

Chapman Allen

**Fenn Masterson's Discovery: or,
The Darewell Chums on
a Cruise**



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CHAPTER I

AN AUTOMOBILE ACCIDENT

“Hello!” exclaimed Fenn Masterson, as he opened the front door of his home, in response to a ring, and admitted his chum, Bart Keene. “Glad to see you, Bart. Come on in.”

“What’s the matter with you?” demanded Bart, throwing a strap full of books into a corner of the hall, as if he cared very little for the volumes. “Why weren’t you at school to-day, Stumpy?”

“Oh, I was a little hoarse this morning – ”

“What are you now; a mule?” inquired Bart.

“No – Oh, hang it, you know what I mean – ”

“Sure!” interrupted Bart. “You slept in a stable last night, and, when you woke up you were a little horse. I know.”

“I had a little cold this morning,” went on Fenn. “Mother made me stay home. Thought I was going into consumption, I guess. I’m all right now.”

“Gee, I wish my mother had made me stay home to-day,” proceeded Bart. “The algebra lesson was fierce. We all slumped.”

“What! You don’t mean to say the professor floored Frank Roscoe?” and Fenn looked much surprised.

“Yes, and Ned Wilding, too. I tell you, Stumpy, it was a good thing you slept in that barn and became a little horse, or you’d have gone down to defeat on that problem about multiplying sixteen x, y, z’s by the square root of the difference between – ”

“Pooh! That’s easy,” declared Fenn. “I remember it.”

“Easy? Here, let’s see you do it!” exclaimed Bart, and he grabbed the bundle of books and proceeded to take out the algebra.

“Never mind – there’s no hurry about it. I’ll show you later,” spoke Fenn. “Besides, I’ve got to take my cough medicine now. Come on up to my room.”

“Cough medicine?” repeated Bart, with a reproachful look at his chum.

“Yes, cough medicine,” answered Stumpy, seeing that his visitor rather doubted him. “Mom made me take it. It’s awful nasty stuff, full of tar and horehound and pine – ugh! I hate it.”

“Moral, don’t try to fool your mother and pretend you have a sore throat, when you don’t want to go to school for an algebra exam.,” said Bart solemnly.

“No, honest, I did have a sore throat this morning,” declared Fenn. “It’s all better now. I guess I don’t have to take that medicine. But come on up to my room. I’ve just got a fine collection of minerals.”

“Minerals?”

“Yes, I’m going to collect them now. I sent for a small case, of various kinds, and I’m going to add to it. There are lots of minerals in this section of the state.”

“Let’s see, the last thing you were collecting was Indian arrow heads,” said Bart, in musing tones; “before that it was postage stamps, and before that, postmarks. Then, once, I remember, it was jackknives, and before that – ”

“Oh, let up!” begged Fenn. “Are any of the other fellows coming over?”

“Before that it was butterflies,” went on Bart relentlessly. “I guess your mineral collecting craze will last about as long as any of the others, Stumpy.”

“Well, all the others were too much trouble,” declared Fenn, trying to justify himself. “It’s no fun to be sticking stamps and postmarks in a book, and I had to chase all over the country after butterflies.”

“To say nothing of getting on bad terms with half the boys in the school for trading them poor knives for good ones, when you had that craze,” remarked Bart.

“Oh, I intend to make a fine collection of minerals,” declared Fenn. “I’ll not get tired of that. You see minerals are easy to get. All you have to do is to pick up stones as you walk along. You put them in your pockets and, when you get home, you look in the catalog, see what kind they are, so as to label ’em, and put ’em in one of the little numbered squares of the cabinet. Why, collecting minerals is fun. Besides, it’s valuable information. I might discover – ”

“Sure, of course. Oh, yes – you might discover a gold mine or a hole filled with diamonds!” interrupted Bart. “Oh, Stumpy, I’m afraid you’re a hopeless case.”

“Wait until you see my minerals,” asserted the stout youth, as he led the way up to his room. “When are the other fellows coming over?”

“Oh, Ned’ll be along right away. Frank Roscoe said he had to go on an errand for his father. They both are anxious to see what sort of a game you worked so’s to stay home to-day. They might want to try it themselves.”

The two chums were soon busy inspecting the case of stones which Fenn had bought. There were small samples of ore, spar, crystals and various queer rocks.

“There’s a piece of stone I found out near the river,” said Fenn, pointing to a fragment of a bright red color. “Maybe it’s a new kind of ruby. I’m going to show it to a jeweler.”

