

ARUNDEL LOUIS

MOTOR BOAT BOYS
DOWN THE DANUBE;
OR, FOUR CHUMS
ABROAD

Louis Arundel

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Danube; or, Four Chums Abroad**

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CHAPTER I

FOUR CHUMS ABROAD

“So this is the famous Budapest, is it, the twin cities of the blue Danube we’ve been hearing so much about?”

“Huh! doesn’t strike me as so very much of a wonderful place. When you come to think of it, little old New York and Brooklyn can beat it all hollow so far as bustle and business go; even Chicago would run it a hot race.”

“Now that’s just like you, George Rollins, always ready to find fault, and throw cold water on everything. No wonder they’ve called you ‘Doubting George’ this long time back. There’s always a flaw somewhere, you believe, and so you look for it right along.”

“Between you and me, Buster, I don’t think he ever will be cured of that nasty habit. Why can’t he see the bright side of things once in a while, and be an optimist, like our chum and commodore, Jack Stormways?”

“Oh, you ought to know by this time, Josh, a leopard can’t change its spots. I reckon our friend George here has spasms of reform once in just so often; but his weakness is ground in, and his resolves collapse, so he goes back to his old ways again.”

“You don’t say, Buster? Kindly take pity on my ignorance and tell me what there is so wonderful about this old Hungarian capital perched on the banks of the Danube and joined by bridges? I’m willing to have the scales taken from my eyes.”

“Oh, well, first there’s the river itself, not dirty water like most of our streams over in the States, but clear, and almost the color of the blue sky overhead.”

“Sounds fine, Buster. Good for you; go ahead and open his blind eyes some more. It was always George’s way to have his nose down over the engine of his Wireless motorboat, and never see a blessed thing around him. Hit him again for his mother, Buster.”

“Then look at the clear atmosphere; the picturesque buildings hanging over the river banks; the queer shaped boats running back and forth; the remarkable costumes of these Magyars; and last, but far from least, that glorious August sunset painting the little clouds in the west crimson and green and gold. I tell you it’s a scream of a place, if you’ve got any eyes in your head.”

“Buster, you’re a wonder at word painting, though I reckon you cribbed some of that stuff from the guide book. What do you say to it now, old If and But and Maybe?”

“Why, it looks good enough, I own up, fellows, but chances are all this is only on the surface. Scratch the veneer off when you go ashore to-morrow, and prowl around, and you’ll find Budapest just as rotten at the core as Chicago.”

“Don’t waste any more words on the growler, Buster. There’s such a thing as casting pearls before swine, you know – not saying that our chum here is really and truly a *hog*; but all the same he grunts like one. Let’s talk about our own affairs.”

“Wonder if Jack will fetch a sheaf of letters back from the postoffice? And say, I’m just a little mite anxious to learn how that spat between Serbia and Austria is going to turn out.”

“All of us are, Buster, and have been ever since we read how the Grand Duke who was the latest heir to the Austrian throne after Francis Joseph was murdered with his wife by some Serbian hothead conspirators.”

“Oh, as far as that goes, Josh, I figure that the game little bantam will have to take water and back down, after all this strutting around, just to show that Serbians have pluck.”

“Don’t be too sure of that, fellows,” put in George; “you mustn’t forget that Russia, yes, and France, too, are back of Serbia. There may be something more come out of this rattling of sabres in their scabbards than only a tempest in a teapot.”

“Then it would be Russia and France against the two Teuton States,” remarked the boy answering to the suggestive name of Buster; “and knowing how the Kaiser has been getting his country ready for a scrap this long while, I’d bet on them to turn the trick.”

George, despite his failings, seemed to have read up on the matter and be pretty well posted on facts.

“But there’s always a big chance it wouldn’t stop there,” he announced, with an air of importance; “other countries would sooner or later be drawn into the scramble, because everybody believes there’s going to be an Armageddon or great world war before the era of peace finally comes along.”

“Just what do you mean?” demanded Josh.

“There’s Great Britain, for instance; she’s bound to France in some way, and may have to shy her castor into the ring. Then her ally in the East, Japan, may choose to knock out Germany’s holding in China, just to oblige. Besides, Italy must show her hand, and for one I can’t believe she’ll stand for her old enemy, Austria. And last, but not least, there’s Turkey, hand in glove with Germany, besides all those scrappy little Balkan States, from Greece to Bulgaria and Rumania, who will fight just as they think their interests lie.”

“Whee! but it would be a grand smash-up if all that comes off!” ejaculated Buster. “I’d sure hate to pay the bills. It’d take me some time to get enough of the long green together I sure reckon.”

“Seems to me it’s high time for Jack to be showing up,” ventured Josh. “I hope he hasn’t run up against any trouble, being unable to speak even ten words of German, while the Magyar tongue is a sealed book to him.”

“I hinted to Jack that perhaps I’d better be the one to go,” said George, modestly, “because I know German fairly well; but he only laughed, and said there were lots of ways of communicating with a Hungarian as long as both parties had their hands to use and could wink and nod.”

“Oh, well, while we’re waiting for him here on our old powerboat that we chartered,” said Buster, with a resigned air, “I’m going to take time to make out a list of groceries we want to lay in while we’re at the capital. Goodness knows if we’ll have a half-way decent chance to buy anything worth eating again before we strike the Serbian border, and then push on through Rumania to the Black Sea.”

George and Josh also sought comfortable seats where they could lounge and watch in a lazy fashion the bustling scene around them; for there were dozens of quaint sights to be seen if one only used his eyes.

While the three lads are thus employed, awaiting the coming of their comrade who had gone to get their mail at the general postoffice, a few words of explanation concerning them may not come amiss.

These four boys belonged to a motorboat club over in the Middle West, their home being on the upper Mississippi River. There were two other members, who had not made the trip abroad, by name Herb Dickson and Jimmy Brannagan, the latter a ward of Jack Stormways’ father.

Buster, of course, had another name, which was Nicholas Longfellow. Nature had in a way played a sad joke on the boy, for, while a Longfellow by family relation, he was also pudgy and fat, always wheezing when exerting himself, but as jolly as could be, full of good nature, and willing to go to any trouble to help a friend, yes, or even an enemy.

Josh Purdue had a strain of the Yankee in him, for he was as sharp as a steel trap, though perfectly honest. As an all-round comrade Josh could not very well be excelled.

George Rollins was a good-enough chap too, though he complained at times, and was so inclined to want to be shown that his friends had dubbed him “Old Missouri” and “Doubting George.”

These six boys had gone through a good many lively times together, as they possessed three motorboats of different models, called the Wireless, a cracky craft built for racing, and which gave George, the skipper, much trouble; the Tramp, which Jack commanded; and the beamy Comfort, run by Herb Dickson.

It would be utterly impossible for us to undertake to mention a tithe of their interesting and thrilling escapades while cruising in these boats. If the reader who has made their acquaintance for the first time in this volume desires to know more about these happenings, he is referred to the six earlier books in the Motorboat Boys’ Series, all of which can be easily procured.

