.

Jimmy waved to the man several times, until finally they lost sight of him as he gained the railroad track, and started north.

"Anyway, that was a good beginning, Jimmy," remarked Jack, in a satisfied tone.

"It sure was, for that bog-trotter," chuckled the other. "His ould boat wasn't worth more'n five dollars, as the tug captain sez, an' here he sells it for three toimes the sum. His clothes'll be dry on his back before an hour, in this warm sun; an' he has a noice tin dollars to buy new garments wid. It's the luckiest day av his life, so it is."

"Well, I rather think that adventure did net him a cool twenty," laughed Jack. "Not so bad for a dip in the river."

"He naded a bath, too, so he did," declared Jimmy. "An, mark my word, he'd be willing to kape it up all the blissed day at the same price, so he would. Now we're safe out from the rocks along the shore, why not hit her up, an' overhaul the rist av the bunch, Jack?"

"Right you are, and here goes," sang out the other. "Take the wheel, Jimmy, and look out for anything in the way. I want to watch how the engine works. You know, George wasn't the only one who overhauled his motor after our fun this last summer."

"She is makin' better toime than she iver did in her whole blissed life!" cried the delighted Jimmy, presently, after Jack had been working at the engine a spell. "Be the powers! I do belave we kin give George a race for his money nixt toime he challenges us, so I do. Hurroo! we're flyin' over the wather, Jack!"

"Less talk, and keep your eyes in front of you!" called the other. "If you get as careless as that tugboat man, we'll be smashing into something, too. And then good-bye to all our hopes for a jolly voyage down the coast."

"Aw! 'tis me that is boring the wather with me eyes all the toime, Jack dear; and never a thing as could escape me aigle vision. I'm a broth of bhoy when it comes to steering a boat, do ye mind."

The stream was wide, and there were far less vessels moving up or down than had been the case above, so that, just as Jimmy declared, it was an easy job to keep clear of obstructions.

Jack had become intensely interested in the splendid working of his reconstructed motor. He was watching its pulsations, and experimenting in many little ways, in order to find out just how to get the maximum of speed from it.

And then, all at once, he heard Jimmy give utterance to an exclamation that might be freighted with either curiosity or alarm – perhaps both.

Hardly knowing what to expect, the skipper of the little *Tramp* struggled to his knees, and then drew himself erect, to make a discovery that thrilled him through and through.

CHAPTER III.

JACK TAKES A HYDRO-AEROPLANE MESSAGE

"Oh! murder! what a big birrd!" Jimmy was crying out.

A shadow had fallen upon the water close by, and the distant cries of the other young motor boat boys could be faintly heard. Jack, looking hastily up, saw a strange thing that had extended wings like a monster bird, apparently swooping down toward the surface of the wide river.

Of course he knew that it was an up-to-date flying machine, and the presence of aluminum pontoons under the body of the contrivance also told him that for the first time in his life he was looking at a hydro-aeroplane, capable of alighting on the water and starting up again, after the manner of a wild duck.

Even as the two in the *Tramp* stared, the queer contrivance skipped along the surface of the Delaware, sending the water in spray on either side. Then it seemed to settle contentedly there, not ten feet away from the motor boat.

There was a young fellow squatted in the seat where the various levers could be controlled. He was dressed after some odd fancy of his own, calculated to serve in the cool air of the upper strata. To Jimmy the vision was very startling.

"Why, say, it's a real birdman after all, Jack!" he cried, as though he had only discovered this remarkable fact after the machine had come to a stop close by.

The aviator laughed aloud.

"What did you think it was, young fellow, an old-time roc come back to life?" he called out; waving a hand at them cheerfully.

Jack had shut off the engine at the time he heard the first exclamation from his teammate, and at this time they were hardly more than moving with the ebb tide, so that in reality the boat drew closer to the hydro-aeroplane with each passing second.

"You gave us a little start, that's all," laughed Jack. "Of course, I knew what it was as soon as I saw the pontoons underneath. They seem to do the trick first rate, too. Seems to me I'd like to sail in one of those things, if I ever had the chance."

"It's a great experience, all right," replied the aviator; "but the way things are going right now, only a very few fellows are fitted for the work. But are you in company with those other two jolly little boats way off yonder?"

"That's right," sang out Jimmy, determined to have his little say with the bold navigator of the upper currents; "we're all chums, an' it's the Motor Boat Club we do be represinting. Along the coast we're bound, on a long cruise, by the same token."

