

ARUNDEL LOUIS

MOTOR BOAT
BOYS ON THE
ST. LAWRENCE

Louis Arundel

Motor Boat Boys on the St. Lawrence

«Public Domain»

Arundel L.

Motor Boat Boys on the St. Lawrence / L. Arundel — «Public Domain»,

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Louis Arundel
Motor Boat Boys on the St. Lawrence / Or,
Solving the Mystery of the Thousand Islands

*“Promise to read to me the log of your last trip, when you went down
the big river.”*

CHAPTER I – AFTER THE GAME

“That was a hard game for Macklin to lose, fellows!”

“I should say it was, Herb.”

“He nearly pitched his head off, too. Wow! how they did come in like cannon balls!”

“And talk about curves and drops, Little Clarence was roight there wid the goods,” said a stout boy; whose freckled face, carrotty hair and blue eyes, as well as the touch of brogue to his voice, told of Irish blood.

“But Jack met his hot pace, and went him one better. Clarence may be a cracker jack in the box, but he can’t *just* come up to good old reliable Jack Storm ways, of the high school baseball club.”

“Oh, shucks! enough of that taffy, fellows,” laughed the object of this praise, as he swung the bat he was carrying; “why, you know right well I was up against the fence when they made that ninth inning rally. They had found me with the goods on. And you know who won that game for us – our never failing, heavy pinch-hitter, Buster Longfellow. When his bat got up against the horsehide I knew it was all over but the shouting for Clarence.”

“Wasn’t he mad, though? Hurrah for Buster! He’s not built for a runner, they say, but he’s got the batting eye. That hit was a peach!”

“Thanks, George. I believe I did help Brodie dash home with the winning tally. It’s awful nice of you fellows to appreciate talent!”

The boy called Buster made a mock bow as well as he was able. He was fat and chunky, so that his baseball suit seemed moulded to his figure. While his name was understood to be Nick Longfellow, he seldom heard it save at home or in school. To his fellows he was known by such significant names as “Buster,” “Pudding,” and “Hippopotamus.”

There were just five in the bunch, dusty, tired fellows, all on the way home from a most exciting game with a rival team, and the most bitter rivals for supremacy in the little river town along the upper Mississippi.

Besides Buster and Jack, there were the Irish lad, Jimmie Brannagan, who lived with the Stormways, being something of a ward of Jack’s father; Herb Dickson, and George Rollins, all of them members of the high school team.

These five boys, with the addition of another who was not present just then, composed the membership of a motor boat club, and between them owned three very clever craft. George’s was a narrow speedboat, called the *Wireless*, the powerful engine of which had a faculty for getting out of order just when most wanted. The one of which Jack was skipper was named the *Tramp*, and while not so fast as its dangerous competitor, could still make great time. Herb possessed a commodious launch, which he had very wisely christened the *Comfort*, for she was as staunch and reliable as a houseboat.

During the preceding autumn, taking advantage of the school being closed until New Year’s because of an epidemic in the town, these boys had made a long trip down the Mississippi river to New Orleans, being given permission by their parents or guardians.

To make the run more interesting Jack’s father had contributed a silver cup as a trophy; and the annals of that adventurous race have already been given in the first volume of this series. The boys for some time had been laying their heads together and planning another outing for the coming vacation; but for various good and sufficient reasons they were keeping their intended cruising ground a dead secret from everybody.

“Where’s Josh Purdue?” asked Herb, as the party swung into the main street of the town. “We want him along when we talk over that letter Jack had from Clayton, where our boats are going. What did you do about hiding their destination, Jack?”

“Yes,” said George, quickly. “You know we agreed that those chaps were nosing all about, trying to get a clew. Clarence has ordered a rattling motor boat from some eastern maker, and if he could only learn where we’re going to hang out this summer, wouldn’t he just try to make it warm for us, though? Ten to one you hadn’t left the station five minutes after fastening on the tags before he was reading the same.”

“I expected that, fellows,” laughed Jack, “and did the best I could to fool him. The boats are only sent to the address in Milwaukee. From there they will be rebilled to Clayton and shipped on a steamer through the lakes.”

“But he might even have the nerve to write to that agent and make some excuse for asking where they were sent. How about that, Jack?” asked Herb.

“I even thought of that,” replied the other. “You see, when you’re dealing with wide-awake, unscrupulous fellows like Clarence Macklin, and his toady, Joe Brinker, it pays to insure against trouble. And I’ve done it as well as I knew how.”

“Tell us about it, please,” asked Buster, anxiously.

“Well,” replied the one addressed, “I wrote the agent in Milwaukee, stating the circumstances. He turned out to be a jolly good chap; for he answered me and promised that if Clarence or Joe make inquiries he’ll put them on the wrong track.”

“Bully for him!” ejaculated Nick. “We’ll vote him thanks at our next meeting, fellows, that’s what, and call on him in a body as we go through to the steamer when on our way.”

“I wish the time was two weeks later,” remarked Herb. “I don’t see just how I’m going to stand it until after the exams are over.”

“Oh, well, the days manage to pass along; and this glorious victory ought to make you feel that life is worth living,” remarked Jack, with mock seriousness.

“As for me,” remarked Buster, taking in a long breath, as if in anticipation. “I just dream of the bliss of cruising aboard a steady, roomy boat like the *Comfort*. You can talk all you want, George, about the delights of flying through the water at the rate of twenty-five miles an hour; but me to the cozy home-like cruiser every time. Once is out for me, you remember.”

“Do we, boys?” jeered George, looking at the rest. “Well, will I ever forget how Buster used to sit there in the stern of my flier, looking like a stuffed pillow, with a cork life preserver belted around him all the time, and trying to keep his balance. And the less said about his cooking the better. It haunts me still.”

“Oh! but I’ve improved in that respect, George, very much,” the fat boy hastened to exclaim. “Don’t you worry about it, Herb. I’m taking lessons from our colored cook right now, and expect to branch out as a real prize box. You know when I once set my mind to a thing I generally get there, even if it does take time. Great bodies move slowly, they say. Didn’t I learn to swim after all my disappointments; tell me that, George Rollins?”

“Sure you did, thanks to Jack here,” replied the other. “But all through that trip you gave me the nightmare because you had lost some silly – ”

“Hold on! you solemnly promised you’d never say another word about that business and I’m going to keep you to it, George,” cried Buster. “We did have a glorious time of it, you know. And I can do a little once in a while to help the crowd forget their troubles, can’t I?”

