

Hancock Harrie Irving

**The Motor Boat Club at
Nantucket: or, The Mystery of
the Dunstan Heir**



Harrie Hancock

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Hancock H.

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Hancock H. Irving Harrie Irving The Motor Boat Club at Nantucket; or, The Mystery of the Dunstan Heir

CHAPTER I – THE PAIR IN THE SEAT AHEAD

“Is the ‘Meteor’ a fast boat?”

“Very fast, indeed.”

“But can she beat anything along this coast? That’s what I want to know.”

“Judge for yourself. On her trial trip she made within a small fraction of twenty-eight miles an hour.”

“Whew! That’s tremendous speed, even for a fast and costly boat such as the rich build to-day. But how long has she been in the water?”

“Since last March.”

“She may have fouled a good deal since then, or her machinery may be a good deal below the mark by this time.”

“Humph! For that matter, something could be made to happen to the boat, I suppose.”

Of the two men carrying on this conversation in a day-coach seat on a railway train, one was five-foot-seven, florid and somewhat stout, with a bull neck and keen, twinkling eyes. His whole appearance hinted that he had spent most of his forty years of life on the open sea. The other man, who was short, slim and swarthy, with narrow, piercing black eyes, might have been a few years older. His every motion betokened great activity. One might have guessed him to be a Spaniard. His general attire, though it was somewhat careless, would place him in the business-man class.

At the first mention of the name “Meteor” two American boys, seated immediately behind the men, started slightly and immediately were all attention. Each boy was about sixteen years of age. Tom Halstead was fair, brown-haired and blue-eyed with a naturally merry look. Joe Dawson was darker, somewhat more reserved in manner and was Tom’s fast chum and great admirer.

Yes; readers of the preceding volume in this series will recognize Tom and Joe at once as the young Americans who became the original members of the Motor Boat Club of the Kennebec. It was they who put Broker Prescott’s fast motor boat, the “Sunbeam,” once more in commission; they who went through some most lively adventures along the coast near the mouth of the Kennebec and who rendered tremendously important services to Revenue Officer Evans, a cousin of the broker, in penetrating the secret of Smugglers’ Island.

Now these same two members of the Motor Boat Club were traveling on business that they believed to be wholly commonplace. They were headed for the island of Nantucket, south of Cape Cod. The experiences ahead of them, they imagined, were to be of the most ordinary kind. They had no glimpse, as yet, of the new excitement that Fate had in store for them. They had no hint of the startling adventures into which they were soon to be plunged.

But that mention of the name “Meteor” had aroused their instant attention. That was the name of the motor boat that they were to join and take charge of at Wood’s Hole. The craft was the property of Mr. Horace Dunstan, one of the wealthy residents of the island of Nantucket.

An ordinary boy might not have heard the low-toned conversation of the pair in the seat ahead. But Tom and Joe, attuned to the life of the sea and with ears trained to note the slightest irregularity of the sound of machinery, possessed acute hearing indeed.

At the first words of that conversation between the unknown pair Tom gave Joe a slight nudge in the side. Dawson’s eyes promptly closed, his lips parting, his head sinking slightly forward. He

appeared to be sound asleep. Halstead seemed to be wholly interested in the newspaper at which he was glancing. Not even when the possibility of foul play to the “Meteor” was mentioned did either youngster betray any further sign. Indeed, the men in the seat ahead were evidently confident that the boys could not hear their low-pitched talk. None of the other seats near by was occupied.

The accommodation train from Boston, rolling slowly along late in this July afternoon, had just left Falmouth for its run of a few miles to Wood’s Hole, the last stop, as this would be the end of the mainland route. Across the meadows the hot breath of July came through the open car windows. The brightness of the sunshine inclined one to close his eyes, so that Joe Dawson’s slumber seemed the most natural thing in the world. Indeed, Tom Halstead’s eyes were narrowing; he seemed the next candidate for a doze. Yet, depend upon it, neither boy had been more awake in his life. The slightest hint of possible mischief to the boat that was soon to be intrusted to their care was enough to set their nerves a-tingle.

“That was a queer rumpus on Boston Common the other day,” began the florid-faced man. The subject had been changed. No further mention was made of the “Meteor.” Tom Halstead felt tremendously disappointed. He had hoped to hear more that would be of interest to himself. But the pair in the seat ahead did not again refer to the “Meteor.” So Tom, after stealthily making a few pin pricks in his newspaper, settled far down in his seat, holding the paper before his face as though reading. In reality he was studying what he could see of the faces of the men who had so suddenly aroused his interest. With the paper close enough to his face the pin holes were almost as good as windows.

Over those last few miles droned the train. Tom felt cheated in not hearing more, but to all appearances the strangers had forgotten the existence of the “Meteor.” When the train was yet a mile out from Wood’s Hole the two men arose, going to the forward end of the car. The train slackened in speed, the two men dropping off on the further side of the car from where the boys sat. By the time that Halstead deemed it prudent to slip across to a window opposite, the two men were out of sight.

“Now what on earth can be the reason for those two fellows desiring any injury to a gentleman’s private yacht?” muttered Tom, rejoining his chum.

“At all events, it’s handy to be well warned in advance,” returned Joe with a quiet grin.

“Yes, if we run across that pair within twenty cable lengths of the boat we’ll know ’em and be on our watch,” answered Halstead with a meaningful flash in his eyes.

They had little more time for puzzling their heads, for the train was now rolling in at the little station at Wood’s Hole. There were less than a dozen people to disembark. Out of such a small crowd anyone looking for two young motor boat experts would have little difficulty in selecting the two boys with weather-tinted faces, who wore suits of strong, serviceable navy blue, soft brown canvas shoes and straw hats. So a tall, slender man of forty-five, dressed in outing gray and wearing an expensive fine-straw hat, came at once toward them.

“Captain Tom Halstead?” he inquired, looking from one boy to the other.

“That’s my name, sir,” Tom answered. “You are Mr. Horace Dunstan?”

“Yes. And heartily glad that you did not disappoint me.”

“There was no good reason why we should, sir,” Halstead rejoined, then presented his chum. Mr. Dunstan shook hands with both very cordially, although he was not able to conceal entirely his astonishment at their youthfulness.

“I – er – really expected to find you a little older,” Mr. Dunstan admitted with an easy laugh. “However, it’s all right. My friend, Prescott, told me he had found, among the seacoast boys of Maine, some of the best material for motor boat handlers in the world. I asked him to send me the best pair he knew, so, of course, it’s all right, for Prescott never goes back on a friend.”

“We’ve handled Mr. Prescott’s boat in some rather tight places,” said Tom quietly.

“You have your suit cases, I see. There’s no need to carry them down to the waterfront. Come over here and hand them to the driver.”

Mr. Dunstan led the way to the solitary hack at the station, though neither sturdy boy would have thought anything of walking and carrying his baggage.

"Now we'll drive down at once and you'll see the 'Meteor'" proposed their host. "Perhaps you will be able to tell, very soon, what ails the craft. I have had one or two local machinists look her over and the owner of one small motorboat who thought he knew all about such craft. Yet the engine doesn't work well enough for me to be satisfied to try to use the boat."

In a few minutes the three alighted near a pier that jutted some hundred feet out over the water. At the further end lay as jaunty a fifty-foot craft as either boy had ever laid eyes on.

"So that's the 'Meteor'? Oh, she's a dandy!" cried Tom in a burst of enthusiasm.