The young fellow appeared interested at once.

"Say, that's nice," he remarked. "I bet you'll have a bully good time of it, too. Headed up or down, may I ask?"

He sat there, as much at his ease as though on an ocean steamer, instead of a frail little machine that sprawled upon the heaving waves very much as Jack had seen a big "darning needle," known also as a "mosquito hawk," do on occasion.

"Florida, by the inside route, and then perhaps along the gulf to New Orleans," replied the skipper of the *Tramp*, in as careless a voice as he could command, just as though a voyage that might cover a thousand or two miles was hardly worth mentioning.

The owner of the hydro-aeroplane whistled, to indicate his surprise. His whole manner showed the keen interest he immediately took in such a glorious prospect; and Jack guessed instantly from this that he possessed the true love for outdoor life and sport.

"That's simply immense," remarked the other, with what might seem like an envious sigh. "I can see where your little crowd have a mighty fine time ahead. Wish I could get off to accompany you; but even if I had an invite, my contracts with the company would not allow me. But later on I am to give some exhibitions in the South; and wouldn't it be strange now if we happened to meet up with each other again?"

Jack rather liked his looks, and of course immediately expressed the hope that circumstances might throw them together again some fine day.

"I'd be glad to see more of you, and learn something about your experiences, for ten to one you've seen some rough times in your air journeys," he remarked, as he leaned on the side of the *Tramp's* cabin, and let his wondering eyes travel over the peculiar mechanism of the queer air and water craft combined.

"Well, rather," smiled the other, nodding his head in a friendly way, as though possibly he had been taken just as much by the frank and fearless face of the motor boat skipper as Jack was by his countenance and bearing. "Might I ask what your names are, in case we ever do run together again?"

He had a notebook and pencil in his hands while speaking, and Jack quite willing to oblige, called off the roster of the Motor Boat Club, with the names of the three craft included.

"This is a great pleasure to me, I give you my word, Jack," remarked the young fellow, as he thrust the memorandum book once more in his pocket. "Never dreamed of such good luck when I took a notion to swoop down, and see what three bully little craft were doing, headed for Delaware Bay. Going all the way to Florida, you say; and by the inside passage, too? I wonder, now, would that happen to take you in the neighborhood of Beaufort, North Carolina?"

An eager expression had suddenly flashed across his face, and Jack saw his eyes sparkle, as with anticipation; though for the life of him he could not understand just why this should be so, unless the said Beaufort happened to have been the home port of the hydro-aeroplane flier, and the mere thought of their being in that vicinity gave him a homesick thrill.

"Why, yes, I remember that I've got Beaufort marked on the chart as one of our stopping places," Jack hastened to reply. "Could I do anything for you while there? I'd be quite willing to oblige you – er, by the way, you haven't told us your name in return for having ours!"

"That's a fact, I haven't," he replied, quickly, but Jack thought with just a trifle of embarrassment; "it's Malcolm Spence."

"Oh! I believe I've read a lot about your doings with one of these air and water fliers. There were some pretty stirring accounts of your trips in the papers out our way not long ago!" Jack exclaimed, looking at the young fellow with considerable admiration; since hero worship has just as strong a hold upon the human heart in these modern days as in times of old, when knights went forth to do battle with dragons, and all kinds of terrible monsters.

"I believe they have been showing me up, more or less; but I try to avoid those newspaper men all I can, because they stretch things so," young Spence modestly remarked. "That's why I come down here to try out any new little wrinkle I may happen to have hit on. A week ago I started off the deck of a Government war vessel, a big cruiser, went up a thousand feet, dropped to the water, and last of all landed again in the same place from which I started – all to prove how valuable a hydro-aeroplane would be in case of real war."

"Yes, I was reading about that while we were on the way here, but somehow didn't remember the name of the one who had done it," Jack went on, while the little motor boat and the new-fangled contraption that seemed perfectly at home in the air or floating on the waves kept company on the tide of the river.

"Did I understand you to say that you would be willing to do me a little favor, if it didn't put you to much inconvenience?" asked Spence, his voice trembling with an eagerness that Jack could not help noticing.

"Certainly we will, if it lies in our power," he answered promptly.

"They never was a more obliging gossoon in the wide worrld than this same Jack Stormways, and ye can depind on that!" exploded Jimmy, thinking it about time he injected his personality into the conversation, since he did not wish to be an utter nonentity.