“Why, to be sure you can, Buster, and I’m the last one to deny it,” declared George. “I don’t mean half I say. You know my weakness is a quick tongue. And after the grand way you belted that ball today, I’d be willing to forgive almost anything you’d ever done. Shake on that, old partner of my joys and woes.”

“The boats got off all right, that’s a comfort,” observed Herb.

“How do ye know?” demanded Jimmie.

“I saw them on the cars, and moving out of town, just in that ninth inning, when things looked so black for us,” was the reply. “You know my position out in right gives me a chance to look across

the big field to the railroad. And as I was getting my breath, after chasing that tricky ball Carson Beggs whacked out, with two on bases, I had a glimpse of a freight passing, and counted all three boats on gondolas, fastened up in their waterproof covers. It just seemed to give me heart to go in and root harder than ever. It was a lucky omen, too, fellows.”

“Well,” Jack said, “of course they’ll be waiting for us at Clayton when we get there. And although we talked of taking the steamer ourselves, I think, on the whole, it would be wise to go by train. In that way we’ll save a couple of days. Besides, some time we mean to cruise all through the great lakes, and we’d better keep the trip until we can do it in our own motor boats.”

“That sounds good to me!” cried Nick.

“And I’m sure it hits my case to a dot, because it means less time to wait,” and Herb nodded his head in a way that plainly told how his mind was made up.

“That settles the lake trip, then,” laughed George, “because I never did care much about going that way. Jimmie, how do you stand on it?”

“Wid both feet,” replied the party addressed, emphatically. “The sooner we kin arrive at the Thousand Islands, the better I’ll be plazed.”

“Oh! well, let’s forget we ever mentioned going the other way,” said Jack. “But that won’t prevent our passing through Milwaukee, stopping to shake hands with that obliging agent, and finding if the boats got off all right.”

“You can learn that by writing in a few days, Jack,” observed Herb, sagaciously. “I only hope Clarence doesn’t have a friend in Milwaukee who would spy around and discover the truth, that’s all.”

“If he writes the agent you can make up your mind he hasn’t,” said Nick, as the party came to a pause on a corner, where, as a rule, they were accustomed to separating, each one heading for his own home.

“Wait a little, boys. I think I see Josh coming away back there,” remarked Jack, when one of the others made some remark about “seeing you later, fellows!”

“Looks like he was in a big hurry, too?” suggested Nick.

“Well, he is half running, to be sure,” admitted George.

“And there he goes waving his hand to us,” mentioned Herb. “I guess Josh wants us to wait up for him here. Perhaps he’s got something to tell us.”

“Or it may be he just wants to wring the hand of our friend Buster, and tell him, with tears in his eyes, how delighted he was to have him save the day for our team,” and Jack, as he said this, winked at George; for it was a notorious fact that Josh and the fat boy were forever playing pranks on each other, and often saying disagreeable things; that, however, ended in nothing harder than a little froth and bubble, since it was only surface and make-believe animosity after all.

“Don’t you believe it,” declared the hero of the late game, shaking his head in an aggressive way. “Josh was the next batter up, and I just know he thinks I swatted that ball to cheat him out of the glory. For he had his mind made up to send the horsehide over the fence for a home run.”

“Well,” laughed Jack, “never wait to see what the next batter is going to do. When the chance comes you just poke that ball out into deep center, and then roll down to first as fast as you can. Then perhaps he’ll bring you home with his big hit. But Josh is getting here, and we’ll soon know now what ails him.”

“Don’t you go to borrowing trouble too soon?” warned Herb. “I know Josh pretty well, and how he likes to joke. He’s a false alarm, that’s what.”

“But he looks serious enough right now,” said George, with whom the runner was to keep company on this new cruise they had planned; and who, therefore, felt an especial interest in Josh.

The newcomer was a rather slender fellow, taller than any of the others, and the best runner on the team. In times past Josh had been troubled with indigestion; but the month and more spent during their memorable Mississippi cruise had about cured him of this, so that he was looking better than ever before in all his life. That was one reason why his parents were only too glad to allow him

the chance of getting in the open again during the coming vacation; for they believed it would be the making of the lad.

Josh stopped running when close to the others, as though husbanding his wind so that he could communicate the news he bore.

“It’s all up, fellows!” he cried, as he finally reached the corner, where the other five gathered around him.

“What do you mean?” asked Jack, anxiously.

“Yes, explain, Josh. What’s up?” demanded George.

“They know where our boats have gone!” gasped Josh, excitedly. “Somebody must have leaked, that’s what. And they’re going to have their new motor boat shipped to the Thousand Islands, too. Now, see what a peck of trouble we’re going to have this summer!”

CHAPTER II – CHUMS, TRIED AND TRUE

“Josh, hold up your hand, and look me in the eye!” said Jack, sternly.

“Oh! you don’t believe me, do you? But I never was more serious in my life!” exclaimed the newcomer, meeting Jack’s look squarely.

“Then I’m sorry, that’s all,” declared the other. “If Clarence Macklin has found out where we expect to cruise this summer, he’ll lie awake nights trying to lay plans how to give us all the trouble he can.”

“How d’ye know all this, Josh?” demanded Nick, rather tremulously.

“I just happened to be near where Clarence and Joe were having their heads together, and the idea came to me to listen. I only thought they were explaining how the game was lost, and I wanted to hear Clarence say how somebody sent a ray of sunlight into his eyes with a pocket mirror, just when he was handing out that ball Buster knocked out in deep center. You know his way, fellows, and how he squirms out of every hole so smoothly?”

“Yes, yes, of course we do, Josh; but go on;” cried Herb.

“Don’t you see you’ve got us keyed up to the breaking pitch? Let loose, and tell what you heard!” exclaimed George, always nervous and anxious to make speed.

“Well, it wasn’t much, but it counted for a heap,” replied the narrator. “About as near as I can remember, and repeat, this was what Clarence said: ‘Never mind, Joe, we’re going to get even soon. Wait till our dandy boat gets to Clayton. Say, mebbe there won’t be a lot of surprised fellows then, as we cut circles around ’em, and make ’em wish they hadn’t blackballed us. You wait and see, that’s all.’”

Various exclamations broke out from the other boys.

“Oh, yes, they must know, all right!” said Herb, bitterly.

“All I can say is it’s mighty queer, after we’ve taken such pains to keep everything a dead secret, so even our folks don’t know yet where we’re going,” Josh continued to say, meaningly.

Somehow or other, as if by mutual arrangement, every eye seemed to be gradually focussed on poor Nick, who turned as red as a turkey cock.