As to just how the interesting quartette of wide-awake American boys came to be running down the historical Danube River in the late summer of nineteen-fourteen, that can be easily explained.

Some of their parents were well-to-do, and as school would not begin this year until some time in October or November, it was at first suggested in a spirit of fun, and then debated as an actual possibility, that they coax their folks to let them go abroad for a season.

Needless to say that as the lads had considerable money in the treasury, thanks to their having been instrumental in capturing some bold bank robbers who had run away with the funds of an institution, they were finally able to gain their folks’ consent.

Then came the question of what they would like to do most of all. By this time they had come to be such cruisers that they could not bear the thought of following in the footsteps of the general run of European tourists. Any one could read all about the cities in the magazine accounts, as well as the many books of foreign travel.

It was Jack who made a startling proposition that caught the fancy of the other three from the first.

He had lately been reading an account of a canoe trip made by an English gentleman all the way down the Danube from its source in Germany not far from the Rhine, through Austria-Hungary, along the Serbian border, and then through Rumania until he finally reached the Black Sea, and brought up at Constantinople.

The account was so vividly written up that it appealed strongly to Jack, and his proposition was that they make their way to some place further down the beautiful river than his starting point, charter some kind of a motorboat, and continue the voyage. They could thus get to the Turkish capital in good time after a most interesting trip, take a steamer to London, and come home in that way.

Well, the more they talked it over the stronger grew the inclination to enjoy a water voyage through a most interesting country, the praises of which they had seen sung in many an account they managed to unearth at the library.

Eventually this was just what the daring quartette had done. They were lucky enough to get hold of a pretty fair powerboat that would accommodate four sleepers with some crowding. This they had fitted up to suit themselves, for long experience in camping out had made them wise in many particulars. And, Buster considered this the most important part of the whole business, they had found a little kerosene blue-flame stove something like those they owned at home, upon which many of their future meals were likely to be cooked.

The party had only been a short time on the way when they brought up at the Hungarian capital, where it was planned to spend a couple of days prying around; for they had reason to believe they would run across no large city save Belgrade in Serbia until they crossed the Black Sea and came to Constantinople.

As often happens, the best laid plans often go astray, and, looking back to former scenes, the four chums could pick out several other instances when this had happened to them.

Buster had just finished his long list of eatables, in which he jotted down everything that appealed to his voracious appetite, when Josh was heard saying he had glimpsed Jack coming. All of

them therefore jumped up to greet the bearer of the mailbag, being greatly interested in news from the home folks.

“Something has happened, as sure as you live!” exclaimed Josh as the fourth member of the little party drew closer; “look at Jack’s face, will you? He couldn’t be more solemn if he had been told he was going to be hung to-morrow.”

“No bad news from across the sea, I hope, Jack?” faltered Buster.

Jack Stormways, who was a resolute looking young fellow, a born leader among boys, shook his head and allowed a faint smile to steal across his sober countenance.

“I’m glad to say it isn’t that, fellows,” he told them; “but all Budapest is in a frightful uproar just now, and it’s a question if our lovely voyage doesn’t come to a sudden end right here.”

“Great Cæsar’s ghost! What’s happened now, Jack?” cried Josh, looking alarmed.

“Only this, and you can guess what it means in Europe,” Jack announced. “Germany declared war on Russia last night, and her army is said to be already marching into neutral Belgium to strike France in the back, and take Paris!”

CHAPTER II

THE NEWS OF WAR AT BUDAPEST

When Jack made this astounding statement the other three stared at him as though they could hardly believe he was not joking. But then Jack seldom attempted to play a practical prank; besides, they could see that he was seriously disposed, and evidently grappling with one of the largest propositions that had ever faced him.

"Then it means a world war has begun, does it?" gasped Buster presently, when he could catch his breath again.

"That's what it's bound to result in," Jack told him. "The cry of 'wolf' has been heard for the last time, and now the beast has come!"

"But will Great Britain and all the other nations jump in?" demanded George.

"Not jump in, but find themselves dragged in, in spite of their horror of war. This thing has been hanging fire a long while, but every little while there would be signs of what lay under the surface. Lots of people predicted it was bound to come sooner or later, and that the destinies of every world power would have to be settled once and for all by the sword."

"Then all other wars will be baby play beside this one," Josh declared, "with the wonderful modern arms they've got. Millions of men must be killed before the end comes, and old Europe will never know herself, such great changes in border lines are bound to take place."

"But what of us?" asked George.

"That's what we've got to decide right away," Jack announced. "We live thousands of miles away from the scene of hostilities, and our neutral country may not be pulled into the whirlpool; but here we are in Austria-Hungary that is now in a state of war with Serbia, Montenegro, Russia and France, with other countries to hear from. What ought we do about it?"

"Let's tell the Kaiser we won't stand for any of this funny business," Buster went on to say, pretending to look very important, though there was a quizzical gleam in his eyes at the same time; "let him know he's got to sheathe that sword of his in double-quick time, or America will get mad."

"Much the Kaiser would care for a dozen Americas," jeered George. "Germany armed can defy the whole world, and as for our great big country, we're only a second China, don't you know – plenty of people, much talk, but able to do next door to nothing."

"I say it would be a beastly shame if we had to quit now before hardly getting started," asserted Josh, indignantly.

"Go on, the rest of you, for I want to hear everybody's opinion," urged Jack.

"But if the whole of Austria is on a war footing, what chance would we have to continue our lovely voyage?" George wanted to know. "As like as not we'd be arrested, because they'd call us spies trying to find a way to invade the country through the back door."

"One for keeping on, and another against it, which is a stand-off," remarked Jack; "how about you, Buster?"

"Gee whilikens! I hardly know where I'm at," muttered the fat chum, rubbing the tip of his nose in bewilderment; "fact is I'm about ready to do whatever the rest of you say."

"In other words, you're on the fence, I take it," sneered George; "if there's anything I dislike it's to run across a *jellyfish*, something that has no opinions of its own. There, that's one for you fellows calling me swine. But how about you, Jack? We ought to know what you think about it all."

"That's right," agreed Josh eagerly, for he could see that their future movements were likely to be controlled by whatever Jack said, since with a tie his vote would be the deciding factor.

"I'll be frank with you fellows," Jack continued soberly. "We've gone to a whole lot of trouble and expense to get started on this cruise, and I hate like everything to give it up."

“Hear! hear!” came from Josh, with a tinge of growing triumph in his voice.

“When I think of all that we’d have to go through with to get back to London the way we came I feel like saying we ought to try and keep right on down the river. The greatest danger to us would come from approaching the fighting region around Northern France and Belgium.”

Even George seemed to be hanging on Jack’s words as though, after all, his ideas of prudence might be undergoing a change.

“We could go ashore right away,” Jack continued, “and buy what stuff we need, for I see Bumpus is holding a list in his hand, and we know him well enough to feel sure he’s omitted nothing worth while having.”

“That settles it, then,” burst out Josh. “You hear, George, you’re outvoted three to one. We go on our way, snapping our fingers under the nose of every Magyar who feels like questioning our right to cruise down the beautiful blue Danube.”