Malcolm Spence thrust a hand into his tightly buttoned leather coat. When he brought it out Jack saw that it held what looked like a small packet, which, after all, might be a letter, though it was sealed.

"I wanted to get this to a party by the name of Van Arsdale Spence," he said, hurriedly, as though afraid that they might back out after all from their kind proposition; "but I knew he no longer lived in Beaufort, and I had no means of finding his present address. So, instead of mailing it, I have carried the thing around with me for three weeks, intending when I went South to make inquiries and send it to his new address, if so be he was far away."

"All right, then," declared Jack, stretching out his hand promptly; "I'll promise to do everything in my power to get it into his possession. Failing, you must give me some address through which I can reach you, to tell you it was no go."

"Here's my card, with the address of the makers of this machine. A letter will always get to me if sent in their care, because, you see, I'm under a three years' contract to exhibit this invention, and add new ideas of my own. But I do hope you may be able to find the party. I'd like that packet to fall into his hands as soon as possible. Too much time has already been lost. Please keep it safe, will you, Jack?"

The skipper of the *Tramp* accepted the little packet in a serious manner that no doubt impressed the other favorably.

"Depend on me to do my level best for you; that's all any fellow could promise, Mr. Spence," he said, simply, as he stowed the article away in an inside pocket of his coat.

"Shake hands, please, both of you!" exclaimed the birdman, heartily, stretching across the little gap that separated him from the motor boat; "I only wish it had been my good fortune to meet up with you earlier."

The formality of shaking hands was concluded with more or less difficulty, owing to the fact that the wings of the aeroplane extended far on either side, and kept the boat off; but in the end they managed fairly well, though the eager Jimmy came near falling overboard in his ambitious stretching, deeming it a great honor to have pressed the hand of one about whom there was so much being printed in the papers.

"Good luck go with you, boys!" called out the young aviator, as he prepared to once more leave the surface of the water, and soar aloft into airy space. "Give my regards to Herbert, Josh, George and Nick, and tell them I hope some day in the near future to make their personal acquaintance. I'm sure you must be a jolly bunch; and what glorious times you have ahead! And I also hope you get track of the party that packet is addressed to, Jack; it means much to me, I tell you."

"I'll do everything in my power to find him, and give it personally into his hands, Malcolm, I promise you. Shall I tell him how queerly we met?" Jack went on.

"Yes, and how some blessed inspiration caused me to believe there was more than accident about our coming together, with you just on the way down South by the coast route. So long, fellows; and again the best of luck to you all."

"Same to you!" called Jimmy, as he heard the motor of the hydro-aeroplane begin to whirr, and saw the strange contrivance start to spin along the little waves, once more sending the spray on either side.

Then it began to rise in the air with perfect freedom. They saw the daring young aviator wave his hand in parting as he sped away, circling upwards until he was hundreds of feet aloft, and constantly gaining.

"Wow! wouldn't that make ye wink, now, Jack darlint?" exclaimed Jimmy, as he twisted his neck badly in the endeavor to follow the course of the wonderful machine that seemed as much at home in one element as the other.

Jack made no reply.

He was bending down to start his own motor once more, and upon his face there might have been seen an expression that told of mingled resolution and curiosity. Yes, he would do everything possible to deliver this strange missive that Malcolm Spence had entrusted to his care, apparently on the impulse of the moment; at the same time Jack would not have been human, and a boy, had he not experienced more or less wonder as to what that same communication might contain.

But the mystery was one that must remain such to the end of the chapter, since the deep sense of honor that always went with his actions would positively prevent his trying to ascertain what that sealed packet contained.

"Hey! get busy there, Jimmy!" he called out; "we're going to start again, and make for the other boats. They've pulled up, and are waiting for us to join them. And, believe me, those fellows are just eating their heads off with envy, because they must have seen that we were hobnobbing with a real birdman, who could scoot along the water as easily as a flying-fish. All ready, are you? Then here she goes, Jimmy," and immediately the merry hum of the motor sounded.

CHAPTER IV. THE FIRST CAMPFIRE ASHORE

"Ahoy there, *Tramp*! What's all this mean?"

That was George hailing through his megaphone, as Jack and Jimmy drew near the spot where the other boats were waiting.