“It’s red glass!” declared Bart.

“It is not!”

“I tell you it is! Look, it’s a piece of a bottle. You can see where it curved for the bottom,” and he pointed it out to Fenn.

“I guess you’re right,” admitted the collector, as he tossed the red object away. “Never mind, I’ll get some good specimens yet. Hello, there’s Ned’s whistle,” and he looked out of the window, which, as it was late in June, was wide open. “Come on up, Ned!” he called, “Bart’s here!”

“Coming!” cried Ned. “Lower the drawbridge and raise the portcullis! Lord Mount Saint Dennis Morency Caldwell de Nois approaches!”

“Yes, I guess it is ‘De Noise’ all right,” murmured Bart. “Since he’s been studying French history he’s been getting off such nonsense as that every chance he has.”

“Greeting, fair and noble sirs!” cried Ned Wilding, reaching the door of Fenn’s room, for, like the other chums, he had the run of the house, “greeting, most noble lords of the high justice, the middle and the low. I give thee greeting!”

“And I give thee that!” interrupted Bart, putting out his foot, and, with a sly motion, upsetting Ned as he was making a low, exaggerated bow.

“First down! Ten yards to gain!” he cried good-naturedly, as he arose, for Ned was a lively, quick-witted youth, full of fun, and never serious for more than a minute at a time.

“I hope that jarred some of the foolishness out of you,” observed Bart.

Suddenly a head was poked in the open window, and a voice exclaimed:

“Gentlemen, allow me to introduce myself. I am the original and only genuine second-story burglar!”

“Frank Roscoe!” exclaimed Fenn. “How did you get there?”

“Climbed up over the porch,” replied the newcomer. “I rang the bell until I was tired, and nobody answered.”

“That’s so, I forgot. Mother’s out this afternoon and there’s no one down stairs. But why didn’t you do as Ned did, walk in? The door’s not locked. I didn’t hear you ring.”

“I prefer this method of stealing into houses,” replied Frank, a tall dark youth, as he bounded from the window sill into the room. “It’s more romantic. Besides I needed exercise, and it was easy climbing up the porch pillar.”

“Don’t give us any romance,” begged Bart.

“No, don’t,” advised Ned, rubbing his thigh where he had come down rather heavily. “The days of romance are dead.”

“That’s not the only thing that’s dead in this town,” put in Fenn. “Things are getting rather dull. We need some excitement to keep us awake.”

The two newcomers soon learned the reason for Fenn’s absence from school that day. They examined his cabinet of minerals and made more or less sarcastic comments about his new fad.

“Yes,” went on Bart, after a pause. “I wish we could have some fun, as we did when we were off camping in the woods, last summer.”

“And rescued Frank’s father from that sanitarium,” put in Ned.

“Well, we had a pretty lively time when you slipped off to New York, and the lodging-house keeper held you a prisoner, Ned,” said Bart. “You had some romance then.”

“Not the right kind,” declared Ned. “I’d like some more fun such as we had when the King of Papricka tried to fool us.”

“Sure! When we got carried away in the captive balloon,” added Frank. “That was a time!”

“And do you remember when we fastened the ladder on the donkey’s back, the night we were going to rescue Frank’s father,” suggested Fenn? “How he ran away in the woods?”

“Yes, and how it rained,” put in Ned. “Gee, that was fierce!”

“But we had a good time,” remarked Frank. “Father can never forget how much you boys did for him.”

“It wasn’t anything!” exclaimed Ned. “Say, do you remember when they thought we blew up the school with dynamite?”

“Do I? I should guess yes,” replied Ned.

“Yes, and how Ned thought he was going to become a millionaire with that investment which made him a fugitive!” spoke Bart. “Oh, yes, we had good times then. But we don’t seem to be having them any more. It’s nothing but measly old algebra exams. that no fellow can pass. I wish – ”

But what Bart wished he never told, for, at that instant there came from the street outside a series of sharp explosions, that sounded like a Gatling gun in full operation.

“What’s that?” cried Fenn.

“It’s an automobile!” replied Frank, who was nearest the window. “It’s running away, too, from the looks of it. They’ve opened the muffler and are trying to reverse I guess! Something’s wrong! There’s going to be an accident!”