“Oh, well, move we make it unanimous then,” snapped George, which proved that, after all, his objections could only have been skin-deep, and were offered more in a spirit of contrariness than seriously.

“Here are letters for every one,” remarked Jack; “but if you take my advice you’ll keep them until after we’ve had supper. There’s a whole lot to be done before night settles down.”

“Jack, you’ve been ashore, and mebbe now you happened to notice a good grocery store where we could pick up what we need in the line of grub,” and as he asked this Buster waved his formidable list before him.

“It happens that I did just that same thing, and, better still, the place is only a short distance away from here. From the glance I took at it I reckon we could get about everything we want, provided we’re willing to take them in the Hungarian style of putting up the packages.”

“Oh,” decided Buster, “so far as that goes, a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet. I’d be willing to forget the trade names of the oatmeal, hominy, and such things I’m used to seeing, if the contents of the packages turned out to be as good.”

“All right, Buster,” continued the other, “suppose we start out right away and do our shopping. I suppose if we buy for cash they’ll send the things around here to this boat builder’s wharf where we had permission to tie up during our stay here.”

Everybody looked pleased. It was as if a dreadful load had been suddenly lifted from their hearts. They would never have been fully satisfied to abandon their trip down the Danube on such short notice. In times to come they would very likely call themselves silly to be frightened off so easily by what might turn out to be only a shadow of coming trouble.

Buster proved himself willing enough by scrambling ashore. In fact, when the question of eating was concerned no one could ever accuse the fat boy of shirking his duty; as Josh said, “When the dinner horn blew Buster was always Johnny-on-the-spot,” though truth to tell the said Josh often ran a race with his comrade at table.

“I don’t suppose you’ll be needing a German scholar along with you to do the bargaining?” suggested George pompously.

Buster chuckled at hearing that.

“Don’t you worry about us, George,” he advised the other, “we can get through all right. As long as I’ve got eyes and can *smell* things I reckon I’ll be able to pick out what we want most. And money talks, George, better than some people’s German.”

“Oh, well, they say a prophet never is appreciated in his own country,” sighed George; “but all the same I’m going to practice up in my German, because it may serve us well sooner or later. If you fellows get pinched, send us word and I’ll hurry around to the police station to explain matters.”

“How kind you are, George; but I’m afraid after they heard your fine German they’d put *you* behind the bars for murdering the language.”

With that parting shot Buster hurried away, leaving Josh shaking his sides with laughter, for they did love to get a crack at George, who was always complaining and throwing cold water on every plan.

Jack led the way, for, having been already over the ground, he could serve in the capacity of pilot.

“Listen, Buster,” he said impressively as they walked along toward the nearby street, “from now on we want to let everybody know that we’re American boys, and not English, you understand.”

“What’s the idea, Jack? Up to now a lot of people have taken us for English, and we’ve let it go at that without taking the bother to explain, because there’s always been a warm friendly feeling between the Austrians and the English.”

“That’s right, Buster, but if Great Britain gets into this big scrap you can see that she’ll be up against the soldiers of Austria-Hungary as well as those of the Kaiser. So from now on stand up for your colors. We’re Americans every time, and don’t you forget it.”

Buster evidently saw the point, for he promised to faithfully observe the counsel of his mate, in whom he placed the utmost reliance.

They soon reached the store which Jack had noticed. It was quite an extensive establishment, and there could be little doubt but that everything needful on Buster’s list might be procured there. If some of the items chanced to be lacking, their place could be filled with others equally attractive, Jack felt sure.

By great good luck the proprietor could speak and read English. This made it very easy for the purchasers. He also promised to have the goods delivered inside of an hour, and said he knew the boatyard well.

When Jack went to pay for their purchases he had only English money. He thought the merchant looked at him a little more closely, and considered that this was a very good opportunity to prove their nationality. So he took out a letter he had just received, which bore the home postmark across in America. This he showed, as well as one Buster also produced, as proof of his assertion that they were Americans, and not English.

“Nothing like getting your hand in,” he told Buster later on when they were making their way back to where the boat was tied up.

“And come to think of it,” added the other with sudden vehemence, “I believe I’ve got a little silk edition of Old Glory stowed away somewhere in my bundle. I just chucked the same in, thinking we might want to fasten it to our boat; but up to this minute it’s slipped my mind. How’d it do to make use of it, Jack?”

“Splendid idea,” commented the other.

“As long as that waves in the breeze nobody can mistake our nationality; even if George keeps on trying to talk that silly German of his. He makes such a mess of it that some of these people may think we’re spies out to learn all about the fortifications of the lower Danube.”

Upon their arrival at the boat the others questioned them concerning the success of their undertaking. Josh also wanted to know if they had managed to pick up any further news concerning the great struggle that had begun.

“We went after grub,” Buster told him severely, “and that being the case, you needn’t expect that we would waste our precious time jabbering about a silly old war, would you? If you do you’ve got another guess coming. And say, we got everything on my list, would you believe it, or something that was just as good.”

“Huh! I can see why you’re grinning so happily, Buster,” sneered George; “you’re contemplating many a fine feed ahead.”

“We’re all in the same boat, George,” sang out Buster blithely; “and when the tocsin calls us to supper I notice that as a rule you’re never hanging far in the rear. Considering the difference in our heft, I take it I’ve got a bird’s appetite compared with you and Josh here – pound for pound.”

“Well, it’s getting twilight, so suppose we start in with that same supper,” Jack ventured to say. “For one I’m willing to admit that an afternoon humming down the river has given me a ferocious appetite; and I’m not ashamed to declare it, either.”

Buster needed no second invitation. Time had been when the fat boy hardly knew how to cook a rasher of bacon properly; but his love of eating had inspired him to pick up fresh knowledge, with the result that he now stood in a class by himself.

Perhaps Josh and George, wishing to shirk much of their share of the culinary operations, flattered Buster more than was really necessary. They imposed upon his good nature in this way outrageously; but since the stout youth seemed to really enjoy handling the saucepans and skillet, Jack interposed no objections.

Supper was soon ready, though they had to light the lanterns before they could sit down at the little adjustable table, which, when not in use, could be slung up against the wall of the cabin and the space it occupied utilized as sleeping quarters for one of the crew.

After that they sat around talking in low tones and covering a wide range of subjects as usual in their conversation, from the folks at home, numerous former escapades that came to mind, to the terrible conflict that apparently promised to engulf the whole of Europe in its thrall.

Then a vehicle came into the boatyard and the stores were taken aboard. When they had been stowed away in temporary places Jack declared that he meant to open his letter from home and enjoy the contents.

Of course, this reminded the others that they too had news from those dear ones now so far away, and for a long time the four sat there, lost in contemplation of distant scenes brought close to them by those envelopes and their contents.

Later on they lay down to secure what sleep was possible. As a rule, after the first night afloat all of them had little difficulty about sleeping; but it seemed that on this occasion they turned and tossed considerably more than usual before settling down. Perchance it was the thrilling news they had heard that afternoon that made them so restless; or it may have been a premonition of coming difficulties that kept them awake; but morning came and found them far from refreshed.