Jack simply waved his hand, to indicate that all in good time the other fellows would hear the news; and that he did not mean to strain his voice shouting across a stretch of water, when there was no necessity.

Presently the three craft were moving along abreast, down the river, and only a little distance apart. It might be noticed that while the *Wireless* hung on the starboard quarter, the *Comfort* was just as near on the port side; and thus conversation was made easy.

"Now spin us the yarn, partner," spoke up impatient George, who did everything in a hurry, though a mighty good comrade all the same.

"Yes," broke in Nick, who was also in the same narrow boat, as usual gripping the sides, as though to steady his fat form; "believe me, fellows, we're consumed with curiosity to know what that chap in the aeroplane wanted with you."

"Say," came from the lanky Josh, squatted in the roomy *Comfort*, with his long legs doubled up under him, after the manner of a Turk; "what d'ye think, Jack, Nick here kinder expected to see you toddle aboard that hydroplane, and take a spin up among the clouds. Said 'twould be just like your luck to get hold of such a bully chance."

"Well, hardly," laughed Jack. "But we did make the acquaintance of a pretty fine young fellow, the same we've been reading about so much lately – Malcolm Spence."

"Oh, say! why couldn't we have been along?" grunted George, disconsolately; "for if ever there was a fellow I'd give a heap to meet up with, he's the one. It's a shame, next door to a crime, that we got left out of the deal. But go on, Jack, old chum, and tell us all he said."

Jack accordingly proceeded to do so. He was frequently interrupted by Jimmy, who fancied that he was neglecting some important feature of the story. Between them everything was presently told. And the other four hung upon the narration to the last word.

"Let's see that queer old packet, Jack," said Herb.

"That's so; give us a squint at it, anyhow," Nick demanded.

So the skipper of the *Tramp* took the letter out carefully and held it up.

"Excuse me for not passing it around, fellows," he remarked, "but I gave my word it shouldn't go out of my possession until I'd found the party mentioned. From the way the young chap acted, I guess it must be more or less valuable, to him and this same party, anyhow."

"What is the name on the envelope – you can tell me that, can't you?" asked Josh.

"Van Arsdale Spence," replied the bearer of the missive, as he just as carefully replaced it in his pocket.

"Hey! that's the same last name as his, ain't it?" remarked George.

"Spence – yes, and it may be some relation of his, perhaps a brother or father. But, fellows, that's none of our business, remember. Now, let's talk of other things, and forget that little adventure for a time."

Jack generally had his way, and in this case his chums realized that he was certainly right. So they started talking about their immediate plans for the first night out.

"We'll go ashore if we can, boys, and build a rousing fire," said Nick, whose one great delight, outside of eating, was seeing a bonfire burn; and, indeed, he always declared some of his remote ancestors must have been real fire worshippers.

"Yes, that would be a good idea," Jack admitted. "There's no telling how often on this trip we'll find ourselves forced to eat and sleep aboard, so when the opportunity offers we might as well get out to stretch our legs."

"Great scheme," declared Josh, who, being considerably longer than any one of his shipmates, suffered more in consequence of cramped quarters.

"Only one thing wrong," grunted Nick, shaking his head.

"I can guess he's thinking of eating right now," flashed Josh, who knew the symptoms in his companion only too well.

"Well, Mister Smarty, for once you hit the nail on the head," grinned the fat boy. "I just happened to think of something we hadn't ought to have forgotten to fetch along for our first meal."

"What was that?" demanded Jack.

"Why, when I looked over that list of things you got up, Jack, blessed if there was anything else I could think of," said George; "but it takes my mate here to have 'em all in his mind, even if he can't cook like Josh."

"Let's hear what we forgot, then, Nick!" demanded Herb.

"Oysters!" immediately cried the other, triumphantly. "This is the country for the delicious bivalve, I understand, and the season is on. I'd made up my mind some time ago, when this trip was first planned, that I was going to have lots of feasts in that line. When a fellow lives away back on the Mississippi River he gets mighty few chances for real fresh oysters, you know, and I do love 'em so much!"

"And a few more things in the bargain," chuckled Josh, who never could resist a chance to get in a sly dig at his friend.

"Lots of 'em," replied the stout boy, calmly, and without a blush.

"But I thought you understood all about that," remarked Jack. "We expect to pick up all the oysters we want on the way, so there was no use laying in a supply at the start, when we needed room for more important stores."