“Oh! yes, look at me, won’t you?” he exclaimed, spluttering more or less as was his habit when unduly excited. “You think I’m the one who leaked, just because I stopped to talk with Clarence the other day on the street, and George saw me. He never even said a single word about boats, but asked me something else. Look all you want too, but I tell you, once for all, that if there *was* a leak, it didn’t come through me! I never told a single soul!”

“Oh! nobody has accused you, Buster,” said Jack, soothingly, for he was fond of the good-natured fat boy.

“That’s all right, but I guess I’ve got feelings, and I can tell what every one of you is thinking,” the other went on, in an aggrieved tone.

“Just forget it, Buster,” Jack continued, for he knew only too well how the fat boy liked to harp on anything that worried him, and in this way make life miserable for the others of the club. “The mischief is done. Like as not we may never know how it happened. And there’s no need of our bothering our heads now about spilt milk. The question is, shall we change our plans, and go somewhere else this summer?”

“I say no!” exclaimed Herb, immediately and with firmness.

“That’s my case, too,” Josh echoed. “After we’ve made all our fine arrangements, it would be cowardly to back down just because those two mean skunks choose to tag after us and try to give us trouble.”

“Niver give up the ship! Them’s my sentiments!” observed Jimmie, aggressively. “And I say the same,” remarked Nick. “Sooner or later you’ll find out how they learned our plans, and then you’ll all be sorry for putting it on me, that’s what.”

“Then it seems settled that we make no change,” said Jack, with a stern look on his face; “for I’m of the same opinion as the rest. We’ll go to the St. Lawrence, and if Tricky Clarence and Bully Joe try to upset our plans, they’ll find themselves barking up the wrong tree, that’s all.”

“And so he thinks he’s got a wizard boat that will cut circles all around my *Wireless*, does he?” said George, with the light of anticipated rivalry in his black eyes. “All right. Perhaps Clarence has got another guess coming. He’ll find me on the job all right, and ready to give him a warm run for his money.”

“When did we start talking seriously for the first time about choosing the Thousand Islands, and the St. Lawrence for our summer outing?” asked Herb, who seemed almost as anxious as Nick to find out the truth concerning the leak.

“I can tell you that,” replied the fat boy, quickly. “It was that afternoon when Jack asked us to stay after school, and meet him in the clubroom for a little talk. Don’t you remember, he read that letter he had from Clayton, the first one; and we soon voted to make the St. Lawrence our cruising ground this summer.”

“Buster is right about that, for I remember it distinctly,” remarked Jack.

“That was the little room in school that Mr. Sparks allows the various clubs and organizations to use when they ask permission – the one on the second floor? Am I right, fellows?” Herb went on.

“Sure ye arre,” declared Jimmie. “Doan’t I just remember that we wint till the door ivery two minutes to say if the inemy would be sphyin’ around in the hall.”

“But there was no sign of them, you also remember that?” observed Jack, quickly.

“Niver a wan,” Jimmie hastened to reply.

“Then it would stand to reason that they didn’t overhear us talking. I know you couldn’t in the next room, for I’ve been in there during recitation, and the wall is dead. I only mention this, because that same day, after I left the rest of you down-town, I found that I’d forgotten a book I needed to study, and hurried back to the school. And I met Clarence coming along the street. He said he had been kept in by Miss Stryker to do a task. But it looks as though the leak could not have been at that time.”

“Somebody must have talked in their sleep,” suggested Josh, humorously.

“Perhaps some one in the post office got on to Jack receiving a letter from Clayton, and writing there,” Herb put in.

“Well, now,” remarked Jack, “there may be something in that idea; though just now I can’t think of anybody in the post office who would be that mean. I know all the clerks, and none of them have ever been thick with either Clarence or Joe.”

“Suppose we give the matter a rest,” said Herb, with an uneasy look toward Nick; for the fat boy was to be his partner during the coming cruise, and he feared lest Buster would get to brooding on the unjust suspicions that had been directed toward him, with the result that he must be forever speaking about it, and suggesting the most astonishing explanations of the riddle.

“Agreed,” Jack replied, readily, falling in with the idea. “After all, the coming of these fellows may add some spice to our trip, who knows.”

It certainly did, as will be made manifest shortly; but just then none of the motor boat boys suspected what a strange series of exciting adventures was to be their portion, all through the decision of their rivals to choose the same cruising grounds for their summer outing, and to be as malicious and troublesome as possible.

Nick seemed to have thrown aside the temporary gloom that had fallen upon him, because of the unjust suspicions of his mates. He was naturally so cheery that trouble and he could never hitch up together for any great length of time.

“If those two cronies do chase after us,” he said, “perhaps the long standing trouble between Joe and myself may be settled. You know we’ve been growling at each other for going on a year now. And some day there’ll be a surprise due him.”

When Nick talked in that vein the others knew he was himself again, and ready to joke. So Jack, pretending to be surprised, went on to remark:

“Why, Buster, do you mean to say you’d pick on that poor fellow, who has never been able to whip more than three boys at a time in all his life? I’m surprised to hear you talk so savagely.”

“Oh! well, the thing is brooding, and bound to come off some day. Bully Joe will go just a little too far, and get his. Why, there was one time, not so long ago either, when I’d just about made up my mind to lick him for keeps. And I give you my word, fellows, I’d have wiped up the ground with him, only that I was grabbed from behind and held back!”

“Wow! listen to the war chief, would you?” exclaimed Josh, pretending to shrink away from the belligerent fat boy, who was doubling up his pudgy fists, and assuming a warrior’s pose.

“He’s sure got on his fighting togs today!” echoed Herb, soothingly.

“Say, Buster,” remarked George, when Jack nudged him in the side, “tell us who was so mean as to grab you that way, and hold you back!”

“Shucks! I just knew you’d never rest till you asked that!” cried the other, as he pretended to show disgust. “Why, that was Joe, don’t you see!”

At that there was a howl; and Jimmie doubled up like a jack-knife in the violence of his merriment.

“I can see Joe’s finish, if he keeps on trying such tricks,” whooped George.

“Oh!” Buster went on, in a calm manner, “I’ll try and be as easy with him as any one could expect. Perhaps after he’s had one good lesson, Joe may reform. It’s keeping bad company that’s been his downfall. Clarence Macklin has oodles of money; and his dad used to be a sporty sort of a Wall street man they say, when he lived east; so he don’t care much what his hopeful does, so long as he keeps out of jail.”

“Well, if he goes on much longer the way he has, I reckon he’ll land there after a bit,” Herb remarked, soberly; for he had suffered on several occasions at the hands of the vindictive Clarence, as was well known to his chums.