The other boys crowded up back of Frank to see what was going on. The street in front of Fenn’s house sloped sharply down to a cliff at the end of the thoroughfare. Across the highway was a stout fence, designed to prevent any one from driving over the cliff, which was quite high. Toward this fence a big touring car, which, as the boys could see, contained an elderly gentleman and a young lady, was rushing at furious speed.

“Stop! Stop!” cried Fenn in desperation, thinking the man in the car did not know or realize his danger. “The street ends at the fence! You’ll go over the cliff!”

As the auto whizzed past the house the girl in it gave one glance at Fenn. The youth thought her the most beautiful person he had ever seen, though there was a look of terror in her eyes.

“He can’t stop!” shouted Bart. “Something’s wrong with the machine!”

Indeed this seemed to be true, for the man at the steering wheel was frantically pulling on various levers and stamping, with his feet, on some pedals in front of him.

The young woman in the car half arose in her seat. The man, holding the wheel with one hand, held her back with the other. She gave a startled cry and, a moment later the auto had crashed through the fence, as though it was made of paper, and the front wheels disappeared over the edge of the cliff.

“Come on!” cried Bart. “We must go to their help!”

“I’m afraid they’re dead,” spoke Frank solemnly, as he quickly followed his chums from Fenn’s house.

CHAPTER II

A MYSTERIOUS CAVE

Running at top speed the four boys hastened down the street toward where the automobile accident had occurred. Several other persons followed them.

“They’ve gone over the cliff!” cried Fenn.

“No, the rear wheels are caught on the edge!” declared Ned. “You can just see the back part of the car!”

“But the man and young lady must be pitched out! It hangs nearly straight up and down!” said Frank.

“I wonder if they could possibly be alive?” asked Fenn, as he hurried along, a little in the rear of the others, for, because of his stoutness, he was not a good runner. “I’ll never forget how she looked up to me, as if she wanted me to save her.”

By this time the chums had reached the broken fence that had proved so ineffectual a barrier to the cliff. They leaped over the shattered boards, accompanied by a number of men and boys.

“Gee! They’re goners!” exclaimed a boy named Sandy Merton, peering over the edge of the cliff. “It’s a hundred feet to the bottom!”

“I wonder what caught the auto?” said Bart. “Why didn’t it fall?”

“A wire caught it,” answered Fenn. “Look,” and he showed his chums where several heavy strands of wire, which had been strung on the fence to further brace it, had become entangled in the wheels of the auto as they crashed through. The wire was twisted around some posts and, with the broken boards from the barrier, had served to hold the car from going over the cliff. There it hung, by the rear wheels only, a most precarious position, for, every moment, it was in danger of toppling over.

“But where are the people?” asked Frank, as he peered over the edge of the cliff. “I can’t see them?”

“They’re all in pieces,” declared a gloomy looking man. “They’re broken to bits from the fall.”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Bart. “Here, let me have a look!”

Lying flat on his face he peered over the edge of the precipice. Then he uttered a cry.

“I can see them!” he shouted. “They’ve landed on the ledge, not ten feet down. They’re under some bushes!”

“Get some ropes, quick!” cried Fenn. “We’ll haul ’em up before the auto falls on ’em!”

“No danger of that,” declared Bart. “They’re off to one side. I’m afraid they’re badly hurt, though.”

“Somebody go for a doctor!” urged Fenn.

“I will,” volunteered Jim Nelson, who had the reputation of being the laziest boy in the town of Darewell. Perhaps he was afraid of being asked to help haul the auto back from the perilous position.

“Telephone for ’em!” called Frank, knowing Jim’s usual slowness, and realizing that the lazy youth would welcome this method of summoning the medical men.

“Tell ’em to come to my house,” supplemented Fenn. “We will carry the man and girl there.”

“Good idea,” commented Frank. “You’ve got more room than any of these houses near here,” for, in the immediate vicinity of the cliff there were only small cottages, and some of them were unoccupied.

“But how are we going to get ’em up?” asked Fenn.

By this time a large crowd had gathered. Some had brought ropes, and there were all sorts of suggestions as to how the rescue should be effected.

“I’ll get them; or at least I’ll go down and put a rope around them, so they can be hauled up,” suddenly declared Frank. “I know how to reach that ledge. There’s not much danger. Where’s a rope?”

Several were soon produced, some neighboring clothes lines being confiscated. It seemed that all the crowd needed was some one to give orders. In a few minutes, with a rope tied around his waist Frank was being lowered over the cliff. Willing hands let him down until he was on the ledge. Then, having fastened the rope about the form of the unconscious young woman, padding it with his coat, so the strands would not cut her, he gave the signal to haul up. There was a cheer as the body was laid gently down on the grass at the top of the cliff, and some one called:

“She isn’t dead! She’s breathing!”