"Say, look at the beauty of her lines! What speed she ought to be good for, with a strong, well-behaving engine!" came from quiet Joe.

Horace Dunstan smiled with pardonable pride as he led the way down the pier. As far as first impressions went the boat was worthy of extended praise. Though only five feet longer than the "Sunbeam," she had the look of being a much larger craft. There was more fore-castle. The space of the bridge deck seemed better arranged. There was an awning over the bridge deck and another over the cockpit. The cabin looked roomier. From davits at the starboard side swung a natty-looking small boat.

"Gr-r-r-r!" came a warning sound from the closed fore-castle as the trio stepped aboard.

"In the absence of crew I've kept my bull pup down in the engine room," explained Mr. Dunstan.

"A mighty good idea," muttered Tom with a swift recollection of the fragments of conversation he and Joe had overheard on the train.

"Stand back a moment, until I let him out and present you to him," requested the owner. "Don't be afraid of him. Bouncer is a very intelligent dog. He'll understand an introduction as quickly as a human being would."

One of the fore-castle windows was open, to give air to the dog, though it was not large enough to let him out.

"It's all right, Bouncer," called Mr. Dunstan reassuringly, as he fitted a key at the fore-castle door. "Now come out like a four-footed gentleman and meet some friends of ours."

Bouncer came nimbly out, a low-built, thick-set bulldog of the finest fighting type. He had a square-set pair of jaws that looked capable of taking a tremendous grip. His look, however, under the prompt petting of his owner, was kindly and curious.

"These young gentlemen are all right, Bouncer," spoke Mr. Dunstan. "Go over and get acquainted with them. Let them pet you."

Bouncer contented himself with a brief sniffing at each boy in turn. Then he submitted to caresses, wagging his short stump of a tail.

"He understands. You'll never need to be afraid of this dog, unless you do some such extreme thing as to attack me or a member of my family," Mr. Dunstan assured them. "Now come down into the engine room."

"Say, this is something like!" uttered Joe enthusiastically, as he stepped below and stood looking about him. Here there was an abundance of room, for much of the engine was housed back under the bridge deck. The engineer had plenty of space in which to move about. Forward of the engine room, shut off by a curtain, was the galley. Here were stove, sink, ice box, dish rack and room for a goodly supply of foods.

Through a passageway Mr. Dunstan led them under the bridge deck. Curtained off from the passage was a wide berth.

"We generally call this the captain's berth," explained the owner.

"I guess my berth will be on one of the engine room lockers with Joe," smiled Halstead.

The cabin proved to be spacious and handsome. The four locker seats could be fitted into berths when cruising. The cockpit aft was large and contained, besides side seats, half a dozen comfortable armchairs.

"Now suppose we go back to the engine," desired Mr. Dunstan, turning about. "I'm anxious, indeed, to know whether you can locate the trouble that has tied this craft up here."

Returning to the engine room, the boys opened their suit cases, taking out overalls and jumpers. Clad in these they were soon armed with wrenches and other tools, exploring the mysteries of that engine.

"This machine hasn't had very good care," spoke Joe after a while. "She's fouled with dirt and thick oil at a good many points."

"Has the motor been overheated?" asked the owner.

"I don't believe so, sir; at least, not to any serious extent," Joe stated as his opinion.

"Any repairs to parts going to be necessary?"

"A few, but simple ones, I guess. We ought to be able to make 'em from the materials at hand."

"You – er – couldn't run out to-night, I suppose?"

"We shall be very fortunate, sir," Joe answered, "if we can take this boat out to-morrow forenoon."

"We'll stay aboard to-night and work as late as we can," Tom explained. "Joe can't really tell, until we get started, just how much will have to be done. But the motor is not hurt past ordinary repair."

"I was going to ask you over to the hotel for dinner to-night," hinted the owner.

"There seems to be plenty of everything to eat in the galley," Tom answered seriously. "So, if you don't mind, sir, we'll stay right by our work and help ourselves to food as we can."

"Make yourselves at home, then. Do you mean to sleep aboard to-night?" inquired Mr. Dunstan, as he started up the steps to the bridge deck.

"I think we'd better, for more reasons than one, perhaps," Halstead made answer as he, too, stepped to the bridge deck. "Mr. Dunstan," he went on in a lower voice, "do you know of anyone who could have a good reason for wanting to injure your boat?"

"Why, no," replied the owner, though nevertheless she gave a slight start. "Why?"

Tom described the men and the conversation aboard the train. Mr. Dunstan listened with interest, though he shook his head when the two men were described.

"There might be a shadow of reason for their talk in one direction," he admitted, slowly and reluctantly. "But, pshaw, no; I'm dreaming. No, there can't be any reason for wanting to ruin my boat. Very likely you didn't hear quite right."

"At any rate," Halstead went on, "Joe and I will be aboard to-night, and probably every night as long as we're in your employ."

"You seem to take this thing seriously, Halstead."

"I don't believe, sir, in throwing away what seems like a very valuable hint. It won't do any harm for us to be watchful, anyway. By the way, sir, do you mind letting the dog stay aboard, too?"

"Certainly you may have him," nodded the owner. "He won't interfere with you and he'll sleep with one eye and both ears open. Well, make yourselves at home here, boys. Do whatever you please in the galley and feed and water Bouncer. I'll be at the hotel this evening in case you should want me for anything."

After impressing upon Bouncer that he was still to remain aboard, Mr. Dunstan strolled leisurely down the pier. Both boys went hard at work.

"What do you make of our new employer?" asked Joe after a while.

"He seems like an ordinary, easy-going man," Tom replied. "I don't believe he ever startled anyone by doing anything very original, but he's a gentleman, and we're going to find him considerate and just. That's all we can ask in any man."

After that there wasn't much talk, except the few words now and then that related to taking the motor to pieces, and repairing and replacing its parts. At the close of day they helped themselves to a bountiful meal and made a fast friend of Bouncer by catering to his healthy appetite. Then, by the light of lanterns, they went to work again. It was after eleven o'clock when they found themselves too drowsy to do further justice to their work.

"Let's go up on deck and get some air. After that we'll turn in," proposed Halstead.

"I wonder if we're going to have visitors or any trouble?" mused Joe. "Somehow I can't empty my head of that talk in the car this afternoon."

"If we *do* have any trouble," laughed Tom nodding down at the dog dozing on the deck at their feet, "I've a private notion that we're going to be able to pass some back – to someone."

Twenty minutes later the motor boat chum had made up berths on the engine-room lockers and had undressed and gone to bed. Both were soon sound asleep. They relied on Bouncer, who lay on the deck just outside the open hatchway, to let them know if anything threatening happened.

CHAPTER II – BOUNCER WAKES UP

While our two young motor boat enthusiasts lie wrapped in the first sound slumber of the summer night, lulled into unconsciousness by the soft lapping of the salt water against the sides of the "Meteor," let us take a brief glimpse at the events which had brought them here.

Readers of the preceding volume in this series are aware of how the Motor Boat Club came to be organized. It now numbered fourteen members, any one of whom was fully qualified to handle a motor boat expertly under any ordinary circumstances.

Every member was a boy born and brought up along the seacoast. Such boys, both by inheritance and experience, are usually well qualified for salt-water work. They are aboard of boats almost from the first days of life that they can recollect. Seamanship and the work required about marine machinery are in the air that surrounds their daily lives. It is from among such boys that our merchant marine and our Navy find their best recruit material. It was among such boys that broker George Prescott had conceived the idea of finding material for making young experts to serve the owners of motor cruisers and racers along the New England coast.