CHAPTER III

TAKING CHANCES

“Better take a little turn ashore, Josh and George, while I’m getting breakfast ready,” advised Buster; “you’d hate to say you’d passed through Budapest without even setting foot in the city.”

“If you go, be careful not to get lost,” added Jack, looking as though almost tempted to veto the arrangement; but George proudly declared he felt sure of being able to find his way about.

“Don’t be more than half an hour at the most, fellows,” sang out Buster after the couple, and they waved their hands at him as if they understood.

About the time breakfast was ready Jack went ashore to look for the absent ones, but there was as yet no sign of them. In fact, the two who were left aboard had more than half finished their meal and were becoming really worried when the others made their appearance.

George looked a trifle chagrined, while Josh was chuckling to himself.

“What’s the joke? Tell us, Josh,” demanded Buster.

“Oh, yes, hurry up and give him the full particulars,” sneered George, looking daggers at his companion.

“Why, you see, George here tried some of his German on a gendarme we happened to meet,” explained Josh between gurgles. “Say, you ought to have seen how surprised that cop looked. I’m afraid George got his nouns twisted and called him some sort of bad name. Anyhow, he was for taking us to the lock-up; but I managed to soothe him down some by showing him my letters with the American postmarks on them, and letting a silver coin slip into his hand. But he shook his head and looked as if he could eat poor George. All the way back George has been racking his brain trying to understand what it was he really called that uniformed gendarme. I rather think it stood for pig.”

“Well, let that rest, will you, Josh?” growled George. “What I’m most interested in just now is pig of another kind, for I see Buster has fried some bacon for us. Mistakes will happen in the best regulated families, they say, and I own up I’m afraid I did get my nouns slightly mixed.”

“Slightly!” echoed Josh, with a shrug of his shoulders. “Well, if the boys could only have seen how that big cop scowled at you they’d have had a fit.”

As Josh was also hungry, he wasted no more time in explanations, and so the incident was forgotten for the present. Later on it would doubtless give Josh occasion for considerable additional merriment and be the cause for more or less acrimonious conversation between the pair.

While they were eating Jack proceeded to settle with the owner of the boatyard for the accommodations, for a bargain had been struck with him. People over in old Europe are not apt to do things without a consideration, especially when tourists are concerned.

By the time George and Josh had finished their morning meal everything was in order for making a start.

“It’s pretty tough to be running away like this without having a chance to see what sort of movies they have over here in Budapest,” complained George, who was known to be a steady attendant at the little theatre in his home town, where all manner of dramas, as well as world-wide views, were nightly screened.

“So far as that goes,” Josh told him, “they’re pretty much all alike here and at home. Chances are you’d see some cowboy pictures of the wild and woolly West; for they do say those are the ones they like best abroad. They know all about Buffalo Bill over here. You know we saw an Austrian edition of some highly colored story about his imaginary exploits hanging up when we passed that book stall.”

Working the boat free from all entanglements, they were soon afloat once more on the river. The motor had started working as though it meant to do good service. Jack himself as a rule took charge of the machinery, not but that George knew all about such things, but he had a decided failing,

which was to “monkey” with things even when they were running satisfactorily, and thus bring about sudden stoppages through his experiments.

“Look at the beautiful bridge we’re going to pass under,” sang out Buster presently. “It makes me think of one we saw in London.”

“There’s a bunch of Austrian officers walking across,” said Josh, “and see how one of them is pointing to us now.”

“Bet you they’re suspicious of us right away, and mean to order us to go back,” said George disconsolately.

“Rats!” scoffed Buster. “Don’t you see they’re only admiring our little flag? – that’s all. I’ve got the same fastened in the stern, where it can show well. I only wish it was five times as big, that’s all. But it stands for what we are – true-blooded Americans, every one of us.”

The officers even leaned over the parapet of the bridge to stare at the boat as it passed under. When the boys looked back a minute or so later they saw that the uniformed Hungarians had hurriedly crossed over and were now gazing after them.

“Shows how seldom Old Glory is ever seen in these parts,” said Josh, “for they hardly know what to make of it. If I had my way, can you guess what I’d do? Make the flag of the free so well known and respected that everywhere people’d kowtow to the same and take off their hats.”

“Now they’re hurrying off the bridge, seems like, as if they’d just remembered an engagement somewhere,” reported Buster.

“I only hope they don’t start any sort of trouble for us, that’s all,” George went on to say, but, finding that no one seemed to be paying any sort of attention to his grumbling, he stopped short, as his kind always do.

Jack held the wheel and guided the boat along through the numerous mazes of moving river craft. He was a skillful pilot and could be depended on to mind his business every time. Unlike George, Jack was plain and practical, whereas the other never seemed satisfied with what he had, but was always trying to better conditions, often to his own and others’ discomfort, as well as possible delay.

By degrees they were now leaving the twin cities behind them, and the river began to appear more open and free to travel. The boys, as usual, were calling each other’s attention to such features of the landscape that attracted their admiration, or it might be some of the buildings they passed.

All of them were on the watch for special sights, and in this way the time passed rapidly. The little motor was a very good one, and chugged away faithfully as it had continued to do hour after hour ever since the start, which was made far down the river below Vienna.

They overtook other vessels frequently, since the Danube is navigable for the greater part of its long course. Rising away over in Germany near the border of Luxemburg, it winds its sinuous way through the greater part of Germany and Austria-Hungary, strikes the Serbian border, turns sharply to the east, and then touches Bulgarian territory, forms the dividing line between Rumania and Bulgaria, then crosses the former monarchy, and serves as a border between Rumania and Russia, to finally empty into the Black Sea.

It is by long odds the greatest river in Europe, and in all the world there can be found no stream upon whose borders live so many different nationalities. That was one reason Jack Stormways had yearned to cruise down the Danube; and he was even now trying to get all the pleasure possible out of the trip, though the clouds had arisen so early in the venture.

Budapest was now far in the rear, though they could see the smoke that arose in a few localities, coming from certain factories producing articles for which the Hungarian capital is famous.

Josh happened to notice about this time that George seemed to be amusing himself by shading his eyes with one hand and looking backward.

“What now, old croaker?” he ventured to say. “Do you imagine you see a patrol boat chasing after us hotfooted, with orders to bring us back and throw us in a black dungeon, charged with being desperate spies?”

“Laugh as much as you want to,” retorted George stubbornly, “but all the same there *is* a boat hustling along after us.”

“You don’t say!” gibed Josh, without bothering to turn his head to look. “Well, since when have we taken out a mortgage on the Danube, please tell me? I guess it’s free cruising ground for anybody who can afford to own a steam yacht, or even a common little dinky motorboat.”

“She certainly is coming hand over fist after us,” asserted Buster.

“Well, the river is sure wide enough for two, and when she comes up we’ll give her a chance to pass us by. Whew! but I’m sleepy, if you want to know it,” and Josh yawned and stretched, but still declined to bother turning his head.