“All right,” Jack put in. “And now, if there’s nothing further before the house, I move we adjourn. For one I know I’m as hungry as a bear, and ready to tackle a good dinner after all that hot work on the diamond.”

“Dinner!” exclaimed Buster, whose one weak point lay in his love of eating. “Wow! don’t you remember what bully good meals we had when we all got together on that dandy Mississippi trip, and Josh here slung the pots and pans? He’s sure the best cook in seven counties. I hear he’s getting up a book on camp dinners. And right now I subscribe for the first copy that’s printed; if it don’t cost over ten cents.”

“Just you wait,” returned Josh, with one of his wide grins. “It won’t be long now before you’ll have to get up and hustle the tin pans and things, whenever you have that longing for grub steal over you. No sitting down to the table and cleaning up everything in sight for you then. It’s work before you can eat. Herb is going to keep you down to brass tacks, ain’t you Herb?”

“Oh! Buster and myself expect to get on first rate,” the one addressed hastened to say; for Herb was a lover of peace. “I’m ready to pitch in and help him out on occasion. Everything is going to be lovely, and the goose hang high, aboard the good, staunch old *Comfort*, when we sail the stormy waters of the St. Lawrence, eh, Buster?”

“Well,” remarked Josh, as he started away, “anyhow, I’m glad you’ve decided to give our friend Buster the upper berth!”

A shout followed after him, and the last glimpse he had of the fat boy, Buster was shaking both fists in his direction, and pretending to display tremendous rage, though secretly chuckling with good-natured laughter. Happy the boy who is so constituted that he can in the best of humor take a joke that is leveled at himself; and that was Nick Longfellow to a dot.

The rest of the bunch soon scattered, as their homes lay in various directions; and this particular corner usually served as a gathering point as well as the place where they separated.

Jack may have allowed the mystery of the suspected “leak” to crop up in his active mind from time to time after that; but he knew just how sensitive Buster really felt over it, and he always religiously refrained from ever introducing the subject.

Some of the other boys of course must have discussed it as the days slowly passed; but they too seemed desirous that their fat chum might not have his feelings further injured, and nothing was said in his presence. But all the same Buster did not forget, as Herb was fated to learn to his sorrow.

CHAPTER III – A CHANCE CLEW

“Why, hello Jack!”

It was the first day of vacation, and being at the tail end of the week, the motor boat club had wisely decided to defer their departure until the following Monday morning, when they would say goodbye to the home town, and start across the state for Milwaukee.

The speaker was no other than Clarence Macklin; and Jack had come face to face with his bitter enemy upon the main street of the town, as he passed out from a shop where he had been making a little purchase.

Clarence was smiling, after his usual manner; but there was always something crafty about this look of his that made most boys suspicious. Had he been given his choice in the matter Jack would have passed on with a mere nod; for he did not believe in pretending to show anything like friendliness toward this tricky lad, who had once tried to get into the motor boat club, and been blackballed, a fact he had vowed to get even for if it took him a year.

But Clarence evidently had a reason for wishing to talk with the other. He even thrust himself squarely in Jack’s way; and the latter saw no reason why he should avoid an encounter.

“Well,” continued Clarence, “I suppose you fellows are in high feather, now that vacation has come, and you can break away?”

“Sure we are,” replied Jack, trying to seem good-natured; though secretly he was wondering what the other had concealed up his sleeve, and why he insisted on stopping him in this way; for it happened that just a day or so before Jack had been reading that good old precept of warning, to “Beware of the Greeks bearing gifts.”

“And I suppose, also, you mean to get away soon?” Clarence went on.

“Monday sees us off, unless something we don’t look for detains us,” was Jack’s response, as he watched the play of emotions on the face of the other, and noted how the pretense of friendliness was fading away.

“Well,” Clarence suddenly burst out with, “I just wanted to let you know what me and Joe Brinker think of your sly trick in finding out where we meant to go this summer, and then arranging to copy after us! It was just what I’d expect such low-down sneaks as Herb Dickson and George Rollins to do; but I am surprised to know how you fell in with such a dirty game, that’s what!”

Really, Jack never had a greater shock in all his life than when Clarence said this. It seemed to almost take his very breath away.

“Now, do you know, Clarence,” he said, steadily, watching that sarcastic face, “the shoe seems to be on the other foot with us. To tell the truth, we’ve been believing all this time that you’d copied after us. In fact, poor Buster has been suspected of giving our secrets away, not intentionally, of course, just because he was seen talking with you. Queer, ain’t it, how great minds often run in the same channel; and both of us thought of going to the St. Lawrence this summer.”

“Aw! now you’re just trying to crawl out of a hole,” the other sneered. “But you needn’t think you can spoil our summer fun for us, if you are six to two. I told my dad about it, and he advised me to go on, regardless. Just make up your minds to keep clear of Joe and me, if you know what’s good for you!”

Even while the other was saying this there suddenly flashed upon Jack’s mind the true reason for his being held up in this way by “Tricky Clarence,” as young Macklin had come to be known among the boys of the town.

He wanted to rub it into Jack, and exult in the consternation which he expected his declaration would cause in the other’s mind. But there was undoubtedly something more than this. If trouble did follow the meeting of the rivals among the many channels of the Thousand Islands, Clarence wished

to make it appear that he and Joe were the aggrieved parties, and that they had been actually set upon by the members of the motor boat club, who had a grudge against them of long standing.

It was a clever bit of sharp practice, worthy of a shyster lawyer. Perhaps Clarence may have inherited some of the shifty trickery by which his respected father had laid the foundation to his big fortune in the wilds of Wall street.

But Jack had no desire to stand there and enter into a wordy war with Clarence, who had a ready tongue, and never cared very much where it led him.

So instead of taking up the challenge, as Clarence doubtless wanted him to, Jack simply elevated his eyebrows, and remarked:

“Oh! is that so? Well, I’m going to tell you just one thing for good and all, Clarence. Neither myself, nor any one of the club, want to set eyes on you or Joe; and if it rests with us, we’ll not run across each other all summer. But, understand me,” and his eyes flashed dangerously, “we mean to strike back, and if there’s trouble it will have to be of your seeking. You can have all you want of it. Now, that’s enough. I’m done talking.”

Clarence hardly knew what to say. He looked at the other as though tempted to blurt out the ugly things he had passing through his mind. But somehow he realized that it would not be safe pressing Jack Stormways too far. He was not the fighter Bully Joe had always been; for as a rule he managed to get some one else to carry out his battles for him. And Jack looked really dangerous just then.