Tom and Joe were undoubtedly the pick of the club for skill and experience. More than that, they were such fast friends that they could work together without the least danger of friction. Though Halstead was looked upon as the captain, he never attempted to lord it over his chum; they worked together as equals in everything.

Mr. Dunstan had long known Mr. Prescott in Boston, where both had offices. So, when trouble happened in the "Meteor's" engine room, Mr. Dunstan had sent the broker a long telegram asking that gentleman to send by the next train the two most capable experts of the Club. He had added that he wanted the boys principally for running the boat on fast time between Nantucket and Wood's Hole, for the owner had a handsome residence on the island, but came over to the mainland nearly every day in order to run in by train to his offices in Boston. The "Meteor," therefore, was generally required to justify her name in the way of speed, for Mr. Dunstan's landing place at Nantucket was some thirty-five miles from Wood's Hole.

Further, Mr. Dunstan's telegram had intimated that he was likely to want the young men for the balance of the season, though his message had not committed him absolutely on that point. The pay he had offered was more than satisfactory.

Wood's Hole is a quaint, sleepy little seaport village. The main life, in summer, comes from the passing through of steamboat passengers for Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. The night air is so quiet and the sea scent so strong that even the city visitors at the little hotel find it difficult to stay up as late as eleven o'clock.

On this night, or rather morning, at one o'clock, there were but two honest people in the whole place awake. Over at the Marine Biological Laboratory, Curator Gray and an assistant were still up, bending drowsily over a microscope in one of the laboratory rooms. But that building was too far from the "Meteor's" pier for the scientists to have any hint of what might be happening near the motor boat.

It was the night before the new moon. The stars twinkled, but it was rather dark when the figures of two men appeared at the land end of the pier. On their feet these men wore rubber-soled canvas shoes. Not a sound did they make as they started to glide out on the pier.

But Bouncer woke up.

"Gr-r-r-r!" the bull pup observed, thrusting his head up, his hair bristling. All this required but a few seconds. In another instant Bouncer was at the rail, his nostrils swelling as he took a keen look down the length of the pier. Then an angrier growl left his throat. It ended in a bound and Bouncer landed on the pier. His short legs moving rapidly under him Bouncer rushed to meet the soft-shoed gentlemen.

That last, angrier note from the bull puproused Tom Halstead as a bugle call might have done. He leaped to his feet, snatching at his trousers. Joe stirred, half alertly. When he heard his chum's feet strike the engine-room floor Dawson, too, sprang up.

"Mischievous, just as we thought!" breathed Tom.

Down at the land end of the pier there was a sudden mingling of startled human voices.

"*Por la gracia de Dios!*" sounded an excited, appealing wail.

"Get away, you beast, or I'll kill you!" roared another voice in English.

Bang! That was the noise from the throat of a big-calibered pistol. It was followed, just as Tom bounded to the deck, pursued by Joe, by the rapid pounding of a horse's hoofs and the rattle of wheels.

"There they go!" cried Tom, leaping to the pier in his bare feet and racing shoreward over the boards. But it was too late for the boys to overtake the prowlers, who were now behind a fast horse.

"Did they shoot that fine dog?" growled Joe, his voice rumbling with indignation. Bouncer answered the question for himself by running to meet them, his tail a-wag, guttural grunts of satisfaction coming from his throat, while a signal flag of information fluttered from his mouth.

"He took hold of one of 'em," chuckled Tom. "Good old fellow, you've brought us a sample of their cloth. Good boy! May I have it?"

Tom bent down to stroke the dog, who submitted very willingly. When Halstead took hold of the large, irregular fragment of cloth the bull pup grunted once or twice, then let go.

Back all three went to the boat. Tom lighted a lantern, then held the cloth forward.

"Brown, striped trouser goods," he chuckled. "Joe, whom have we seen with trousers of this pattern?"

"That Spanish-looking chap in the seat ahead on the train," muttered Dawson grimly.

"Now if Mr. Dunstan doubts that some one wants to put his boat out of commission we'll have something definite to call to his attention," uttered Tom excitedly. "Bouncer, you stocky little darling!"

Joe looked the dog over carefully to make sure that a bullet had not even grazed that reliable, business-like animal.

"If they had touched you, old splendid," growled Joe, "we'd have had a good clew or two for avenging you. But those rascals didn't even hurt your grit. You're ready for 'em again – if they come!"

For some time the boys were too excited to lie down again. When at last they did, they kept their trousers on, ready for any further surprise. Bouncer took up his old post on the deck above, seemingly free from any trace of excitement.

It was nearly half-past six in the morning when Joe next opened his eyes. In a hurry he roused his chum. Donning bathing trunks and shirts both dropped over the side for a refreshing swim. Then after drying and dressing, Halstead went forward into the galley, while Joe snatched a few minutes at the work left over from the night.

Breakfast was a hurried affair, for there was still much to do about the motor. It was after nine o'clock when Tom stood back, looking on inquiringly while Joe put on the finishing touches.

"Now I'll turn on the gasoline and see if we can get any news," proposed Joe. A few moments later he started the ignition apparatus and gave the drive wheel a few turns.

Chug! chug! the engine began slowly. Joe, oil can in hand, looked on with the attention of a scientist making an experiment. Bit by bit he increased the speed of the engine, smoothing the work with oil.

"Give us a little time and the old motor'll move," observed Dawson quietly.

"Yes," nodded Tom equally observant.

Had they been more of amateurs at the work they would have felt elated, for the engine responded to all increased speeds that were tried. But these two had worked enough about motors to know that such an engine may come to a creaking stop when everything appears to be running at the best.

Chug! chug! It was a cheery sound as the minutes went by and the motor did better and better.

"I'm almost hopeful that everything is in shape," declared Dawson at last.

"Good morning, boys!" came a pleasant hail from the pier. "I see everything is in fine trim."

"It looks that way, Mr. Dunstan," answered Tom, stepping up above and, by way of salute, bringing his hand to the visor of the Club's uniform cap that he had donned this morning. "But motors are sometimes cranky. We don't dare begin to brag just yet."

"This morning's mail brought me a letter from Mr. Prescott," went on the owner, holding up an envelope. "He has written me seven pages about you. It seems that you are great pets of my friend's. He tells me that I can place every confidence in you."

"Why, that's mighty nice of Mr. Prescott," replied Tom quietly. He was greatly pleased, nevertheless, for he could now see that Mr. Dunstan's opinion of them had gone up several notches.

"Well, well," continued the owner, as he glanced smilingly down into the engine room; "are you going to cast off now and take me over to Nantucket? It's four days since I've seen my home and that lucky little rascal, Ted."

Tom didn't know or inquire who Ted was or why that "rascal" was so very fortunate. Instead he replied:

"We were thinking of a little trial trip first, sir, just to see how the craft will behave underway."

"Good enough," nodded the owner. "But I'm aboard, so why can't I go with you?"

"Of course you can, sir."

Tom ran ashore to cast off while Joe did some last fussing over the motor. Having cast the stern-line aboard and coiled it, Tom now came forward, throwing off the bowline, boarding with it.

"Start her up at very slow speed ahead, Joe," called down the young captain, taking his place at the wheel and throwing it over a little.