A little while later George again made a remark.

“Now that they’re coming closer, I believe I can see several people in uniforms aboard that swift little boat.”

Jack took a look on hearing this.

“You’re right there, George,” he assented; “but then there’s nothing to hinder Magyar officers going on the river when they choose. In fact, I imagine they pass plenty of their time that way when off duty.”

Josh could not hold out after that any longer, but condescended to lazily turn and indifferently survey the approaching craft.

“Oh, she’s a dandy for speed, all right,” he frankly admitted, “and could make circles around our old tub if the skipper wanted. Yes, those are soldiers on board, I’ll admit, but how can you decide that they want to overhaul us, I’d like to know?”

“I’m only guessing when I say that,” acknowledged George; “but now that I look sharper it strikes me one of those officers is the tall chap wearing the feather in his hat that we noticed on the bridge. How about it, Jack?”

“He looks like that man, but then there are probably scores in Budapest who wear that same kind of hat, Alpine style. He’s probably an officer of the mountaineer corps, those fellows from the Carnic Alps who can do such wonderful stunts in scaling dizzy heights.”

“Well, we must soon know if there’s going to be any sort of a row,” said George, “because in ten minutes or less they’ll overtake us.”

“There must be no row, remember, boys,” advised Jack. “If we attempted to resist arrest we’d soon be trapped, for they would send word down-river way about us by telegraph or telephone, and officers would be on the watch for us all along the route. Don’t forget that.”

“Paste it in your hat, George,” advised Josh, “for I reckon you’re the only one in the bunch liable to make trouble. If they want to take me back and give me free lodging, I’ll go as meek as Mary’s little lamb. But whatever you do, George, *please* be careful how you fling that German of yours around loose. If you called one of those fiery Hungarian officers a *donkey* by mistake I think he’d want to run you through the ribs with his sword.”

“Huh! wait and see. That German you pretend to make so much fun about may some day keep you from being hung or stood up against a blank wall. Stranger things than that have happened, let me tell you, Josh Purdue.”

“They keep pushing us right along,” announced Buster, beginning to feel quite an interest in the affair by this time.

“Get ready to give them the right of way, Jack,” jeered Josh. “We wouldn’t want to act greedy, you know, and claim the whole river. And when they whiz past look out you don’t get splashed, Buster.”

“Goodness! I hope you don’t mean to say they might swamp us away out here in the middle of the river. But there, I know you’re only being true to your name, Josh. Who’s afraid? You don’t get me to worrying any if I know it.”

“Look again and see what’s happening!” suddenly snapped George, with a ring of triumph in his voice.

“They’re waving to us, for a fact!” admitted Buster. “Now what d’ye suppose that can be for, Jack?”

“Just saluting our little flag, mebbe,” suggested the unconverted Josh.

“They are demanding that we pull up and wait for them, that’s what!” asserted George, with a superior air that he liked to assume on occasions like this.

“Is he right there, Jack?” asked Buster eagerly.

“I think that’s what is meant,” assented the pilot and engineer of the powerboat the boys had chartered. “They are suspicious of us, and mean to have a look in before allowing us to proceed.”

“But why should anybody be suspicious of four honest-looking boys out for a little fun?” demanded Josh. “We’ve met heaps of other people before now, and they acted just as nice as you please. I don’t understand it.”

“Well, you must remember,” admonished Jack, “that something *terrible* has happened since yesterday morning. Every military man in Germany and Austria has been on needles and pins about this war business ever since Serbia defied Francis Joseph and some of her adventurers murdered the heir apparent to the Austrian throne. And now that war has broken out, they are all eager to show their fidelity to their country.”

“But will you stop for them, Jack?” asked Josh.

“It would be foolish not to,” he was told, “because you can see it’s only a matter of ten minutes at most when they will have overhauled us. It pays to be courteous, especially, I’m told, when dealing with the military authorities over here. Besides, in war times they rule the roost.”

“I guess they do all the time,” muttered Josh; “but then you’re right about it, Jack. We must get ready to show them just who and what we are. If they’re sensible men they’ll let us go on down the river as we’ve planned.”

“And supposing they happen to be unreasonable men?” queried Buster.

“Oh, some of the dungeons may be large enough to hold you, perhaps,” laughed George; “but I can see your finish on a diet of bread and water, mostly water. You will waste away to a shadow before you get out, Buster.”

The other only gave him a scornful look, as much as to say he was not worrying any about that part of the game, for he knew he could rely on Jack to pull them all through safely.

So Jack shut off the power, and the clumsy but comfortable boat lay wallowing on the surface of the river, awaiting the coming of the speedy craft containing the Hungarian army officers.

CHAPTER IV

UNDER SUSPICION

Although every one tried to put the best face on the matter, afterwards more than one of the boys frankly confessed that his heart was beating furiously during that time when waiting for the speed boat to come up.

They were in a strange land, it must be remembered, and the habits of the Magyars were unfamiliar to them. More than this, war had just been declared, which was sure to mean that Austria-Hungary would be at handgrips with not only Serbia on the south, but great Russia as well.

They gathered at the stern of the boat and awaited whatever fate had in store for them. Josh was so much afraid even then that George might be tempted to try his American German on the Hungarian officers that he immediately made a suggestion.

“Remember, now, everybody keep still but Jack. That’s meant for you, Buster, as well as George here. The rest of us are apt to get excited and do our case more harm than good if we butt in.”

“I’m as mum as an oyster, Josh,” said Buster readily.

“How about you, George?” demanded the other sternly.

“Oh, I’ll promise all right,” mumbled George, shaking his head; “but all the same, I do it under protest. You don’t know what you may be missing when you put the muzzle on a fellow that way. But I’m used to being sat on, and I guess I can stand for it again.”

Jack himself was pleased to hear Josh settle this. He had feared that George, who could make himself more or less of a busybody when he chose, might break in when the negotiations were well under way and possibly spoil the whole business.

But they would at least soon know the worst, for the other boat was coming on at great speed and about to draw alongside.

The man at the wheel knew his part of the business perfectly, for when the craft came together the bump was hardly noticeable.

There were just three of the Hungarian officers, all of them dressed in their attractive uniforms, with little capes hanging from their shoulders and their lower limbs encased in shiny boots with tassels. Indeed, Buster just stared at them in sheer admiration, for he thought he had never in all his life looked upon such handsome soldiers.

Apparently the tall one must have been the superior of the trio, for he took it upon himself to do the talking.

All of them were looking curiously at the four lads. They evidently hardly knew what to make of them, for, while outwardly Jack and his chums had the appearance of harmless young chaps off for a holiday, nevertheless in such dark times as now hung over the Fatherland it was not well to be too easily deceived. Spies must be abroad, under many disguises; and if so, why not playing the part of innocent tourists, was no doubt the question uppermost in each of their minds.

Then the tall officer said something. His voice was filled with authority and his face frowning, but of course none of the boys could understand a word he uttered, for the Magyar tongue was a sealed book to them.