“Pooh! words come cheap with some fellows,” he muttered, as he turned away. “But you’ll find they cut no figure with my partner and me. As to our keeping away from any particular spot you chumps choose to patronize, that for your silly warning,” and he derisively snapped his fingers, for he was now twenty feet away.

Jack held himself in with an effort. He felt in a humor to have given the exasperating Clarence the drubbing he deserved; but it would hardly be nice to create such a disturbance of the public peace so soon before they expected to leave home. If it seemed fated that he must teach this contemptible fellow the lesson he so richly deserved it might be wise to wait until they were far away from the town where they lived.

He was looking after the departing Clarence when he saw him take out his handkerchief to wipe his forehead, for the day was warm.

Something fell to the ground, something that, even at that distance reminded Jack of a yellow telegram blank. He could just as well walk from the sporting goods store in the direction Clarence had gone as any other way. And it was his full intention to call after the other, if the paper seemed worth while.

So, in this spirit Jack bent down and secured possession of the crumpled yellow paper.

Just as he had expected it was a telegraph blank, written on but not signed. It seemed to be a message that some one had started, and upon making a mistake in the wording had crammed in his pocket while he started afresh.

That some one, of course, could only be Clarence, since the paper had fallen to the ground at the time he took out his handkerchief.

Ordinarily Jack would not have been guilty of looking at a telegraph message that had come into his possession under such circumstances. It seemed excusable now. Clarence was a secret enemy, and had been plotting to make trouble for the members of the motor boat club that had declined to allow him and Bully Joe membership.

And the very first glimpse he had of the writing gave him a thrill; for he read the address, which was:

“Jared Fullerton, Clayton, N. Y.”

On the spur of the moment Jack changed his mind. Instead of calling out after the departing Clarence, and notifying him that he had dropped something, Jack just crammed the yellow paper in his pocket, and wheeling, strode away.

He was considerably excited, and eager to learn what sort of communication the other could be sending to Clayton that required the use of the wires. And as he walked hurriedly away, with his nerves on edge, he half expected to hear Clarence shouting after him, demanding the return of his property.

“I never would be guilty of doing such a thing,” Jack was saying to himself, on account of the mean feeling he had, “only that sometimes it’s just necessary to fight fire with fire. If I’m wrong in my suspicions then there’s no harm done. But I must know what he’s telegraphing to Clayton. Who Jared Fullerton is I don’t know from Adam; but I bet he’s cut from the same pattern Clarence and Joe were.”

By then Jack had turned a corner. Unable to withstand the temptation any longer, he looked around to make sure Clarence was not in sight; and then drawing out the crumpled piece of paper, read what had been written on the blank.

“Glad to hear boat arrived, and is such a corker. I’m bringing that hundred with me, and hope you’ve earned it before we arrive. Don’t get in trouble for – ”

Apparently Clarence did not like the way that last sentence looked, for he had started to change it several times. Then, thinking he had better write the whole message over again, he had doubtless thrust the first draft into his pocket, and entirely forgotten it.

Jack read it over twice, and looked grave.

“Now what that snake’s up to, I’d give something to know,” he said to himself, as he started to walk on, after placing the message away in his pocket. “Some sort of dirty scheme has been mentioned in a letter, and he’s meaning to pay this Fullerton for doing the thing. What could it be? He says it’s to be done before he and Joe get there. A hundred dollars is a lot of money. Oh! I wonder could he mean to have this other scamp injure our boats in some way?”

It was a dreadful suspicion that beset him right then. How easy for any one to put a lighted match to the canvas tarpaulins that covered the three boats on the steamer’s dock at Clayton. Why, they might be either entirely ruined, or else so badly injured as to be useless for the whole season.

Would Clarence be equal to conspiring to do such a serious thing as this? Jack was sorry to admit that he believed the other was not past it in the least. He had known him to play pranks that savored of the criminal before now; and it had always been his rich father’s money and influence that had saved Clarence from getting the punishment he so richly deserved.

Obeying a sudden inspiration Jack turned and chased back to the railroad station where the telegraph office was located. He knew that the strict orders of the operating company would prevent his seeing the message that Clarence had finally given in, unless they were compelled to show it by a decree of the court. But Jack had no desire to go that deeply just then.

He knew the operator quite well, a young fellow who also sold tickets.

“Clarence Macklin was in here sending a message to Clayton, New York, wasn’t he, Bert?” he asked, trying not to appear at all excited.

“Yes, that’s so, Jack,” came the reply from the agent; who was really an admirer of the young high school pitcher.

“How long ago was that – could I find him in town now, do you think?”

Note how cleverly this question was framed; and the operator fell into the trap without even a suspicion that he was yielding up valuable information.

“I reckon you might,” he said, promptly, “because he went out of here not more than fifteen minutes ago, after sending his message. Start on Monday, I hear, Jack? Well, I only wish I was along. You fellows do have the best times going; while some of the rest of us have to keep our noses to the grindstone. Good luck to you all, and a bully trip on the river,” for Jack, having picked up all the information he wanted, had turned abruptly on his heel and was leaving the station.

That settled it, then. Clarence had sent a message to the unknown Jared Fullerton, that was presumably along the same lines as the one he had first started. And doubtless that individual would be only too glad to try and earn his hundred-dollar fee before Clarence and Joe arrived.

Since none of the motor boat boys would be in Clayton to be injured, the only way in which he could do anything would be to scheme to bring some miserable catastrophe upon the precious motor boats that had arrived and were waiting to be claimed by their young owners at the steamboat docks.

It was surely a time for quick thinking, and action, unless they wished to take the chances of having their whole summer outing spoiled.

And Jack, as he hurried home, was laying out a plan of campaign in his mind calculated to outwit the miserable plotting of the reckless Clarence and his equally unscrupulous crony, Bully Joe.

CHAPTER IV – BLOCKING A SLY MOVE

“Is that you, Jack?”

“No other. Say, George, can you come over here at once?” asked the boy who was at the other end of the telephone wire; and there was that in his voice to arouse the interest of George Rollins to fever heat.

“Why, sure I can. My wheel is handy, and you’ll see me drop in on you inside of a jiffy. But what’s the row, Jack; no bad news about our boats I hope? They haven’t been dropped overboard in the middle of Lake Erie, and sunk?”

“Oh, nothing half so bad; but I must see you,” Jack went on saying. “And George, start some of the rest along too, won’t you?”

“Buster and Josh are on my way, and if they’re home I’ll jolly both into coming. But you’d better try to poke out Herb over the wire,” came the reply.