With the first throbs of the propeller the "Meteor" began to glide away from the pier. Mr. Dunstan had taken his post at Halstead's right. The water being deep enough, the young captain moved out confidently.

"Just a little more speed, Joe," Tom called, when the pier end was some two hundred yards astern.

A little faster and still a little faster the propeller shaft turned, until it settled down to good work. The "Meteor" was moving at about twelve miles an hour.

"Fine!" cried Mr. Dunstan joyously. "We're all right now."

"We're not yet quite out of the – well, I won't say woods, but sea woods," smiled Tom quietly.

"I'm forgetting my duty," cried Mr. Dunstan in sudden self-reproach. "I must act a bit as pilot until you know these waters better."

"Why, I studied the chart, sir, nearly all the way from Portland," replied Tom. "I think I am picking up the marks of the course all right."

"You can't see Nantucket from here, but can you point straight to it?" inquired Mr. Dunstan.

"I'm heading straight along the usual course now," Tom replied.

"Right! You are. I guess you know your way from the chart, though you've never seen these waters before. Keep on. I won't interfere unless I see you going wrong."

"Shall I head straight on for the island?" asked Halstead. "Or would you rather keep close to the mainland until we see how the engine behaves?"

"Keep right on, captain, unless your judgment forbids."

Tom, therefore, after a brief talk with him through the open hatchway, held to his course, to the south of which lay the big island of Martha's Vineyard, now well populated by summer pleasure seekers.

Notch by notch Joe let out the speed, though he was too careful to be in a hurry about that. He wanted to study his machine until he knew it as he did the alphabet. Every fresh spurt pleased the owner greatly.

“Your Club has some great fellows in it if you two are specimens,” said Mr. Dunstan delightedly. “Prescott knew what he was writing when he told me to stand by anything you wanted to do.”

By the time when they had the Vineyard fairly south of them and the craft was going at more than a twenty-mile gait, Tom judged that he should inform the owner of the happening of the night before. He therefore called Joe up from the motor to take the wheel. Then Halstead told Mr. Dunstan what had taken place, exhibiting the fragment of cloth secured by Bouncer and connecting this, in theory, with the swarthy man they had seen aboard the train.

Bouncer, looking up in his master’s face and whining, seemed anxious to confirm Tom Halstead’s narration.

“Why, there’s something about all this that will make it well for us all to keep our eyes open,” said Mr. Dunstan.

Tom, watching the owner’s face, felt that that gentleman had first looked somewhat alarmed, then much more annoyed.

“There’s something that doesn’t please him and I shouldn’t think it would,” the young captain reflected. “Yet, whatever it is he doesn’t intend to tell me, just yet, at all events. I hope it’s nothing in the way of big mischief that threatens.”

“Of course I’d suggest, sir,” Tom observed finally, “that Dawson and myself sleep aboard nights.”

“You may as well,” nodded the owner, and again Tom thought he saw a shadow of worry in the other’s eyes.

“Are you going to let Bouncer stay aboard, too, sir?” Tom asked.

“Ordinarily I think I’ll let the dog sleep at the house nights,” replied Mr. Dunstan, immediately after looking as though he were trying to dismiss some matter from his mind.

Joe, too, had been keen enough to scent the fact that, though Mr. Dunstan tried to appear wholly at his ease, yet something was giving that gentleman a good deal of cause for thought. Mr. Dunstan even went aft, presently, seating himself in one of the armchairs and smoking two cigars in succession rather rapidly.

“We’ve put something into his mind that doesn’t lie there easily,” hinted Joe.

“But, of course, it’s none of our business unless she chooses to tell us,” replied Halstead.

A little later Joe Dawson went down into the engine room to get the best reasonable work out of the motor. Even at racing speed the “Meteor’s” bow wave was not a big one. There was almost an absence of spray dashing over the helmsman. Tom did not need to put on oilskins, as he had often done on the “Sunbeam.” The “Meteor’s” bow lines were so beautiful and graceful, so well adapted to an ideal racing craft, that the bridge deck in ordinary weather was not a wet place.

As they neared cool, wind-swept Nantucket, Mr. Dunstan came forward once more, to point out the direction of his own place. This lay on the west side of the island. As they ran in closer the owner pointed out the mouth of a cove.

“We’ve come over in two hours,” announced Mr. Dunstan, consulting his watch as they neared the cove.

“Now that we understand the boat and the engine,” answered Tom, “we ought to go over the course in less than an hour and a half.”

“Fine!” pronounced the owner. “That’s what the boat was built for. Do that and I can make the trip to my Boston offices every weekday – if I decide that it’s best to do so.”

Tom noted a certain hesitancy about those last few words. Again he felt sure that some mystery threatened the owner’s peace of mind.

Into the cove and up alongside the pier the “Meteor” was run. From here large and handsome grounds and a huge white house, the latter well back from the water, were visible.

“We’ll leave Bouncer on board for the present,” said Mr. Dunstan. “I’ll take you up to the house so you can get used to the place. By and by we’ll have lunch. And I want to show you my boy, Ted.”

CHAPTER III – THE LUCKIEST BOY IN THE WORLD

Hardly had Mr. Dunstan's new boatcrew followed him ashore when a whooping yell sounded from up the road that led to the house. Then into sight dashed a boy mounted on a pony. On they came at a full gallop, the boy reining up with a jerk when barely six feet from his father.

"Careful, Ted!" warned Mr. Dunstan laughingly. "Don't ride me down. You're not yet through with your use for a father, you know."

"I was trying to show you, dad, how Sheridan and I are learning our paces together," replied the youngster. He was a rather slightly built boy, with clustering yellow hair and gray eyes. He wore a khaki suit and a sombrero modeled after the Army campaign hat. Even his saddle was of the Army type, being a miniature McClellan model.

Tom liked this lad after the first look. There was something whole-souled about this little fellow with the laughing eyes. And, though he had been reared in a home of wealth, there was nothing in the least snobbish in the way he suddenly turned to regard the Motor Boat Club boys.

"Ted, Captain Halstead and his friend, Dawson," said Mr. Dunstan. "You'll be glad to know that they've got the 'Meteor' in running order again."

Ted was careful to dismount before he offered his hand, with graceful friendliness, to each of the boys.

"You've made dad happy if you've got his boat to running again," laughed Master Ted.

"And you? Aren't you fond of motor boating?" queried Tom.

"Oh, yes; after a fashion, I suppose," replied the Dunstan hopefully deliberately. "But then, you see, I'm cut out for a soldier. I'm to go into the Army, you know, and anything to do with salt water smacks a bit too much of the Navy."

All of which remarkable declaration Master Ted made as though he imagined these new acquaintances understood all about his future plans.

"The Army is fond of the Navy, of course," the lad added by way of explanation. "Yet, to a soldier, the Army is the whole thing."

"Oh, I see," smiled Captain Tom, though in truth he didn't "see" in the least.

"Yes, Ted's to be a soldier. He's doomed – or destined – to that career," nodded Mr. Dunstan good-humoredly. "There's a whole long story to that, Halstead. Perhaps you and Dawson shall hear the story later. But for now we'd better get up to the house."

Master Ted evidently took this as a hint that the subject was to be pursued no further for the present, for he merely said in a very gracious way:

"Of course, I shall see you again. So now I'll take myself off – with Sheridan."