They could, of course, give a pretty good guess that he was asking who they were and what they might be doing there. George sighed as though it nearly broke his ardent heart to be deprived of this golden opportunity to air some of his German. He had perhaps managed to remember certain words that would serve to partly explain the situation; but a savage nudge from Josh caused him to shut his teeth fiercely together and get a fresh grip on himself.

Then Jack tried an experiment.

“We do not understand what you say, because none of us can speak the language. We only know English. We would be glad to explain everything if you could understand what we tell you.”

The tall man listened attentively and then immediately turned to his comrades to say something to them. It was just as if he remarked, “Didn’t I tell you they must be English?” for Jack caught the concluding word.

Then, turning again to them, the officer went on:

“Certainly we can speak English as well as is necessary. We have many tourists in our country each summer. I myself have a number of very good friends among the English, though when we meet again it may be as bitter enemies.”

Jack saw that there need be no further trouble in explaining matters. He felt decidedly relieved over the sudden change in the situation. Only George frowned, for possibly he had been entertaining a forlorn hope that in the end Jack might have to call on him to save the day, and now he knew that chance was doomed.

“I am glad you can understand what I want to tell you,” Jack proceeded. “In the first place, we are not English at all, but from America.”

Again the three Hungarians exchanged significant looks. Evidently they did not know whether to believe the assertion or not.

“We have great regard for America,” the tall man went on to say, “for many of our countrymen are there, making an honest living and helping to support their kin on this side of the water. Of course, then, you can show us your passports?”

“Certainly, sir, and with pleasure,” responded Jack.

His words served as the signal to the others. Every fellow immediately hastened to dive into his breast pocket and produce the necessary paper, which was always kept in an especially safe place for fear of trouble in case of its being lost.

The officer took the sheaf of papers and proceeded to critically examine the passports, as though looking for signs of fraud. Buster watched him anxiously. He had heard that when war came upon a country all ordinary protection for tourists is annulled, and even passports may not be worth the paper they are written on.

Greatly to Buster’s relief he saw that the tall officer did not look at them so ferociously after he had scanned the papers, which he now handed back to Jack in a bunch.

“They seem to be perfectly correct, so far as I can see,” he proceeded to say; “but perhaps you would not mind explaining what your object is in coming down the Danube in this powerboat?”

“I’ll be only too glad to do that, sir,” Jack announced, with one of his winning smiles that always caused people to feel kindly toward him. “Over in our own country we have three motorboats, with which six of us in times past have made many exciting cruises along the great rivers, and the coast as well.”

The officer nodded his head, while his face lighted up. Evidently he could appreciate the love for adventure that induced these healthy specimens of boyhood to want to be in the open air all they could. Perhaps whenever he had the chance for an outing he might have been found off in the mountains, hunting the wild boar, or it might be in pursuit of the nimble chamois.

“When we had a chance to come to Europe this summer,” continued Jack, “we decided that the thing we would like best of all would be a long trip down the beautiful blue Danube. I had just been reading an account of a cruise taken by an Englishman from near the source down to the Black Sea. While we couldn’t spare the time for all that, we could come to Vienna, find where a suitable boat could be chartered half-way to Budapest, and make our start there. And, sir, that is what we have done. We are now just two days on the way.”

“I admire your courage, as well as your choice of the Danube for your trip. Many a voyage have I taken on its waters when I was younger. But how long have you been at Budapest, may I ask?”

Jack knew that there was only one way to treat such a questioner, and that was by being perfectly frank with him.

“We only arrived late yesterday afternoon, to tell the truth, sir,” he admitted.

“But how comes it you are leaving so early the next morning?” asked the officer, with a little fresh suspicion in his manner. “We have a most beautiful and renowned city here, and travelers usually find it difficult to tear themselves away from it, even after a stay of days. You seem to have been in a great hurry.”

“We own up that we are, sir,” continued Jack. “You see, the first thing I did on arriving was to hasten to the postoffice for our letters from home. It was then that I realized the city was in a feverish state of excitement. I suspected what must have happened, for we heard rumors when above. I managed to learn that war had been declared by Germany on Russia, which would mean for Austria-Hungary, too. And after we had talked it all over we decided that it would be best for us not to waste any time here, but hurry along our way.”

“Would you mind showing me those letters?” asked the officer.

“With the greatest of pleasure, sir,” Jack told him. “Boys, hand him the last ones you received, please.”

The other took them as they were thrust out. He examined the postmarks as if making sure of the dates, and also read each name in turn. Then he deliberately opened that belonging to Jack and seemed to be glancing over it, though the boy felt rather surprised to see him do this.

Still, it was good to find the officer nodding his head as he gleaned something of the contents. At least he could see it was genuine, and that counted for a good deal.

“I am quite satisfied now that you are just what you claim to be – tourists, who have no connection with our enemies, or those who in a short time we must look on as such. You are wondering, no doubt, why I went so far as to pry into the contents of your letter from home, and I believe an explanation is due. To tell the truth, we rested under the belief that you were four desperate young Serbian youths, who were said to be on their way up the Danube bound for Vienna, with the mad intention of trying to assassinate our good kaiser, Francis Joseph, just as the Austrian heir apparent to the throne was killed not long ago.”

Buster could not keep from giving a little gasp at hearing this. Really never before, so far as he knew, had he been taken for a desperado. He did not know whether to be ashamed or flattered. It would be something with which to thrill those boy comrades at home, if ever they were lucky enough to get safely back again.

“That would be a serious charge against us, I am sure,” said Jack; “but it pleases us to know that you are now convinced we are not what you thought. Seeing four strangers in a boat, and all young at that, of course made you suspicious.”

“The fact that you were headed down-stream puzzled us considerably,” continued the officer, apparently willing to explain things in order to prove that he and his comrades were only doing their duty; “but we figured that something may have caused a change in plans, perhaps the breaking out of war, and that the four desperate Serbians were on the way back to their native land.”

“After all, we should not be sorry for what has happened,” diplomatic Jack went on to say, “since it has given us the pleasure of meeting three such excellent gentlemen. I hope, though, there need be no necessity for causing us to alter our plans, since our hearts are set on finishing the voyage, and we will never have the opportunity for visiting your great country again.”

Every one of them held his breath while waiting for the officer to make a reply to this question. He looked around at the half circle of anxious faces and smiled indulgently. No doubt just then he put himself in their place and tried to realize how much it might mean to be simply let alone.

“I do not mean to demand that you turn back,” he finally told Jack, “for that would really be exceeding my authority; but I would feel that I had not done my full duty if I did not warn you of the perils you will likely encounter below here. By the time you reach the Serbian border it is more

than likely there will be desperate fighting going on between Hungarians and Serbians, for they are ready to-day to fly at one another's throat. You will find yourselves in great danger before you can pass the Iron Gate and enter Rumania."

Jack only smiled reassuringly at him.

"Thank you many times, sir, for taking enough interest in us to give that kind warning," he remarked warmly; "but we have passed through some pretty lively adventures in the past and always managed to come out safely. We will try and be careful how we act when the time comes; and once past the Serbian border along the Danube we need fear little else."