"Depend on it, Nick, you'll get all the bivalves you want before we're through with this cruise," Herb prophesied.

"Bring 'em on, then," boasted Nick. "I'm ready to tackle a mountain of 'em right off the reel, in the shell or out. Never believed I could get enough oysters. But about what time do we go ashore, boys?"

"He's getting hungry already, I do believe?" cried Josh. "Honest, now, to keep that fellow from complaining, there ought to be a bag of crackers and cheese hung up all the time within his reach, so he could take a snack every hour or two. I reckon those fat legs of his'n must be hollow, for how else could he stow away all the grub he does? He's a regular *Oliver Twist*, calling for more, more!"

Nick took all this in the best of humor. He even grinned, just as though he might look on it as some sort of compliment.

"I guess I was born hungry, and never got over the complaint," he observed; "but that don't answer my question, Jack. It's near four o'clock, right now, and it gets dark not a great while after six, you know."

"All right, then; in about another hour we'll think of looking up a creek along the shore, and make a snug harbor. Then for a fire, and a supper, the first of the new cruise," the skipper of the *Tramp* replied.

"Hear! hear! only another hour to wait," declared Nick, waving his hat exultantly.

"Think you can hold out that long?" demanded Josh.

"I'll try," said Nick, meekly, as he drew an apple from one of his pockets, and proceeded to calmly munch the same.

"I give you my word, boys," said George, solemnly, "that's the seventh he's bit into since we left the dock. Two did for me; and I can see still more bunching up in his pockets. If he gets faint, I'll hand him a cracker box to open. But I've some hopes the apples will be a life preserver."

Jack presently began to increase the speed of the flotilla. He wanted to get as far down the river as possible before being compelled to put up for the night. And having glanced at his charts, he knew that they must cover a number of miles ere they reached a tributary flowing into the Delaware at this point.

Five o'clock came around at last. Josh remarked that he was pleased to see Nick still holding out, and that he had not wasted away to a mere shadow.

"Now we head in toward the western shore, and keep our eyes on the lookout for the mouth of a creek that ought to be along down here," Jack called out, as he began to gradually alter the course of his boat.

Of course, this pleased them quite a little, as marking a change in the monotony of the afternoon run. And truth to tell, Nick was not the only fellow who enjoyed looking forward to supper time beside a roaring fire.

"Hey! that looks like an opening below us, Jack!" called George, who was in the bow of the *Wireless*, steering, leaving to Nick the duty of attending to other matters connected with the management of the speed boat, especially its balance.

"You're right, George, that's just what it is, the mouth of the creek; so slow up everybody, and we'll go in."

Impetuous George was the first to turn into the tributary. After running up a short distance, the prospect for a camp not improving, Jack called out:

"It looks as if it might get worse instead of better, so let's stop off here. There are a few trees anyway, and we can get all the wood we need. Head in, George, and make a landing."

Presently all of them stepped ashore. Although their surroundings did not appeal very heartily to lads accustomed to dense timber, with all that implies, still they knew how to make the best of a bad bargain.

Nick began to gather firewood at once, and some of the others helped, so that in a brief time a fire was started that at least made things look a bit more comfortable and home-like, as Nick said, while puffing like a porpoise in his labors.

The cruisers had been securely tied up, since there was no danger of any storm out on the river dashing them against the shore in this peaceful harbor.

Having brought the mess chests ashore, together with what cooking things they needed, the boys began preparations for supper. Many hands make light work, and Jack utilized every one for some purpose. Some laid in a supply of wood, others opened cans, while Josh, being the boss cook of the crowd, took charge of the menu.

Meanwhile night began to settle around them, and with the coming darkness a swarm of insect pests developed.

"Whoop!" cried Nick, as he made his fat arms swing around his head like a couple of old-time flails; "what d'ye call all this, tell me? Every time I open my mouth a dozen hop right in. Talk to me about skeeters, these must be the frisky Jersey brand we've heard so much about."

"Say, it's lucky Jack thought to get nets for us all in Philadelphia," remarked Herb, as he too waved the invaders aside when they harried him.

"No sleeping ashore for me here," declared George. "The varmints would carry a fellow off bodily, I do believe."

A little breeze springing up caused the insects to drop into the grass again, so that the boys had some peace. Supper being ready, they finally sat around, and started to partake of the first meal of the great cruise.