Resting his left hand through the bridle and gripping the pony's mane, Master Ted used his right hand to strike the pony a smart blow over the rump. As the pony bounded forward the lad made a flying leap into the saddle. It was such a flying start as almost to startle Tom and Joe.

"He rides like a cowboy," declared Tom admiringly, watching the mounted youngster out of sight.

"He has need to, I fancy," replied Mr. Dunstan gravely. "That is, since he's going into the Army, for Ted wouldn't be satisfied with being anything less than a cavalryman."

As Mr. Dunstan's last words or the tone in which they were uttered seemed to dismiss the subject, Halstead and his chum knew that they were not to be further enlightened for the present. They followed their employer up to the house.

He took them into a roomy, old-fashioned looking library, with heavy furniture, and, excusing himself, left them. He soon returned to say:

"The family are now at luncheon, all except Master Ted, so I have given instructions to have luncheon served to us in here presently."

In half an hour the meal was before Mr. Dunstan and the boys. It tasted rarely good after their hasty snatches of food aboard the boat. When it was over Mr. Dunstan took a chair on the porch, lighted a cigar and said:

"I'm going to take it easy for a while. Would you like to look about the grounds?"

Tom and his chum strolled about. They found it a delightful country place, covering some forty acres. There was a large stable, a carriage house and a garage which contained a big touring car. There were greenhouses, a poultry place and a small power house that supplied electric light to the buildings and grounds.

"It looks like the place of a man who has enough money, but who doesn't care about making a big splurge," commented Joe.

"It also looks like the place of an easy-going man," replied Halstead. "I wonder how a man like Mr. Dunstan came to get the motor-boat craze?"

"Oh, I imagine he likes to live out on this beautiful old island, and merely keeps the boat as a means of reaching business," suggested Dawson.

After an hour or more they returned to the house to find Mr. Dunstan placidly asleep in the same porch chair. So the boys helped themselves to seats, kept quiet and waited. They were still in doubt as to whether their employer wanted to use the boat later in the day. Theirs was a long wait, but at last Mr. Dunstan awoke, glanced at his watch and looked at the boys.

"Becoming bored?" he smiled.

"Oh, no," Tom assured him, "but I've had hard work to keep from falling sound asleep."

"Have you seen Master Ted lately?"

"Not since we first met him down by the pier."

"That's a youngster with quite a picturesque future ahead of him, I imagine," continued Mr. Dunstan. "I call him the luckiest boy alive. Perhaps he is not quite that, but he is going to be a very rich man if he follows a certain career."

"It must be an Army career, then," hinted Halstead.

"It is, just that. And I suppose I might as well tell you the story, if it would interest you any. A lot of people know the story now, so there's no harm in repeating it."

Their host paused to light a cigar before he resumed:

"Ours used to be a good deal of a military family. In fact, every generation supplied two or three good soldiers. There were five Dunstons, all officers, serving in the War of the Revolution. There were four in the War of 1812, two in the War with Mexico and two in the Civil War. We gradually fell off a bit, you see, in the numbers we supplied to the Army. The two who served in the Civil War were uncles of mine. My father didn't go – wasn't physically fit. There were three of us brothers, Gregory, Aaron and myself. Both were older than I. Aaron would have made a fine soldier, but he was always weakly. The fact that he couldn't wear the uniform almost broke his heart. Yet Aaron had one fine talent. He knew how to make money almost without trying. In fact, he died a very rich man.

"Greg, on the other hand, was what I expect you would call the black sheep of the family. He went to Honduras years ago. He's a planter, doing fairly well there, I suppose. He's pretty wild, just as he used to be. He's always getting mixed up in the many revolutions that they have down in that little republic of Honduras. One of these days I'm afraid he'll be shot by a file of government soldiers for being mixed up in some new revolutionary plot.

"My brother Aaron never married. Greg has two daughters, but no sons. Ted is my only son and Aaron just worshiped the lad as the last of the race. Aaron wanted Ted to become a soldier and keep the family in the Army. The youngster was willing enough, but I didn't wholly fancy it. However, my brother Aaron died a little while ago and I found he had fixed the matter so that Ted will have to be a soldier."

"How could your brother do that?" asked Tom.

“Why, you see, under the will, brother Gregis let off with one hundred thousand dollars and I get the same. But there’s a proviso in the will that if, within ninety days from Aaron’s death, Ted appears in probate court with me or other guardian, and there both Ted and myself promise that he shall be reared for the United States Army, then half a million dollars is to be paid over to myself or other guardian, in trust for the boy. The income from that half million is to be used to rear and educate him. But Ted, as a part of his promise, must make every effort to get himself appointed a cadet at West Point.”

“Some other boy might get the cadetship away from him,” suggested Joe Dawson.

“In case Ted simply can’t win a West Point cadetship,” replied Mr. Dunstan, “then, at the age of twenty-one, his promise will oblige him to enlist in the Army as a private soldier and do all in his power to win an officer’s commission from the ranks.”

“Even then, there’s a chance to fail,” hinted Tom.

“If the lad fails absolutely to get a commission in the Army,” responded Mr. Dunstan, “he will lose a lot of money – that’s all. There is another fund, amounting to two and a half million dollars, that is to be kept at interest until the young man is thirty. By that time the money, through compound interest, will be much more than doubled. On Ted’s thirtieth birthday all that huge sum of money is to be turned over to him if he has won, somehow, a commission as an officer of the Army. If he has tried, but failed, then the money is to be devoted to various public purposes.

“But if Ted fails to go into probate court on time, with myself or other guardian, and have the promise made a matter of record, then he loses everything. In that case I get the same hundred thousand dollars as otherwise, but Greg, instead of receiving only a hundred thousand is to get a cool million dollars.”

“Isn’t your brother Gregory likely to contest such a will?” asked Tom thoughtfully.

“The will provides that, if he does contest, he shall lose even his hundred thousand dollars,” Mr. Dunstan replied. “I have had great lawyers go all over the will, but they can’t find a single flaw through which it can be broken. You see, the will is right in line with what lawyers call ‘public policy.’ It’s altogether to the public interest to have the boys of our best old families, as of the best new ones, brought up with the idea that, they’re to give their lives to the service of their country. So the will is bound to stand against any contest, and if Greg or myself tried to break it we’d only cheat ourselves out of goodly sums of money.”

“Then Master Ted, of course,” pursued Tom, “has been or is going before the probate court to have the promise recorded.”

“To-day is Tuesday,” answered Mr. Dunstan. “The ninety days are up next Monday. On that day there will be a short session of probate court and Ted and I are going to be on hand.”

“Is this the first time probate court has been in session since the will was read, sir?” asked Halstead.

“Oh, no,” replied their employer in his most easy-going tone. “But there was no hurry and I wanted to give the lawyers plenty of time to consider the matter. Next Monday, being within the required ninety days, will do as well as any other time.”

“Well, of all the easy-going men!” gasped Tom inwardly. “To think, with such a big fortune at stake, of dilly-dallying until the very last day of all!”

“So, you see, Ted really *is* a very lucky boy,” finished Mr. Dunstan.

“I should say he is!” breathed Halstead, his face flushing at the thought. *He* would have been happy over a West Point cadetship without any enormous reward.

“The luckiest boy I ever heard of!” vented Joe, his nerves a-thrill over this story of one of Fortune’s greatest favorites. “No wonder your son, sir, is so eager about being a soldier.”