"Well, I admire your boldness, while at the same time I fear you may be making a mistake. We will wish you a pleasant trip, and that you reach your goal in safety. What are your plans after arriving at the sea, may I ask?"

"We have arranged to send the boat back to the owner at our expense," explained Jack. "Then we will find some way of getting to Constantinople, where we hope to remain a short time, looking around. From there we go to Italy, and then back to London to sail for home about October fifteenth."

"Ah! what wonderful things may happen in those ten weeks!" remarked the officer, as though he might be trying to lift the veil that hid the future. "History will be in the making, I fear, and all Europe be torn up with the war clouds. But better so than the armed peace that has existed so long. A storm is necessary once in so often to clear the atmosphere which has become murky."

He thrust out his hand to Jack, who gladly seized it.

"May the best of luck follow you all the way, is the wish of myself and my comrades here," the tall officer told them as in turn he pressed each boy's hand, in which genial undertaking he was followed by the other pair, who, although taking no part in all the talking, had been earnest listeners.

Then the speed boat backed away, made a sweeping turn, and was soon heading up the Danube again. The boys waved their hats to the three gaily dressed Hungarian soldiers seated in the other craft, and were in turn saluted by the trio.

After that Jack again started the engine, and they began moving with the current at a lively rate.

"Well, that was a new experience, now!" exclaimed Josh; "and we are mighty lucky to have escaped being taken back to Budapest and shut up in a dungeon."

"Yes, it was easy, after all," grumbled George; "but who'd think Hungarian officers would know English so well?"

"And just to think of our being taken for a lot of desperate Serbian youths sworn to get the aged and benevolent Emperor Francis Joseph! Ugh! it'll give me a shiver every time I think of it. I never dreamed before that I looked like a fellow who would take his life in his hand to do such a terrible thing."

CHAPTER V

SIGNS OF COMING TROUBLE

All day long the powerboat kept constantly moving down the reaches of the Danube River. Many were the interesting sights the boys looked upon from time to time. Nor did they see any particular signs of overhanging trouble. War may have been declared by Austria-Hungary upon Serbia and Russia, backing up the action of her ally, Germany, but the indications of it were not immediately apparent.

It was true that in several towns which they passed on that morning's run they could see that groups were in the streets, and there seemed to be many men in uniform hurrying this way or that. Once they also saw a field battery of glistening guns disappearing up a steep road that led to the south.

"You can see what's in the wind, all right," Josh remarked, as they watched a group of uniformed horsemen galloping along the river road as though bound for some distant point of mobilization. "In a few days after the call to the colors, as they say, has gone out for many classes of reserves, the whole country will be swarming with men in uniform."

"I only wish we could hold over and see what goes on," grumbled George. "It's a chance in a lifetime to be a looker-on in a foreign country, with war breaking out; and I think it's a shame that we are going to miss it."

Jack took him to task for saying that.

"We ought to thank our lucky stars, on the other hand, George," was the way he put it, "that we have a chance to get out of Austria before every exit is closed. I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of tourists have the time of their lives escaping, because, you see, every train will be taken over by the Government for carrying soldiers, guns, ammunition, horses, stores and such army necessities."

"Yes," added Buster, "that's what I say, Jack. For one I want to tell you I'm mighty thankful to be on board this old boat right now. I only hope they won't want to commandeer it for carrying soldiers down to the Serbian border."

"Oh, they wouldn't want to bother with such a mosquito craft as this, I should think," remarked Josh uneasily.

"Our little flag seems to attract a heap of attention," Buster continued, with a vein of pride in his voice, for that small edition of Old Glory was his private possession, it may be remembered.

"Where we landed at noon to see if we could buy some eggs and milk at that farm house," Josh observed, "those peasant girls were examining it. I rather think they must have somebody over in our country, for when I said the word 'America' and pointed to the flag and then myself they laughed and nodded their heads."

"And don't forget to mention, please, George, that we got the eggs all right," suggested Buster; "likewise a bumper mug of fresh milk apiece, and some butter that didn't have a bit of salt in it, which I think queer."

"Oh, so far as that goes," explained Jack, "there's lots of that made and sold over here. They call it sweet butter, and most people like it. You'd get used to it in time."

"Four dozen eggs, and whoppers at that," Buster went on to say, gloatingly; "which I consider a splendid investment; and we didn't have to pay half what they'd cost us in the States either. I'm going to have a couple fried for my supper, and anybody else that likes them that way can get what they want by giving the tip now."

They continued to chatter in this manner as the afternoon wore away. It had been decided that while there was a full moon that night they had better not attempt navigating the river after the sun had set. None of them knew what they might run up against; and besides, since war had come,

possibly there would be strict rules enforced prohibiting such a thing during the night. None of them felt like taking chances.

Buster, it seems, must have been thinking of some of his previous exploits in the times that were gone, for later on he was seen to be looking over some fishing tackle he produced from his pack.

"Hey! what's in the wind now, Buster?" sang out Josh upon discovering what the fat chum was doing.

"Oh, nothing much," replied the other easily, "only it struck me that there might be some kind of eatable fish in this same blue Danube, and I'm looking over my lines. To-night, if I can find any fat grubs or worms, I might set a line and see what happens. You know I've had more or less success about grabbing big fish out of fresh and salt water."

That seemed to make the others laugh, as though certain humorous memories were refreshed. Buster joined them, for he was a jolly fellow and could even enjoy a joke when it was on himself.

"I mean to drop one of these lines over as we go along, so as to soak the snell of the hook, for if it's too dry it might break," Buster explained.

"Well, here's wishing that you meet with good luck," said Josh, "because I'd enjoy a supper of fresh fish pretty good."

"Don't make up your mouth for it, then," warned George, "because you never can tell about such things. Fish are what some people would call notionate; they bite well one day and then given you the grand laugh the next one."

"About how far do you think we've come since leaving Budapest, Jack?" Buster asked, not deigning to continue the discussion with George.

"I should think something like fifty to sixty miles," was the reply.

"Whew! as much as that?" whiffed George.

"Well, this current must be all of four miles an hour, and the old boat when going with it ought to average ten. Counting for our stops and all that, we've certainly covered sixty miles if we have one."

"I agree with you, Jack," said Josh; "George is only saying that to be contrary."

"Oh, I am, eh?" grinned George, who seemed to take especial delight in stirring Josh up.

"It's been a pretty good day for August, with the sun shining overhead most of the time, and not so very hot at that," Buster continued. "There's no sign of such a thing as a storm that I can see – great guns! what in the mischief can that queer-looking thing be over yonder? Do they have birds shaped like a fat cigar in the Danube country?"

Of course, every one immediately twisted his head around to take a look, and all sorts of exclamations announced that they were about as much astonished as Buster.

Low down toward the horizon they saw an object outlined against the sky that was undoubtedly moving, for they could notice that it passed a small cloud with considerable speed. Just as Buster had said, it looked very much in the distance like a fat cigar, and was of a neutral tint, not very easily distinguished against the heavens.