It was harder work for Frank to adjust the rope about the man’s body, as he was very heavy, but the lad accomplished it, and the crowd above hauled the unfortunate automobilist up. Then Frank was raised from the ledge.

“Carry ’em to my house,” cried Fenn. “The doctors will soon be there if Jim hasn’t forgotten to telephone for ’em.”

On stretchers, improvised from pieces of the fence, the bodies, of which that of the girl alone seemed to contain life, were carried to Fenn’s house. The crowd followed but, at the door a constable named Darby, at Fenn’s orders, refused admittance to all save the three chums, and those who had borne the stretchers.

“The doctors will need room to work,” declared Fenn, when there were murmurs at what was his right, to exclude the mob from his home. “I’m glad mother’s out,” he said. “This would scare her into a fit.”

“The doctors are coming,” said Jim, who came into the house a moment later, after the man and young woman had been laid on beds where Fenn directed. “I telephoned to all in Darewell, but only three were home.”

“That ought to be enough,” declared Fenn. “I hope they can save their lives. There doesn’t seem to be any evidences of injuries.”

The medical men, under the direction of Dr. Fanwood, the eldest of the practitioners, made hasty examinations of the two victims of the accident.

“I think we’ll have to operate on the man,” declared Dr. Fanwood. “We’ll need several things from my office. Who can go for them?” and he looked at Fenn, whom he had doctored ever since Fenn was a baby, on the few occasions when that healthy youth needed medicine.

“We’ll go!” offered Frank, Bart and Ned at once.

“I guess we can use all three of you,” decided Dr. Fanwood. “Dr. Kyte and Dr. Feldon will need things from their offices. Now I tell you what to do, just take our horses and carriages, which are tied out in front, and drive after the things. That will be quicker.”

Then, the three physicians having given the chums a list of what they needed, proceeded to get ready for the operation. The girl was in a semiconscious condition, but a hasty examination showed that the worst she was suffering from was shock. She could be left alone for a time.

While the medical men were preparing to attend to the man, Constable Darby kept guard in front of the house, before which it seemed as if half the population of Darewell was gathered. Jim Nelson was sitting in the front hall, ready to go on an errand if needed, but, on the whole, rather hoping that he would not be required to run. The hasty telephoning had been quite a strain on his lazy nature. Fenn, at the suggestion of Dr. Fanwood, remained in the room where the young lady was, to be at hand in case she recovered consciousness.

“My, things have happened suddenly,” thought Fenn, as he looked at the silent form on the bed. “We were just wishing for something like our old adventures again. This seems to promise a good beginning.”

The four boys, who, because of their intimate association, and from the fact that they lived in the town of that name, were known as “The Darewell Chums,” had been through some lively times together, as has been related in the previous books of this series. In the first volume called “The Heroes of the School,” I related how the four took part in a peculiar mystery, and solved it to their

satisfaction, though, at one time, when they went up in a balloon, and were captured by the enemy, it looked rather dubious for them. The boys were wide-awake lads, full of energy and resources, and they managed to free themselves from a difficult situation.

Their home town was on the Still River, which flowed into Lake Erie, and Darewell was a few miles from that great body of water, on which they often enjoyed themselves rowing or sailing.

In the second volume of the series, “Ned Wilding’s Disappearance,” there was set down the story of what happened to Ned when he tried to do a little financial business on his own account. He went to New York, and there by some curious mis-chances, he had to hide, almost as if he had committed a crime. But, by the aid of his chums, and a poor lad whom they once befriended, Ned was rescued.

In the third volume, “Frank Roscoe’s Secret,” I told of a queer case of persecution. Frank and his chums went camping and Frank’s manner, which had been not only strange but sometimes unaccountable, became still more curious and bewildering, for one of his good nature. His chums did not know what to make of him, and there was considerable worry on their part.

But it turned out that Frank was the one who had to worry, because of the danger to his father, whom he had always supposed was dead, but who turned out to be alive, though in captivity. How the boys discovered Frank’s secret, and how they helped him to rescue his father was related in the book together with various other happenings during their encampment in the woods.

And now the Darewell Chums seemed to be in for another series of adventures, if Fenn was any judge. The young woman on the bed tossed and turned in the fever of a delirium. The lad became rather frightened, and was going to call one of the doctors, though he knew they must be very busy preparing for the operation.