As they were furiously hungry of course everything tasted just splendid; but then it was good without any starvation sauce to tempt them, for Josh had always proved a remarkably clever cook, even though caring so little himself for eating.

After the edge of their appetites had been taken off, the six boys began to chat and joke. Josh was pleased to get a chance to sing one of his little ditties, and required very little urging, after the meal was over, and the things cleared away.

It was mighty nice, sitting there in comfortable attitudes, listening to Josh sing, and with the flames jumping up as Nick threw another armful of fuel on the fire. Now and then one of them would make a hurried slap at some over-strenuous mosquito that insisted on having his meal, too; but, taken in all, the boys were enjoying it tremendously.

"When does the moon show up?" asked Herb, after a time.

"Why, it's already up there in the west, and a fair-sized crescent, too," remarked Jack. "Each night it'll get bigger, until we have it full. That's the time I like most of all, when she hangs up there like a big round shield, and the waves dance as if they were made of silver."

"Listen to Jack getting poetical!" laughed George.

"Well, who wouldn't, when you can hear the lap of the little waves out there on the creek?" replied Jack, instantly. "And there, that must have been a fish jumping, the way they told us the mullet do down South."

"Yes," said Nick, "me to get one of those castnets, and pull 'em in at every throw. No danger of a fellow getting hungry in that country, I guess."

"If you didn't get hungry where would be the pleasure in living, tell me that?" demanded Josh.

Before Nick could frame any reply there suddenly broke out the most terrible roaring sound any of the boys had ever heard. It seemed to come from right off the surface of the dark creek close by, and gave poor Nick such a fright that he almost fell into the fire upon attempting to struggle to his feet, such was his clumsiness when excited.

All of them forgot the comfort they had been enjoying, and scrambled erect.

CHAPTER V. A STORM, AND NO REFUGE IN SIGHT

It was only natural that every one of the little party of cruisers should feel their hearts beating much faster than ordinary, as they were so startled by that horrible blast so near at hand.

But Jack believed he had heard another sound close on the heels of the first, and which was not unlike a hoarse laugh. That indicated the presence of human beings; and, of course, would account for the roar that had disturbed their first camp ashore.

Looking in the direction from whence the sounds had apparently proceeded, which was just below where their boats were pulled up, he could just manage to make out some bulky moving object; then the whipping of what seemed to be a discolored sail caught his eye, and he understood.

Of course, it must be some boat, possibly belonging to oystermen who plied their trade out on the bay, close to which they now found themselves.

Coming into the creek, which was possibly their regular harbor for night refuge, and discovering the fire as well as the boys, they had blown a fog horn just in the spirit of frolic, to give the boys a scare.

Both men were laughing now at the success of their scheme, and one of them called out, with the idea of calming the bunch before they took to shooting, in their excitement, as greenhorns were liable to do under such conditions.

"Hey, there! it's all right, boys; we're just oystermen, ye see, an' meanin' to come ashore to jine ye, 'fore we goes home. Got a dock a leetle ways up-creek. So hold yer guns, boys; no harm done, I reckons!"

The sloop was run up on the sandy shore and both men jumped off. They proved to be honest chaps, and soon the boys were quite relieved of their first suspicious sensation at sight of such rough customers.

These fellows had seldom looked on such dainty tricks as the three little motor boats. Accustomed to heavy craft, they shook their heads when they heard how Jack and his chums expected to make far distant Florida in such frail boats.

"Never kin do it, boys, an' I knows it," declared the taller fellow.

"But ye got the grit, all right, I reckons," added the other.

"We expect to meet up with lots of trouble on the way," said Jack; "but then we've been through some experience, and know a little about managing these things. Often a boat like mine will live in a sea that would swamp a more clumsy craft. A canoe rides the waves like a duck, where a rowboat would fill and sink, being logy."

"They may be somethin' in that same," remarked one of the oystermen; "but the chanct is, ye'll never make the riffle, boys. I hate to say that same; but right down in this Delaware Bay they's bad spots where ye kin git caught out in a blow, an' can't land. Many a fine boat's gone down as I know of."

"An' if so be ye do make shore they's hard characters all along that section. Look out if ye happens to land near Murderkill Creek, that's all I kin say," his mate spoke up, quite seriously, for they seemed to have taken something of an interest in the boys, and their ambitious plans.

"Goodness gracious! did you ever hear such a terrible name as that?" gasped Nick, looking pale, as his imagination worked overtime in picturing the dreadful things apt to be met with in a country where even the creeks bore such suggestive names.