“Is your brother Gregory in this country now?” asked Tom slowly.

“Not to the best of my knowledge,” almost drawled their employer. “The last I heard of him he was still on his plantation in Honduras, probably hatching more revolutionary plots and giving the government a good excuse for sending its soldiers to shoot him one of these days. But I *do* know that,

for a while, Greg had American lawyers hard at work trying to find some way to smash Aaron's will. They gave it up, though, and so did Greg, after hearing from me that Master Ted was wild to follow a soldier's career."

Both boys were silent for some time. Yet, if they did no talking, their thoughts very nearly ran riot. To them it seemed that Ted Dunstan's lot in life lay in all the bright places of glory and fortune. How they would have relished such a grand chance!

"By the way," said Mr. Dunstan, rising slowly and stretching, "I haven't seen the youngster in hours. I think I'll locate him and bring him around here."

He went into the house. Within the next ten minutes two of the men servants left the house, running hurriedly out of sight in different directions. At the end of twenty minutes Mr. Dunstan himself appeared, looking actually worried.

"We can't seem to find Ted anywhere," he confessed uneasily. "The young man hasn't been seen since he stabled his pony at half-past twelve. I thought he would lunch with Mrs. Dunstan; she thought he was lunching with us. We've sent all about the grounds, we've telephoned the neighbors and the town, and all without avail. The pony is in the stable and the young man seems to have disappeared."

"Disappeared?" repeated Tom Halstead, springing to his feet, electrified by the news. "Don't you think it more likely, sir, he's been *helped* to disappear?"

"You think he may have been spirited away?" demanded Mr. Dunstan. "But why?"

"Haven't you yourself told us, sir, that it would be worth some one's trouble, to the extent of nine hundred thousand dollars, to have the boy vanish?" asked Tom breathlessly.

"You suspect my brother?"

"Pardon me, sir, for forgetting that Gregory Dunstan is your brother," Tom went on whitening. "Yet that talk about disabling the 'Meteor'! The man who looked like a Spaniard – but the people of Honduras are of Spanish descent. Why should anyone want to disable the 'Meteor,' unless to stop a pursuit by water? You yourself have told us that your brother has a weakness for mixing up in revolutions down in Honduras."

All this Halstead had shot out jerkily, thinking even faster than he spoke.

"But at this very moment Greg is down in Honduras," objected Mr. Dunstan.

"Even if he is, wouldn't friends of his, who may want funds for a new revolution, see how easy it was to get the money through getting Ted out of the way?" asked Tom quickly. "Grant that your brother is wholly innocent of any plot about your son. Wouldn't supposed friends of his perhaps be willing to spirit the boy away, knowing that if the big money prize went to your brother, Gregory Dunstan could afterwards be persuaded to throw his fortune into some new revolutionary cause?"

"Yes, yes, it's all possible – horribly possible," admitted Mr. Dunstan, covering his face with his hands. "And Greg, who is a citizen of Honduras now, has even had aspirations in the way of becoming president of Honduras. Halstead, I will admit that I had even thought of the possibility of some just such attempt as this, and yet in broad daylight I dismissed it all as idle dreaming. And now Ted's gone – heaven only knows what has become of him!"

"Of course," put in Joe coolly, "it may turn out that the youngster just went fishing. He may walk in any moment for his supper."

"But he went without his lunch," retorted Mr. Dunstan. "That was wholly unlike Ted."

"The 'Meteor' may be disabled now," broke in Tom. "If she isn't, won't it be more than well worth while to get the craft out and go scouting through these waters?"

"Yes, yes!" cried Mr. Dunstan. "Come on, boys."

As they raced down through the grounds they espied the coachman returning.

"Come along, Michael!" shouted Mr. Dunstan. Then, to the boys he explained:

"If the 'Meteor' is fit to go out, Michael can go along with you. If there's any fighting he's a heavy-fisted, bull-necked fellow who'd face a regiment of thieves."

Joe had the key of the engine-room hatchway out in his hand before they reached the pier. In a jiffy he had the sliding door unlocked, almost leaping down into the engine room. With swift hands he set the engine in motion.

"All right here," he reported, while Bouncer, just liberated, frisked about his master's legs and then whined.

"Keep the bulldog aboard, too, Michael," called Mr. Dunstan, as he stepped ashore. "Start at once, Captain Halstead. Go as far and wide as you can and hail any craft you think may have news. Michael, I rely upon you to use your fists if there's need."

"If there's the chance!" grinned the Irishman readily.

"I'll run back to the house and get in touch with the police," Mr. Dunstan shouted back over his shoulder.

Tom sprinted aft along the pier, throwing the stern-line aboard. He leaped aboard forward with the bowline, not stopping then to coil it.

Not even calling to Joe, whose head was barely six feet away, young Captain Tom Halstead gave the bridge bellpull a single jerk. As the response sounded in the engine room alert Joe gave the engine slow speed ahead. Tom threw the wheel over and the fine boat glided out from her berth.

Two bells! Full speed ahead! The "Meteor" forged forward, gaining headway every moment. The hunt for missing Ted Dunstan was started in earnest.

CHAPTER IV – SIGHTING THE “PIRATE”

“How much speed do you want for this trip?” asked Joe, poking his head up through the hatchway as soon as the “Meteor” was running smoothly northward.

“On a hunt like this I think Mr. Dunstan will want us to burn gasoline,” Tom answered. “Give her about all the speed she can make.”

“That means twenty-five miles – or more?” insisted Dawson.

“Twenty-five will be close enough to going fast,” Tom replied.

Almost immediately the fast motor boat began to leap through the water. Though the boat minded her helm sensitively, Halstead rested both hands upon the wheel, watching intently ahead.

“Hey! What you trying to do? Swamp us, with your wake?” demanded an irate fisherman in a dory, as they raced past him.

But they had gone only close enough to enable big Michael, standing on the deck house, to peer at the inside of the dory.

Several other small craft without cabins they ran close to in the same manner, making sure that no stolen boy was on any of them.

Up near Great Point they encountered a cabin sloop. Michael, however, recognized a clergyman friend as one of this party, so Halstead passed them with only a friendly toot from the auto whistle.

Then down around the east coast of Nantucket they sped, further out to sea now, since in shore no craft were observed. They kept on until the south coast, too, had been passed, but there was no sign to gladden their eyes nor arouse their suspicions. Next along the south shore of the island the “Meteor” raced, and on out to Muskeget Island. From this point they had only to round the latter island and steer straight back for the inlet where Mr. Dunstan’s pier lay.

“Sure, I don’t like to go back stumped like this,” growled Michael.

“No more do I,” rejoined Tom. “Say, we’ve got daylight enough; I’m going to retrace our whole course and keep in closer to shore.”

Joe, who for some time had been on deck, nodded his approval. Cutting a wide sweep, Tom headed back, going now within a quarter of a mile of the shore.

“It begins to look,” hinted Joe, “as though whoever is leading the young Dunstan heir astray hasn’t taken him off the island of Nantucket at all.”

“There are plenty of hiding places on Nantucket, aren’t there?” inquired Tom, turning to the big coachman.

“Plenty,” nodded Michael, “if the rascals knew their way about the old island. But, by the same token, the rascals would be in plenty of danger of being found by the constables.”

“Of course Mr. Dunstan is having the local officers search,” pondered Tom aloud. “He said he would. He can telegraph the mainland from the island, too, can’t he, Michael?”