Suddenly the young woman sat up straight in bed. Her light jacket, which had not been removed, bore many dirt-stains, where she had fallen upon the ledge. She struggled to get it off. Fenn started to help her, thinking one of her arms might be broken. Suddenly she exclaimed:

“The cave! Oh, the cave! It was hidden but I can see it now! And the men! See, there are the men, digging, digging, digging! I must stop them! They will take all – ”

She fell back upon the pillows.

“What cave? Where is it? Can I help you?” asked Fenn eagerly.

“The cave! They are in it!” exclaimed the young woman again. “The mysterious cave! If I could only find it! I must find it – my father – his wealth – search for the cave – I – he – ”

“Yes, yes,” spoke Fenn, advancing to the side of the bed. “Perhaps I can help you find it!”

He hardly knew what he was saying, so great had been the strain of the accident, and so strangely did the words of the young lady affect him.

She opened her eyes, which had been closed when she was talking. A look of consciousness came over her face.

“Was I speaking?” she asked in different tones than that she had used before. “Did I say anything? What has happened? Where am I? Where is my father?”

“The automobile went over a cliff,” explained Fenn. “You were hurt, and so was your father, but not badly, I hope. He is here. The doctors are with him.”

“I must – Oh, let me go to him,” and she arose from the bed. “What did I say just now?” she demanded suddenly. “I know I was unconscious, but I was saying something.”

“It was about a cave,” replied Fenn.

“Oh!” she exclaimed in such a voice that Fenn was alarmed. “I was afraid so! Why did I do it? Forget it, please! Forget that I ever mentioned it! I don’t know – ”

She seemed about to say something more, but her face suddenly became pale, and she fell back on the pillows.

“Doctor!” cried Fenn, very much frightened.

“Ah, I’m just in time, I see,” remarked Dr. Kyte, coming into the room at that moment. “I’ll attend to her now, Fenn. She has only fainted.”

CHAPTER III

SAVING THE AUTO

Fenn's brain was in a whirl. The manner of the girl, her strange words, her sudden fright when he had sought to recall to her what she had said, and her reference to a mysterious cave, all served to give the lad much to think about. Coming as it did, on top of the automobile accident, it added to the excitement of the day. He was glad, when he got down stairs, to find that his three chums had returned with the things for which the physicians had sent them.

"Well, were you playing nurse?" asked Frank.

"Say," declared Fenn earnestly, "I certainly was up against it. I had a delirious patient, who was talking about caves and strange men."

"Tell us," suggested Bart, and Fenn related what the girl had said.

"That's nothing," declared Ned. "She was talking in her sleep."

"No, it was delirium."

"Well, that's the same thing," retorted Ned. "It doesn't mean anything. She was all worked up over the accident. Probably she looked ahead, saw the fence, and got scared half to death. Then, when the auto went over the cliff, and she and her father were spilled out, it might have looked as if she was falling into a cave. That's all."

"I don't believe it," declared Fenn determinedly. "I think there is something back of her talk. She was only partly delirious. Besides, she knew she had been talking about a cave, for she asked me to forget all about it. There's something in all this, and don't you forget it. Some day I'll find out what it is."

"You're a regular mystery solver, you are, Stumpy," declared Ned.

"Fenn! Fenn!" exclaimed an excited woman, coming into the dining room where the boys had gathered to talk. "What has happened? What is the matter? Are you hurt? Was there an accident? Why is Constable Darby in front of the house, keeping the crowd back?"

"There was an accident, mother," said Fenn, "and a man and a girl who were hurt have been brought here. I told them to fetch them in. I thought you wouldn't care."

"No, of course not. Poor things! I'm so sorry! Are they badly hurt?"

"I'm afraid the man is, but the girl seems to be getting better, except that she fainted awhile ago," replied Fenn, and he briefly related what had happened.

Just then Dr. Fanwood came into the room, to ask Fenn to heat some water, and he remarked:

"It is not so bad as we feared. The young lady is suffering from nothing but shock and some bruises. The man, her father, has a bad wound on the head, but nothing serious. They will both be all right in a few days. It was a narrow escape."

"Who are they, Doctor?" asked Mrs. Masterson.

"I have not been able to question either of them," replied the physician, "but, from papers which we found in the man's pocket I take him to be Robert Hayward, of Bayville, Wisconsin. The young woman is evidently his daughter, Ruth, though what they can be doing so far away from home, in an automobile, I do not know."