"Oh, sometimes things turn out less terrible than they seem!" laughed Jack, who had read something about this same creek, and felt no particular fear about making a camp along its border, should necessity compel such a thing.

"Now, we got to be goin' home, 'case we got famblies waitin' for us; but we'll toss a lot o' oysters ashore here, if so be ye'd like to have 'em," the taller man remarked.

"All right," spoke up Nick, so promptly that Jack was unable to get in a reply; "give us fifty cents' worth, if that'll buy a bushel. I feel like I could eat that many myself. Yum, yum, just think of the luck, fellows!"

The men laughed, but took the money, since their business was gathering the bivalves, and there were doubtless many mouths to feed. And they certainly tossed a full bushel ashore before pushing off, to continue their run up the stream, to the dock they spoke of owning.

Nick had galloped over to the *Wireless*, and was heard rummaging about at a tremendous rate, all the while lamenting the fact that he could not find what he was so eagerly searching for.

"Oh, George! where did you ever hide that bully new oyster knife I bought up in Philadelphia?" he bellowed, as he raised his head above the side of the speed boat.

"Never touched it," answered the other, promptly. "But I do remember seeing some such thing in that locker up in the bow, where the tools are kept."

A triumphant squeal presently announced that Nick had unearthed his treasure; and over the side he came, making at once for the heap of bivalves.

"You want to go slow with those things," warned Herb.

"Oh, rats! I guess I know my capacity!" scoffed the fat boy, starting to rap a shell smartly, and then insert the end of the knife between its two jaws. "When I get enough I'll hold up."

"You bet you will before you reach that point!" declared George, "because some of us hanker after oysters, too. But just remember how you cut your fingers with the shells the time we were down at New Orleans. And be careful: they may not hurt much now, but tomorrow they'll fair set you wild, boy."

Nick only mumbled in reply. He was stuffing the first fat oyster into his mouth, and as this was an extra large specimen, it allowed of no room for words.

The others soon got busy too, using such implements as they could find among the tools. Jack had a regular oyster knife, but none of the others had thought to provide themselves with such a necessary article, save Nick alone.

But by degrees they tamed the oyster fiend, and would not let him have any more. Jimmy borrowed his knife, and amused himself in disposing of the juicy contents of numerous shells. And Josh, after swallowing several himself, proved to be a public benefactor by opening them for those who were green at the business.

But after a time they cried quits, and began to think of going aboard again; for the venomous little pests were beginning to be very active, and kept them all busy slapping right and left.

Once under their nets they found a solid comfort that fully compensated them for not being able to sleep ashore.

And so the night passed. Nothing occurred to disturb them; and yet despite the calm, it is doubtful whether any of the six slept very well. The novelty of once more being away from civilization and starting on a long cruise that might bring all sorts of adventures in its train, kept them wakeful.

Doubtless, too, memory carried them back to many scenes connected with past experiences; and they lived again in the various happenings marking those halcyon days.

Up with the dawn some of them once more went ashore. The fire was started afresh and preparations for breakfast were under way by the time Nick made his appearance. He surveyed what was being done for a little time, and then lifted his voice in protest:

"What! no oysters for breakfast? That's mighty funny, now. I expected to have 'em every meal, you know."

Not getting any satisfaction from Josh, who was busy making some batter for the camp flapjacks, Nick wandered off. They soon heard him hard at work on oyster shells, though an occasional grunt told that he had cut his tender fingers with the sharp points.

He did succeed in opening a few, which he insisted on cooking for his own breakfast; and Josh let him have his way; but it might have been noticed that Nick consumed his full share of the batter

cakes; and even wistfully eyed a last one belonging to the cook, upon which Josh generously passed it along, saying that he was "full up."

If any one ever saw Nick in that condition it did not readily occur to them, for the fat boy seemed to be built after the style of an omnibus, with always room for "just one more," with crowding.

"Looks like a good day ahead," remarked Herb, glancing at the sky.

"I was just thinking the other way," spoke up Jack.

"Eh? What makes you tell us that, after hearing what those oystermen said about the danger we'd run, if we were caught in the big bay in a storm?" asked George; for his narrow-beam boat always threatened to turn turtle when the waves were very boisterous, and it kept him guessing continually.

"Oh! well, I may be wrong; but I didn't altogether like the looks of those mottled clouds as the sun was coming up," Jack remarked.