“Sure,” nodded the coachman.

“Then Mr. Dunstan must have waked up some pretty big searching parties by this time, both on the island and on the mainland,” Halstead concluded. “But see here, Michael, why wouldn’t it be a good plan to put you ashore? You can telephone Mr. Dunstan and see if there’s any news.”

“And if there ain’t any,” suggested the Irishman, “I might as well be going home across the island on foot, and keeping me eyes open. I can ask questions as I go along, and maybe be the first of all to find out any real news.”

“That’ll be the best plan of any,” approved Halstead. “It begins to look more sure, every minute, that we’re not going to need your fine lot of muscle.”

At the lower end of the east coast of the island Tom remembered having seen a pier that would serve them for landing the Irishman. They made for that pier accordingly and Michael leaped ashore.

"I'll telephone and then come back with insight," the coachman called back to them, as he started. "If 'tis good news I'm hearing, I'll throw up me hat two or three times. If 'tis no news, I'll wave a hand."

The "Meteor" then fell off, but kept to her bearings while ten minutes passed. Then Michael appeared in sight from the shore. He waved one hand and signed to the boys to keep on their course.

"Too bad!" sighed Tom. "But it makes it more certain than ever now, doesn't it, Joe, that some real disaster has happened to young Ted Dunstan? It's past the lad's dinner time now. No healthy boy goes without either luncheon or dinner, unless there's a big reason for it."

"Unless Ted has merely gone to some friend's home and has forgotten to notify his parents," suggested Dawson.

"But Ted doesn't strike me as the boy who's likely to do that. He's a fine little fellow, and I don't believe he'd be guilty of being so inconsiderate as to leave home for hours without telling some one."

They had the "Meteor" under full headway now. Tom, with one hand on the wheel, kept a keen lookout. They had run along some miles when Halstead gave a sudden gasp, made a dive for the rack beside the wheel that held the binoculars and called sharply:

"Take the wheel, Joe!"

With that Tom Halstead bounded down into the engine room. Over at one of the open portholes he raised the marine glasses to his eyes.

"What's the matter?" called down Joe, filled with the liveliest curiosity.

"Matter enough!" came his chum's excited rejoinder. "Don't look when I tell you. Keep your eyes on your course ahead. But you saw that little pier over at port?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you noticed a man sitting there?"

"I did," Joe admitted.

"When I first saw him," Tom went on, showing his animated face at the hatchway, "I didn't think much about him. But the second time I looked I thought I saw something that brought back recollections. That was why I came down here for a near-sighted peep through the glasses. The fellow couldn't see me down here and so ought not to suspect that we have noticed him particularly."

"But who is he?" cried Joe eagerly.

"Oh, he's the right man, all right," Tom retorted perhaps vaguely. "He's got on either the same pair or another pair just like 'em."

"Pair? Of what?" demanded Joe.

"Trousers, of course, you dull old simpleton!" whipped out Halstead. "Joe, it's the same old pattern of brown, striped –"

"The Span –"

"The pirate, I call him," growled Halstead, stepping up on deck and replacing the binoculars in their rack without another look ashore. They were rapidly leaving astern the solitary one seated against the pier rail.

"Do you think –" began Joe, but Tom gave him no chance to finish.

"I don't think anything," broke in Halstead, alive with energy. "I am going to know – that's what." Tom took the wheel himself, swinging the craft around a point of land just ahead.

"Look back, Joe. This shuts us out from the sight of that striped pirate, doesn't it?"

"Yes," nodded Dawson.

Tom shut off the speed, adding:

"Stand ready, Joe, to use speed or wheel, and keep her about so-so. I'm going to lower the dingey into the water and row ashore. I'll rig a line to her stern, so you can haul her back. Don't bother to get the small boat up at the davits. Just make her fast astern. And then –"

“Wait here for you,” guessed Joe.

“No, as soon as you get the dingey made fast, put on headway and run the boat back to Mr. Dunstan’s pier. Report to him, telling him just what I’m doing and assure him I won’t be afraid to telephone if I learn anything worth while. I’ll get over to his place as soon as I can, later in the evening.”

Tom got the small boat into the water, left one end of a small rope in Joe’s hands and rowed somewhat more than a hundred feet to the beach. From there he waved his hand. Joe began to haul in on the line. Within thirty feet of the beach the woods began; Halstead was quickly lost to his chum’s sight.

Full darkness came on while Tom was still in the woods heading cautiously south. As he hastened along, making little or no noise, Halstead wondered what he would do with the man in case he discovered him to be really one of the pair who had sat in the seat ahead on the train.

“I suppose I’d better wait and make up my mind after I’m sure it *is* the same fellow,” Tom concluded.

The young skipper did not, at any time on this swift walk, move far from the shore line. At last he came to the edge of the woods, a very short distance from the pier he was seeking. There was still a man there, seated on the rail of the pier. There were some bushes, too, to aid in shielding the boy’s forward progress if he used care. Tom went down, almost flat, then crept forward, moving swiftly, silently, between bushes.

At last he was near enough to be sure of his man, trousers and all. It was the same man Halstead had seen on the train. The “pirate” was at this moment engaged in rolling a cigarette.

CHAPTER V – A JOKE ON THE ENEMY

The slight, swarthy stranger rolled his cigarette up nicely, moistening the edge of the paper, stuck the thing between his lips, lighted the tobacco and began to smoke in evident enjoyment.

“That’s my party, all right,” quivered Tom. “And now I’ve found him what on earth am I going to do with him?”

That was a new poser. Halstead had been so intent on identifying his suspect that, now he recognized him, he must figure out what was to be done.

“If the fellow is all right he ought to have no objections to going along with me and answering questions. If he won’t do that” – here Tom’s eyes began to flash – “I believe I’ll make him. This is a business that calls for stern measures. This fellow belongs to the crowd that must know all about Ted Dunstan’s disappearance.”

Yet, to look at him, one would hardly suspect the swarthy man leaning against the pier rail of being a conspirator. As he smoked he appeared to be wholly at peace with himself and with the world. He did not seem to have a care on earth.

As he still crouched behind a bush, watching the nearby fellow in the dark, an impulse of mischief came to Tom Halstead. He remembered that night prowling about the “Meteor” over at Wood’s Hole, and he remembered how Bouncer had frightened this same man.

“Gr-r-r-r!” sounded Tom suddenly from behind the bush. “Gr-r-r-r! Woof! Woof!”

It was a splendid imitation of the growl and bark of a bulldog. At the same instant Tom made a semi-spring through the bush.

The “pirate” uttered a wordless howl of fright. He lurched, attempted to recover himself and leap at the same instant, and —

Splash! There was another howl of terror as the man slipped over backward, then, head-first, struck the water at the side of the pier.

“Help! I drown!” came in a muffled voice, and a new note of terror sounded on the night.

Now drowning anyone was as far from Tom Halstead’s mind as could be. With an upward bound he sprinted out onto the pier, bending under the rail close to where the frightened one was making huge rings on the water in his struggle to keep up.

In his efforts the fellow reached one of the piles of the pier, hanging to it in mortal terror.

“Help, help, kind sir!” he pleaded hoarsely. “Not a stroke do I swim. Pull me out before I drown.”

Throwing himself upon the pier, Tom bent down with both hands.

“Here, catch hold,” he hailed. “You’re in no danger. I’ll pull you out all right.”