"Is he dangerously hurt?" asked Mrs. Masterson.

"Well, it would be dangerous to move him for a few days, as complications might set in. If he could stay here –"

"Of course he can," interrupted Fenn's mother. "He and his daughter, too. We have plenty of room."

"I am glad to hear you say so," replied the doctor. "They will get well more quickly if they are kept quiet. Now I must go back to my patient."

He took the hot water Fenn gave him and left the room. The four chums and Mrs. Masterson discussed the recent happenings, and the crowd outside, learning from the constable that there was no one dead, or likely to die, went off to look at the auto which still hung over the cliff.

Mrs. Masterson rather ridiculed Fenn's idea that the girl's talk had a bearing on some mysterious happenings, and she was of the same opinion as Ned, that it was merely the raving of delirium. But Fenn stoutly clung to his own idea.

"You'll see," he declared.

The doctors left presently, and Alice Keene, Bart's sister, who was something of a trained nurse, was installed to look after Mr. Hayward. Miss Hayward declared she was not ill enough to be in bed, and wanted to look after her father, but Mrs. Masterson insisted that the young woman must consider herself a patient for several days, and declared that she would take care of her.

"Come on, boys," suggested Fenn, when the excitement had somewhat calmed down. "Let's see if we can't save the auto."

"I'm afraid if we disturb it the least bit it will go over the cliff," said Ned. "It's hanging on by its teeth, so to speak."

"We'll try, anyhow," decided Bart. "I'd like to help haul it back. Maybe we'd get a ride in it, after Mr. Hayward gets well."

"That's all you care about it," taunted Frank with a laugh.

"No, but if we do save it, I guess you wouldn't refuse a ride in it," retorted Bart. "It isn't often you get the chance."

"That's so," agreed Fenn. "But come on. If we wait much longer the crowd will get around it and, maybe, loosen the wire that holds it."

The four chums hurried to the scene of the accident. They found that the weight of the big car had stretched the wires so that the machine hung farther than ever over the edge of the cliff.

"It's going to be a hard job to save that machine," declared Ned. "How are we going to do it?"

"Let me think a minute," spoke Bart, who was usually fertile in devising ways and means of doing things.

"What ye goin' to do?" demanded Constable Darby who, having found his post as guard at the house an empty honor, had assumed charge of the machine. "What you boys up to now? You'd better move away from here."

"We're going to rescue Mr. Hayward's auto for him," declared Fenn with more assurance than he felt. "He wants it hauled back," he added, which was true enough.

"Wa'al, ef he wants it, that's a different thing," replied the constable, who evidently recognized that Fenn had some rights in the matter, since the injured persons had been carried to the lad's house.

"I guess we've got ropes enough," spoke Bart. "The next thing is to get some pulleys and find something strong enough to stand the strain. I guess that big oak tree will do. Who knows where we can get some pulleys?"

"There are some at our house," said Fenn. "The painters left them there when they finished the job last week. I can get them."

"Good!" cried Bart. "You get 'em, and we'll get the ropes in shape."

When Fenn returned with the pulleys he found that his chums had taken several turns of one of the ropes about a tree, that was to stand the strain of hauling the auto back on firm ground. The pulleys were arranged so as to give more power to the hauling force, and then, the cables having been cautiously fastened to the back of the auto, Bart gave the word, and half a score of boys assisted the chums in heaving on the rope.

There was a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull altogether, but the auto never budged.

"Once more!" cried Bart.

"Hold on!" a voice urged, and the boys, and others in the crowd saw a telephone lineman approaching.

“That wire holds the wheels!” he explained, pointing to where the wire from the fence was entangled in the spokes. “You fellows hold on the rope and I’ll cut it for you!”

Drawing out a big pair of cutters he crawled under the rear of the auto, and, lying on his back, proceeded to sever the wire strands.

“Keep the rope taut!” urged Bart. “When the wire is cut there’ll be a heavy strain.”

The boys, and several men who had taken hold of the hempen cable, braced themselves. There was a snap, as the cutters went through the wire.

“Look out!” cried the lineman.

There was a creaking of the ropes. A sudden strain came on them, so powerful, that those holding the strands felt the hemp slipping through their fingers.

“She’s going over the cliff!” cried Bart. “Hold her, boys! Hold her!”