"Why, that must be one of those German Zeppelins we've read so much about!" exclaimed Jack, after taking a second look.

"A war dirigible, you mean, don't you?" demanded Josh.

"Nothing else," he was told. "I've seen pictures of them often, but never thought I'd set eyes on one. Yes, it's a Zeppelin, all right, and heading due south, too."

"What d'ye mean by saying that last?" asked Josh.

"Well, you remember what that officer said about the Serbians and Austrians on the Danube down below, where it acts as a boundary line, being ready to fight at the drop of the hat? Perhaps they're already having it hot and heavy. Perhaps the word has been flashed over the wires for one of the Zeppelins to come down and get busy there."

"What would they use it for, Jack?" questioned Buster, as all of them continued to watch the steady movement of the fast dirigible in the west.

“I believe the main thing for Zeppelins to do is to carry explosives and drop bombs from a great height on forts and barracks occupied by the enemy forces. But they can be also used for scouting and bringing back information of value. That may be what they want this one down along the Danube for.”

So fast was the dirigible going that in a quarter of an hour more it had passed beyond the range of their vision.

“Looks like things are going to happen right along over in old Europe these days,” remarked Josh.

“Yes, but we’ll know next to nothing about it all,” George went on to say; “for we can’t buy a paper, and even if we did none of us could read Magyar. This thing of knocking around in a foreign country may be all very good when there’s no war on, but there are times when you’d like to be able to buy an extra and learn all that’s happening.”

“There’s a good landing by that tree yonder, Jack,” remarked Josh.

“But we’re not quite ready to pull in yet a while,” the commodore announced.

“What’s the hurry, Josh?” asked Buster, again working at his long and strong fish line.

“Oh, I thought George wanted to get out and start right away back,” answered the other with a dry chuckle. “He’ll never be happy until he can have all the comforts of home, including the afternoon extra to read.”

“Forget it!” snapped George. “I’ve always been able to take things as they came as well as the next one, and I reckon I can stand what you fellows do. Because I grumble a little once in a great while, that’s no sign I’m not having a good time. Some of my folks must have been sailors, I guess, and it runs in the blood. Don’t pay any attention when you hear me complain.”

“We’ll try not to, George,” promised Josh blithely; “we’ll have to remember the source, and then forget it.”

“There, now, I’ve got the silly old line untangled,” announced Buster; “and I’ll let the hook and sinker trail after us, just to make believe I’m fishing. It’ll do me a heap of good to feel the twirl as the hook goes around with the swivel – sort of revive old memories like.”

He lay there by the broad stern of the boat amusing himself after his fashion. Josh could not resist the temptation to warn him.

“Better look out for yourself, Buster,” he remarked seriously. “Some hungry fish might snap at your bare hook and get caught. If you were taken off your guard the next thing you knew you’d be overboard.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time, either,” mentioned George.

“Aw, no danger of that happening,” retorted Buster good-naturedly. “Even over here in Austria-Hungary the fish have their eye-teeth cut, and wouldn’t be so green as to bite at a bare hook. If I had anything to bait it with I’d watch my steps, you may be sure. But don’t worry yourself about me, either of you. I can take care of myself.”

No more was said just then with reference to the subject, something else coming up to catch their attention.

The afternoon was nearing its close, and Jack knew that before a great while they must be on the lookout for a place to haul up for the night. Whether they had better select a retired nook for their camp, as had been their habit when cruising down home rivers, or land near some farm, he had not yet decided. Of course, it would be unwise to stop over at any town, since they might have more or less trouble getting away again if the authorities chose to be exacting.

“There goes a long train over there, heading south, too,” remarked Josh, pointing as he spoke.

“Seems like nearly everything is going the same way we are, for a fact,” added George.

“It strikes me it must be a troop train,” Jack was saying, “for, while I’m not dead sure, I think I can see men in uniform leaning from the windows of the carriages, as they call the cars over here.”

“Well, what else could we expect?” Buster wanted to know. “If Austria means to give little Serbia a licking she’ll need a lot of her soldiers down there, many more than she’s got along the lower Danube now. Yes, they’re soldiers, all right, Jack. I can see them plainly in the sunlight.”

“The plot is thickening,” remarked George solemnly; “and right now I wouldn’t be surprised if the Germans were having a hot time over in Belgium, if they’ve really started to cross the little kingdom. They say those Belgians are fighters to the backbone, and will never stand by to let the Kaiser cross their neutral country to strike at France.”

George was deeply interested in all that was going on. He took pride in his knowledge of things connected with the aspirations of these countries, big and little, of Europe, and especially of the turbulent Balkan States. While George undoubtedly has his failings, as what boy has not, as a rule he seemed well informed, and could argue on almost any point.

“A lot of those fine chaps will like as not never come back,” said Buster, as he gave the fish line another idle hitch around his wrist, preparatory to winding it in; “they start out full of enthusiasm and life, and are brought home again wrecks, fit for only the scrap heap.”

“Listen to Buster, will you?” chuckled Josh; “he’s getting to be a regular old philosopher these days.”

“Well, it always did hurt me more or less when it came to parting with any one I cared for a heap,” admitted the fat chum, trying to look serious, though that was always a difficult task with him, because nature had made his round features to bear the stamp of a jovial disposition; “you may remember that it took me two whole days to recover when we left home. I’m of a clinging nature, you see, and this thing of severing the bonds goes against my grain.”

He had just said this when something happened that astounded the others. Buster seemed to be dragged from the end of the moving powerboat as though an octopus had suddenly flung one of its long tendrils up and clasped him.

The others heard Buster give one loud howl of fright, and then the sound was swallowed up in a splash as he disappeared in the river.

As Jack hastily stopped the engine and prepared to back up, he had a glimpse of the stout chum struggling desperately in the water. If his frantic actions counted for anything, it would seem as though Buster must be engaged in a life-and-death struggle with some marine monster that had pulled him from the after deck of the powerboat and into the river.

CHAPTER VI

THE CAMP ON THE RIVER BANK

“Keep a-going, Buster; we’re coming back for you!” shrilled Josh, not a little alarmed on account of seeing such a tremendous splashing back where the stout chum was struggling in the river.

Being compelled to fight against the steady current, the boat could not make such very rapid progress, especially when backing up. Still it seemed as though Buster might be swimming toward them. He was using only one hand, and churning the water like the paddle-wheel of a Mississippi steamboat.

“Whew!” they heard him say, after ejecting a stream of water from his mouth, which he persisted in keeping open; “a sockdolager, I tell you! Going to beat all the records this time. It must be a river horse, or a boss sturgeon, boys. I want to save him, you bet!”

Evidently, like a true fisherman, Buster’s first, last and only thought concerned the successful landing of the game he had struck. And presently the boat had come so close to the submerged boy that Jack stopped the engine lest the propeller do Buster some material damage.

Two of them leaned over the stern and with great difficulty managed to drag the water-soaked chum aboard.

“Sit there in the stern until you drain, Buster,” ordered Jack. “If we took all that water aboard we’d be in danger of foundering.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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