“I will. So-long, George. Get a move on you now. Important!”

Then Jack put up the receiver, to sever connection; although a moment later he was asking Central to give him the Dickson house. By great good luck Herb happened to be up in his den, doing some packing; for this was the last day he would have at home saving Sunday, and he was a very careful fellow.

After hearing the “call of the wild,” as Jack expressed it, Herb consented to head for the Stormways domicile without any delay. He, too, made use of his wheel to cover the intervening distance; and quite a bunch of boys drew up in the yard about the same time.

Jack and Jimmie met them at the side door.

“Now, what under the sun has he got hold of, fellows?” queried George, nervously, as they filed up to Jack’s snug den; for the serious expression on the faces of Jack and Jimmie gave him considerable concern.

Nick was puffing like a steam engine. The little rush had winded him more or less; but at the same time he also looked anxious. For, as they were on the eve of starting out on their anticipated summer vacation, this sudden summons to headquarters gave him a shock.

“I only hope it ain’t anything about the boats,” he remarked plaintively, as he dropped down in a capacious chair that just suited his stout figure to a dot, and was hence invariably appropriated by Buster every time he came to see Jack.

“Well,” remarked Jack, “I might as well admit right in the start that it does concern our three motor boats.”

“Don’t tell me that any tragedy has happened to ’em, Jack?” pleaded George, who was known to have a great affection for his *Wireless*, even though the cranky speed boat did seem to delight in playing many cruel tricks upon its skipper.

“No, not yet, I believe,” came the answer.

“Good! You make me feel better already, Jack!” exclaimed George.

“But hold on!” cried Herb; “you noticed that he said ‘not yet,’ didn’t you, boys? Don’t you see what that means? The boats are in danger; ain’t that so, Jack?”

“I’ve pretty good reason to believe so,” replied the owner of the den; and then he whipped out the crumpled telegraph blank. “Here, read that, fellows, and tell me what you think. It fell from the pocket of Clarence Macklin not half an hour ago. And I understand that he sent off a message along these lines, after he had changed the wording a little.”

Eagerly four heads were clustered above the yellow paper which he had smoothed out on the chess table. Clarence wrote a plain hand, so that there was no trouble in making out every word.

“Well, wouldn’t that knock you?” gasped Nick, who had as yet failed to entirely recover his wind after his quick passage on his wheel to Jack’s home, followed by the climb up two flights of stairs to the attic den.

“Jack, you’re right; he means our boats!” ejaculated Herb, with a trace of indignation and horror in his voice.

“Oh! the miserable skunk, what wouldn’t I give for the fun of punching his head for him. Just wait, the chance will come some fine day. Let them dare do anything to my bully little *Wireless*! Why, Jack, they could be sent to prison for a long term if they destroyed the boats.”

Of course that was Skipper George, whose father being a lawyer, visions of the stern hand of justice were always cropping up in the boy’s mind.

“The way I look at it is this,” Josh went on, deliberately; “Clarence has a crony in Clayton, some fellow he knows by the name of Jared Fullerton. Seems to me I’ve heard him mention that name, too, though I don’t remember anything about him. But he’s meaning to hire this chap to do something worth an even hundred. Fellows, we can give a quick guess that something has to do with our three boats, which by now must be lying on the steamboat dock there, waiting for us to arrive.”

“You hit the nail on the head that time, Josh,” declared Jack. “And I’ve asked you all to come here so we could talk the matter over, and decide what ought to be done.”

An animated discussion followed. Some suggested one thing, which was debated *pro and con*; then another new idea would crop up, which they eagerly seized upon, being deeply concerned about the safety of the precious craft.

“Whatever do you suppose that sneak of a Fullerton could do, to put our craft out of the running?” asked Nick, finally.

“Well, he might accidentally drop a lighted match under the tarpaulin cover of one. You know it would flame up pretty quick, and might set the whole bunch going like a pack of fire-crackers,” Josh observed.

“Well, I hardly think any one would take such chances at that,” Jack remarked; “because, you see, they are lying on a public dock, and if a big fire resulted it would mean the penitentiary for Jared. But no matter, if a fellow only happened to be mean enough he could find lots of ways to injure boats like ours. And for one, I don’t propose to take the chances.”

“Tell us your plan, Jack; we’ll stand by you,” cried Buster.

“All right,” said the other, quickly; “then listen. I propose that George and myself go and see his father, and ask his advice. You fellows make yourselves at home here; and after we’ve got things going we’ll come back to report. How does that strike you?”

“I say yes!” Josh hastened to cry.

As the others were of the same mind, Jack and George hurried away. It being Saturday morning, George knew that his father would not be very busy at his law office and could easily spare them a little time.

They found Judge Rollins without any client, which Jack considered lucky, since haste was an element in their calculations just now. And after he had heard the whole story, scanned the incriminating telegraph blank, and asked numerous questions, the lawyer smiled, and said he was ready to give his advice.

“Here is the address of a party I know in Clayton, and whose name just came to me while you were talking, Jack,” he observed. “Try and get him on the long distance phone, and explain the circumstances to him as you have to me. I feel sure that if you can reach Amos Spofford everything will be all right.”

Accordingly the two lads immediately hustled around to the central station of the telephone company, where they could use the long distance phone to better advantage than in a drug-store.

Having the local number of the party to whom the judge had referred them, Jack, who had taken it upon himself to do the talking, because George was apt to get excited, and splutter in a way

that might interfere with the carrying of his message to such a long distance, asked to be connected with the Clayton office.

Of course, there was more or less delay, as usual, and the two boys became quite nervous before there finally came a faint call.

When Jack learned that it was really Mr. Spofford who was at the other end of the wire, he started to explain that it was Judge Rollins who had told the boys to get in touch with the Clayton man.

Then as briefly as possible, for time was valuable, he told about the trouble, and what they feared might happen. Happily, the man to whom he was talking seemed capable of seizing on facts, and building a plan of campaign instantly.

“Telegraph the agent of the steamboat Company to let me have the boats. I happen to know him very well – his name is James Matthews. Then forget all about the matter, boys. Depend on me! Your boats will be guarded, day and night, every minute of the time until you arrive. That is all. Goodbye!”

“Hurrah for Amos!” exclaimed George when his chum had related what the man in Clayton had said. “He’s all to the good! That was a bright thought of yours, Jack, when you suggested going to ask my father’s advice!”

“But let’s get back to the others,” laughed Jack, as they paid the bill and left the telephone office; “for they’ll be burning up with anxiety to know what’s going on.”