It was some moments before Tom could persuade his “pirate” to let go that frantic clutch at the pile. But at length Halstead drew his dripping suspect up onto the boards of the pier.

“Where is that terrible, that miser-r-rabledog!” panted the swarthy one, glaring at him.

“That’s all right,” Tom answered composedly. “There isn’t any dog.”

“But – but I heard him,” protested the other, still nervous, as he stared suspiciously around him. “The wr-r-retched animal sprang for me. His teeth almost grazed my leg.”

Such was the power of imagination – a fine tribute to Tom’s skill as a mimic.

“Aren’t you thinking of the other night, over at Wood’s Hole, when you tried to get aboard the ‘Meteor’ to wreck the engine?”

Halstead shot this question out with disconcerting suddenness. The young skipper looked straight, keenly, into the other’s eyes, standing so that he could prevent the stranger’s sudden bolt from the pier.

“I? What do you talk about?” demanded the foreigner, pretending astonishment.

“Oh, I know all about you,” nodded Tom. “You’re the party.”

“Be careful, boy! You insult me!” cried the other angrily.

“That’s all right, then,” Tom went on coolly. “Now maybe I’m going to insult you a little more. The trouble is, I need information, and you’re the best one to give it to me. Where’s Ted Dunstan?”

“I – I – you – ” stammered the foreigner. “What do I know about Ted Dunstan? No, no, no! You are wrong. I have not seen the boy – donot know him.”

“Yet you appear to know that he is a boy,” insisted Tom sternly. “Come, now, if you won’t talk with me you’d better walk along with me, and we’ll find some one you’ll be more willing to answer.”

“How? I walk with you? Boy, do not be a fool,” retorted the swarthy one angrily. “I shall not walk with you. I do not like your company.”

“I’m not sure that I like yours, either,” retorted the boy. “But there are times when I cannot afford to be particular. Come, why should you object to walking along with me? All I propose is that we find the nearest constable and that you answer his questions. The constable will decide whether to hold you or not.”

“Step aside,” commanded the swarthy man imperiously. Full of outraged dignity he attempted to brush past the young skipper. But Tom Halstead, both firm and cool, now that his mind was made up, took a grip on the fellow’s left arm.

“Take your hand off! Let me go!” screamed the fellow, his eyes ablaze with passion. “Out of my way, idiot, and take yourself off!”

As the swarthy one struggled to free himself Tom only tightened his grip, much as the bull pup would have done.

“Don’t be disagreeable,” urged Tom. “Come, my request is a very proper one. I’m only asking you to go before one of the officers of the law. No honest man can really object to that.”

“You – ” screamed the foreigner.

He shot his right hand suddenly into a jacket pocket. But Tom, watching every movement alertly, let go of the fellow’s left arm, making a bound and seizing his right arm with both strong hands. There was a fierce struggle, but Halstead’s muscles had been toughened by exercise and by many days of hard work at a steering wheel in rough weather. This slight man from another country was no match for the American boy.

Down they went to the flooring of the pier with a crash, but young Halstead was uppermost. In another twinkling he was bending the swarthy one’s right arm until that fellow was ready to sue for a truce.

Tom now held him helpless, kneeling on him.

“What were you trying to fish out of that jacket pocket?” demanded the young motor boat captain, thrusting his own hand in. He drew out something and held it up briefly – a clasp knife.

“A coward’s tool!” uttered Tom, his voice ringing scornfully. Then he threw the clasp knife far out so that it splashed in the water. “Why don’t you cultivate a man’s muscle and fight like a man, instead of toting around things like that? Come, get up on your feet.”

Bounding up, Halstead yanked the other upright. In a twinkling the swarthy man broke from him, sprinting off the pier.

“You haven’t learned to run right, either,” grinned Halstead, dashing after the “pirate” and gripping a hand in his collar.

That brought them facing each other again. How the swarthy one glared at his resolute young captor! They were about of a height, these two, and might have weighed about the same. But the man possessed nowhere near the strength of this sea-toughened boy.

“Now see here,” spoke Tom more pleasantly, “I’m doing what I think is right or I wouldn’t venture to be so rough. Walk along with me sensibly, until we can find out where a constable lives. I’ve got the best of you and you realize I can do it again. But I don’t want to be rough with you. It goes against the grain.”

The swarthy one’s only answer was to glare at the young skipper with a look full of hate.

Tom suddenly changed his tone.

"I know what you're thinking of, myman," he cried tauntingly. "You are just thinking to yourself what a fine time you'd have with me if you had me down in Honduras – where your friends do things in a different way!"

The taunt told, for the stranger's eyes gleamed with malice.

"Ah, in good Honduras!" he hissed. "Yes, if I had you there, and –"

He stopped as suddenly as he had begun.

"That's just what I wanted to know," mocked Halstead. "Honduras is your country, and now I know to a dot why you're interested in having Ted Dunstan vanish and stay vanished for awhile. Come along, now. We'll keep right on until we find that constable!"

Tom seized the stranger's right arm in earnest now. The other held back, as though he would resist, but suddenly changed his mind.

"You are somewhat the stronger – with hands," he said in an ugly tone. "So I shall go with you. But perhaps you will much regret what you are doing to-night."

"Oh, I hope not," Tom jeered cheerily. "At all events I'm doing the best I know how. And I'm glad you're not going to make any fuss. I hate to be cranky with anyone."

The place to which the pier belonged looked, from what Tom had been able to see of it, like a run-down coast farm. Away up on a hill to the left were a dilapidated old farm house and other buildings. Halstead feared, though, that the stranger might have friends up at that house and so decided to keep on through the woods at the right.

Before long they struck a fairly well defined road through the forest, a road that looked as though it might lead to somewhere in particular.

"We'll keep right on along this road, if you don't mind," said the boy. He kept now only a fair hold of the other's wrist. As the swarthy one offered no opposition, they made passably good speed over the road. But Tom, though he looked unconcerned, was wholly on the alert for any sudden move on the part of his captive.

"If I find I'm wholly in the wrong," said Tom pleasantly, after they had gone at least a quarter of a mile in this fashion, "there isn't anyone in the whole United States who'd be more glad to make a complete apology."

"But that will not save you from trouble," breathed the swarthy one angrily. "The laws of your country do not allow such high-handed deeds as you have been guilty of."

"Down in Honduras the laws are a bit different, aren't they?" asked Halstead very pleasantly.

"Down in Honduras, they –"

The swarthy one checked himself suddenly.

"That is the second time you have asked me about Honduras," he went on presently. "Why do you say so much about Honduras?"

"I've trapped you into admitting that it's your country," laughed Halstead. "And that tells me, too, why you are so interested in having Ted Dunstan kept out of sight for the next few days."

"What's all this talk about Honduras?" demanded a gruff voice. The challenge made both jump. A stocky figure stepped alertly out from behind a tree. It was the solidly built, florid-faced man – the other of the pair Tom had first seen in the seat ahead.

"Oh, you, you, you!" cried the swarthy one delightedly, as he wrenched his captive wrist free from Halstead's weakening clutch. "You have appeared in time, my friend!"

"So?" roared the florid-faced one, taking a business-like grip of Tom Halstead's collar. "What was this young cub doing?"

"Doing?" cried the swarthy one, dancing in his wrath, his eyes gleaming like coals. "He had the impudence, this boy, to say he would take me to a constable. He insists that I know all about one Ted Dunstan."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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