"And it was red, too, which I understand is always a bad sign," Nick put in. "If we could only get another lot of shell fish, I'd vote to stay right here for the day. Perhaps things would pick up by tomorrow."

"Rats! Who's afraid?" laughed Josh, who knew he was sure of lots of comfort aboard the roomy boat belonging to Herb.

It was, however, put to a vote, because Jack believed in majority ruling in matters affecting the whole crowd. Nick himself voted in favor of going on. Whether he did this because he was ashamed to show the white feather, or from fear lest they might not be able to secure a further supply of oysters, none of them ever really knew. But the motion to continue the cruise was carried unanimously.

As they issued forth from the creek they found that the river seemed much wider than they had believed it to be. And apparently it would keep on that way, with the shores drawing further apart, until they found themselves on Delaware Bay, which in parts, Jack understood, to be something like twenty-five miles from side to side, an ocean in fact, for such small craft.

"We must have been camping in Delaware last night, eh, Jack?" called out Herb, as the three boats ran along side by side, even George curbing his propensity for rushing ahead.

"Sure we did," spoke up George. "I found out on the chart where we stopped. Look away over there in Jersey, and you'll see a cloud of smoke hovering over Salem. How about that, Jack; am I correct?"

"That's Salem, all right; and we've got to start at a better pace than this if we hope to get anywhere before night. Hit her up, George, and we'll do the best we can to follow," Jack answered.

This pleased the jaunty skipper of the *Wireless* first-rate. He always liked to lead the procession, and set the pace for the rest.

So, as the morning wore on, they made good progress. Of course the others were compelled to tone down their speed to suit the pace of the old *Comfort*, that just wallowed along in what George called a "good natured way." Boat and skipper were very much alike; but then that similarity also applied in the cases of George and his speed boat; yes, and with regard to Jack, too, who united the good qualities of both other skippers, as his craft did those of stability and speed.

At noon they ate a lunch while still booming along; for Jack had discovered a bank of clouds coming up in the west that he did not just fancy, and hoped to make a certain point before the storm, if such there was in store for them, should break.

"What's this mean, Jack?" asked George, a couple of hours later, falling back somewhat so that he might exchange words with the others.

"Yes," said Herb at that; "it's getting as dark as the mischief. Guess we're going to have that storm Jack prophesied this morning, fellows."

"Say, perhaps I'd better be shooting ahead, then," suggested George, uneasily. "You know this cranky boat of mine isn't the nicest thing going, to be in when the waves are rolling ten feet high. And it's so wide here, they'll beat that, in a pinch."

"What would you be after going ahead for, then?" asked Jimmy.

"So as to get to that creek with the lovely name we talked about," George replied, looking troubled, nevertheless. "I noted its position on the chart, and think I might find it."

"But if the storm caught you beforehand, you'd be in a bad pickle, George!" declared Jack, soberly. "No, better all keep together. Then, if an accident happens, there's some chance for the others lending a helping hand. But we'll head in more toward the Delaware side, though if the wind strikes us from the east it'll be a bad place to be caught on a lee shore."

Nothing more was said just then. They changed their course somewhat, and the three little motor boats continued to push steadily forward. Meanwhile the gloom seemed to gather around them, until even stout-hearted Jack shuddered a little as he surveyed the wide stretch of waters that had begun to tumble in the freshening wind, and thought what might happen if they could find no harbor, with a fierce late equinoctial gale sweeping across the dangerous bay.

CHAPTER VI.

A CLOSE SHAVE, BUT NO DAMAGE DONE

"See any signs of a harbor, Jack?"

It was Nick who called this out, as he watched the skipper of the *Tramp* swing the pair of binoculars he was handling along the shore ahead, while Jimmy had the wheel.

"Not that I could say for certain," replied the other, lowering the glasses for a minute in order to rest his strained eyes. "I was trying to get our bearings; and from several things about the shore, that resemble the line of the chart, I begin to believe I know where we are."

"Not near that awful Murderkill Creek, I hope?" spoke up Nick, shuddering.

"What's the matter with you?" called George. "Any port in a storm, say I; and even if it happened to be Slaughter Creek, which I believe lies further on toward Lewes, I'd grab it in a hurry, if it came along. Don't you go to saying a single word against that sweet harbor. We'll rename it Paradise Creek, if only it serves us this day."

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