“Yes,” grinned George, now as happy and light-hearted as he had previously been gloomy, and oppressed with fears. “By now poor Buster will have lost a pound or two in weight. He’s the greatest fellow ever to fret over things.”

At that Jack fairly shouted.

“I know another of the same breed, George, and you can’t deny it,” he said.

“Oh! well, what’s the use?” admitted the other. “I know I do see mountains often, that turn out to be ant hills when you get up close. But I’m feeling particularly jolly right now. Bully for Amos. Won’t we shake him by the hand till he yells out for mercy. His name will be emblazoned on the annals of our St. Lawrence cruise as the best friend the motor boat club had, barring none.”

Of course, they were set upon as soon as they entered the den in the top story of the Stormways home, and made to tell what had happened. When the balance of the club learned how neatly a spoke had been put in the wheel of Clarence, they voted thanks to Mr. Edison for all he had done in the interests of modern science.

And it can be set down as positive that those lads spent a much more healthy Sunday than would have been the case had their minds still wrestled with the problem of what the mysterious message sent by Clarence stood for.

Then came the final morning when they were scheduled to leave the home town, headed for the far distant Clayton, to begin their summer vacation.

A score and more of boys were at the station to see them depart, besides those persons who constituted the various families of the club members. Their baggage was properly seen to, and then the last goodbyes said. Clarence and his crony, Joe Brinker, came sauntering along, and stood watching the passing of the expedition.

“He can’t just help grinning all the time,” Buster said aside to Herb, as they were waiting at the car steps for Jack and George, still talking with a group of friends.

“Sure he is,” replied George, looking out of the corner of his eye, “and every little while he says something to Bully Joe that tickles him to beat the band. But we can afford to keep quiet, because we happen to know how the game is going. I’m putting my faith in Amos right along; he’s going to make good.”

“But why ain’t Clarence and Joe starting, too?” demanded Nick at this juncture.

“Oh! they’re too sly for that, you see,” George replied, knowingly, his lawyer blood standing him in good stead. “Like as not they’ve got through tickets right through Chicago, while we stop over in Milwaukee. And even if they slip away this afternoon they could get to Clayton as soon as we do.”

“There’s the conductor calling ‘all aboard!’ We’re off, fellows!” cried Buster, as he started to climb up the steps of the car, an operation that required more labor on his part than in the case of more agile lads.

The entire bunch grouped on the last platform of the parlor car at the end of the train, and as they pulled out, waved their hats in salute to the cheering of the crowd at the station.

Faster went the train, and presently a turn hid the home town from the sight of the six vacationists. If any of them felt badly over parting from loved ones they succeeded in concealing the fact as they passed inside to take their seats, and while looking from the windows at new scenes, lay delightful plans concerning the glorious time they anticipated would be their portion when they got fully started on their St. Lawrence river cruise.

CHAPTER V – THE GUARDIAN OF THE FLEET

“Well, here’s the steamboat dock, all right; but I don’t see anything of our boats!” exclaimed George, as he and his five chums came to a full stop close to the local office of the lake line running to Buffalo, Milwaukee and Chicago.

“Oh! dear me, I hope we don’t have trouble, after all,” started Nick.

“Here, let up on that misery whine, Buster. Will you ever learn never to squeal till you’re hurt?” said Josh.

“Well, if you’d lost as much flesh as I have lately, you’d be a nervous wreck too,” replied the fat boy, aggressively.

“If I’d lost all you say you have, there wouldn’t be anything more of me left than a grease spot, and that’s right!” grinned Josh.

“What shall we do, Jack?” and Herb turned to the one upon whom they usually depended to steer them clear of the shoals.

“Well, here’s the office right handy,” replied Jack, smiling. “Suppose we crowd inside, and make the agent give up some information. He ought to know what’s happened to our boats, because we understood they got here safe.”

“A bully idea, Jack; you’re the goods when it comes to doing the right thing!” Josh remarked.

Accordingly they fell in line, and rushed into the little office, where a gentlemanly fellow, who was working at some freight accounts, in his shirt sleeves, because of the heat of the day, glanced up in more or less surprise.

“We’re looking for some motor boats, sir, that arrived on the vessel from the west. They were billed from Milwaukee by your line.”

As Jack said this the agent smiled.

“Which one of you wired our Mr. Matthews?” he asked.

“I did. My name is Jack Stormways,” replied that individual.

“You gave him authority to turn the three boats over to some party, didn’t you?”

“Yes, if that party’s name was Mr. Amos Spofford,” Jack replied.

“All right. We gave them into his keeping. Let me see, that was last Saturday afternoon about one o’clock he was here,” the other went on.

“But,” Jack remarked, blankly, “we’ve been looking all around, and have seen no sign of our boats on the wharf.”

“And they couldn’t have flown away like aeroplanes,” put in Josh.

“I should hardly think so,” laughed the other. “But have you looked beyond the end of the dock, in the water?”

“No. Do you mean to say Mr. Spofford had the three boats launched?” cried Jack.

“Well, there was something doing that way, I remember, on Saturday. He had quite a gang of men working under him. That Mr. Spofford seems to be something of a hustler. Over toward that point, boys.”

They were already trooping across the big dock, as excited as any eager lads could be. And no sooner had they reached a certain point than a series of whoops burst from every throat.

“There they are, fellows! Don’t they make a bully show, though, the brave little boats? Say, ain’t this like old times again?” cried Nick, as he discovered the three craft anchored close together at a point where they would not be in the way of any steamboat landing.

“There’s somebody aboard, too!” exclaimed Jack, as a head was poked out of the deck tent of the *Comfort*, which was the only one of the trio to be thus honored, the others being in cruising trim.

“That must be Mr. Amos Spofford,” declared Herb; “and he knows a good sleeping boat when he sees it, too; for you notice he’s camped in the Old Reliable.”

Jack waved his hand, and then called out.

“We’re coming aboard. Are you Mr. Spofford?”

“That’s my name. Glad to see you, boys. Come right along. You won’t be fired into the harbor if you try to get aboard!” came back the answering hail.

“Gee! I wonder if that’s what happened to Jared,” remarked Nick, as the party made for the landing, where a rowboat could be obtained in which to paddle out to the anchored flotilla.

Every boy had his eyes glued on the boat that, to his mind, represented all that was delightful. Many a happy day and night had they spent aboard these same craft in times that were gone; and the future opened up possibilities just as joyous.

One by one they climbed aboard the *Comfortand* shook hands with the jolly old gentleman whom they found there. None of the other boats could have accommodated them as readily as the big launch.

“Glad you got here safe and sound, boys. I imagine this is Jack Stormways. Introduce me to your chums, please, Jack. Told you not to worry. Camped right here ever since getting your message. Would have stayed a week if necessary, because you see I happen to be an old bachelor, without any family ties. Greatest pleasure I’ve had for many a year. Used to knock about myself, once upon a time, before I took on flesh. And let me tell you, lads, you’ve got the greatest little cruising outfits here I ever set eyes on. In my day we never knew such comforts, any more than we did such bully boats.”

In this fashion did Mr. Amos Spofford rattle on, for he was a great talker, and a retired lawyer as well. He quite staggered poor Buster by the immensity of his girth; for he was simply *tremendous*, and no mistake.

“Gracious!” Nick whispered to Herb, when he found the chance; “you don’t think, now, I’ll ever get to be like that, do you, Herb? Oh, if I thought so I’d starve myself.”

“Well, it would end your knocking about, just as it did his, so beware!” answered the other; and chuckled to see poor Buster shiver.

All the time they were in contact with Mr. Amos Spofford Nick could not keep his eyes off the wheezy old lawyer; and every now and then he would shake his head and sigh most dismally. It was really an awful lesson for Buster, as Josh often declared.

“Then you’ve really enjoyed camping here since Saturday afternoon, sir?” asked Jack, as the party clustered around the guardian of the motor boat fleet.

“Beyond measure,” came the quick reply. “I haven’t let the boats go unwatched a minute of the time. On Monday I hired a man to stay aboard while I finished up some little business that was pressing. Then I came back in the afternoon with a new supply of grub, and determined to hold the fort. Why, boys, it’s been the happiest days of the last ten years to me. And I’ve made up my mind that I’m going to throw business to the dogs, have a boat like this, only larger, built especially for a heavy man, and take to the water. I thank you for the opportunity you threw in my way for this pleasure.”

“And on our part we feel that you’ve been mighty kind to us, sir,” said Jack.

“Don’t mention it. Besides, I’m only too glad to do something for Rube’s boy. He was good to me once upon a time, and helped me get back on my feet.”

“Perhaps our anxiety was all for nothing though?” remarked George; not because he really believed what he was saying, but hoped it would tempt Mr. Spofford to “open up,” and tell anything he knew.

The stout lawyer chuckled until he shook like a bowl full of jelly. He reminded Jack of Santa Claus around Christmas time, both with regard to his white beard and the size of his paunch.

“Ah! that was a chip of the old block that spoke then,” laughed Mr. Spofford, “Rube for all the world; and a born lawyer, too. Follow in the footsteps of your illustrious dad, George, and the world is yours. No, to tell the plain, unvarnished truth, your anxiety *was* well placed, I have reason to believe.”

He looked over the side at the water, and chuckled again.

“It is pretty wet in there for a fact, boys,” he said, “and when a fellow flops over with all his clothes on, he feels kind of squeamish, I suppose.”

“Do you mean to say, sir, that Jared Fullerton actually attempted to come aboard in the night, and that you dumped him into the river?” asked Herb.

“Oh! I didn’t bother asking his name; and so far as I know he never had the politeness to leave one of his visiting cards behind him,” remarked the big lawyer, still shaking, so that the staunch old *Comfort* actually quivered in sympathy. “In fact, to tell the truth, he was so set upon leaving in a hurry after he discovered that there was a tenant ahead of him, that lots of things were sadly neglected.”

“And you threw him overboard, sir?” asked Jack.

“That was the easiest part of it,” replied the other, calmly. “You see I used to be a great athlete in my day, when Rube knew me; and the fellow wasn’t anticipating running up against a lodger. I just gave him a neat push, and you ought to have heard the splashing that followed.”

“Wow! I’d have liked to, first rate!” declared Josh, in ecstasy.

“But he managed to climb out again, of course, Mr. Spofford?” Jack asked.

“Oh! yes, after a lot of floundering around. I saw him climbing that spile yonder, dripping at every move. And I’ve had no trouble since.”

“Then we owe you a vote of thanks for helping us out in this way,” declared George, warmly. “Only for your guardianship something serious would have happened to our boats; and you can understand, sir, that they are precious to all of us, after serving us so well on that Mississippi cruise.”

“I want to hear all about that at the first chance, boys. But now I’ll move out, and give the rightful owners possession. This is a very well named boat, Herbert. I give you credit for knowing how to get full enjoyment out of a trip. Now, that speed boat doubtless pleases George, but you see it would hardly do for a fellow of my heft. I’m going to get the builder of this outfit to put me one up that will be a dream, a fat man’s paradise.”

“Hold on, Mr. Spofford,” said Jack, who knew he was voicing the sentiments of the entire club when he spoke as he did; “we are going to stay around here until another morning, for we’ve got a lot to do, stowing our stores, you know. And tonight, if you can do so, we invite you to a little dinner, to be held on this boat. We hope you will please us by coming; and let me tell you we’ve got the boss cook among us, who can tickle your palate the best ever.”

All eyes were turned toward Josh, who got up and gravely bowed, pushing back Buster, who had impudently been in the act of accepting the honor himself.

“I’ll do it on one condition, boys,” said the lawyer, as he started to deposit his bulk in the boat Herb was holding to the side of the *Comfort*.

“What is that, sir?” demanded Jack.

“That you promise to read to me the log of your last trip, when you went down the big river; also tell me the many adventures that I’m sure must have come your way during those glorious weeks.”

“Done!” cried one and all, as they shook hands with the jolly retired lawyer, and Herb started to paddle him to the dock.

“What time is dinner hour, fellows?” sang out Mr. Spofford, just as heartily as though he might be one of the youngsters.

“Six sharp; but we’ll wait for you any length of time you say, sir,” replied Jack.

“Look for me before that time; and remember, boys, I’m a man of some size, so be warned,” laughed the other, waving his hand.

“Oh! we know all about that, sir; because, you see, we’ve got a shining example of the same with us,” called Josh, motioning toward Buster.

“That’s so; but I’m afraid you mean a *horrible* example; for we fat fellows are to be pitied,” floated back to their ears.

Nick sank back on his seat, looking plainly troubled.

“Oh! my, if I thought there was any danger of my ever getting like that I’d – I’d, well, I don’t know what I’d do; but something pretty desperate – skip a meal once a week, perhaps,” he remarked to George.

The other was already trying to draw his own boat alongside, so that he might aboard; for naturally each skipper had thought of the craft that was dearest to his mind; and Herb returning, both Jack and Jimmie used the rowboat to reach the anchored *Tramp*

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