CHAPTER IV

PLANNING A CRUISE

Farther and farther over the cliff slid the heavy auto. The boys and men, holding the rope, were pulled slowly along, as is a losing team in a tug-of-war.

“Snub your rope, boys!” a voice suddenly called. “Snub her! That’s the only way to hold her back! Take a half hitch around that stump, and you’ll have her! She’s got a little too much way on for you! Snub her! Snub her, I say!”

Bart gave one glance at the man who had called these directions. He saw a short, squatty figure, wearing a dark blue cap, with some gold braid on it. One glance was enough to show that the man knew what he was talking about.

Bart let go his grip of the rope. The auto slipped a little faster then, for there were not so many hands holding it. But Bart knew what he was doing. He grabbed the free end of the rope and, following the directions of the newcomer, who aided him, he took a couple of turns about a big stump. This “snubbed” or slowed up the progress of the ponderous car, and a moment later it came to a stop.

“Now you’ve got her!” exclaimed the squatty man. “She’ll hold until you can get a couple of teams to haul her back. You can’t do it alone. Too much steam needed!”

“That’s where you’re right, Captain Wiggs!” remarked Constable Darby. “I was jest a goin’ t’ tell th’ boys that myself, but it’s better t’ have th’ advice come from a regular sea-farin’ person I s’pose.”

“I’m no sea-faring person,” replied the captain. “The Great Lakes are good enough for me, but those who cruise on them know a thing or two, even if they’re not of the salt water.”

“Your advice came just in time, Captain,” said Ned, for the boys knew the commander of the steamer *Modoc*, which was one of the Great Lakes fleet of freight carriers, and occasionally tied up at Darewell.

“I should say it did,” added Frank. “My arms are nearly pulled off.”

“I’ll go up the street and see if I can get a couple of men to bring their teams here and haul the auto up,” volunteered Fenn. “I guess Mr. Hayward will pay them.”

The others thought this suggestion a good one, and, in a short time Fenn returned with two men, who each drove two powerful horses.

The animals were hitched to the rope and, after a little pulling and hauling, under the direction of Captain Wiggs, who naturally took charge, the auto was hauled back to the street, not much damaged from the plunge over the cliff.

The crowd stood around for some time longer, looking at the touring car until Fenn had the men haul it to a barn near his house. The boys would have liked to have run it themselves, but, as they knew very little about cars, and as they were not sure of the condition of the machinery of this one, they decided the slower method of propulsion would be best.

In the morning there was a great improvement in the condition of Mr. Hayward and his daughter, Ruth. In fact Ruth could be up, Dr. Fanwood said, though she must not exert herself.

That afternoon after school the three chums wanted Fenn to go for a walk, but he made some excuse and hurried home. He found Miss Ruth, who looked prettier than ever he thought, sitting in the parlor in an easy chair.

“I don’t believe I thanked you and your friends for what you did for my father and myself,” she said, with a smile, as she held out her hand to Fenn.

“Oh, it isn’t necessary – I mean we didn’t do anything –” and poor Fenn became much confused. “I – er – that is we – saw the auto go over and we hurried out.”

“Oh, it was awful!” exclaimed Ruth, “I thought I was going to be killed! It was terrible!”

“It was a lucky escape,” murmured Fenn, sympathetically, wondering if the girl would make any reference to the cave she had raved about.

But she did not, and, after asking Fenn to bring his three chums, that she might thank them personally, she went back to her room.

“I wish I dared ask her about that mysterious cave,” thought Fenn. “There’s something back of it all, I’m sure. She acts as if she was afraid I’d find it out.”

A few days later Mr. Hayward was able to be up, and after that his recovery was rapid. He explained to Fenn, and the boy’s parents, that he was in the timber business, and had some mining interests. His daughter’s health was not of the best, he added, and, in the hope of improving it, he had taken her on a long auto trip. They intended to go to Maine, and camp in the woods, and were on their way there when the accident happened.

“I’m sure I can’t thank you for all you have done for me,” said Mr. Hayward, looking at Fenn and his parents. “Those other boys, too; my daughter tells me there were three of your chums who helped.”

“Oh, we didn’t do so much,” murmured Fenn. “Anybody would have done the same.”

“Yes, but you did it,” replied Mr. Hayward. “I appreciate it, I can tell you. I wish I could show you how much. Perhaps I can, some day. I’ll tell you what I wish you’d do; come out and see me. It’s not so very far to Bayville, and we can show you some great sights there, I tell you. You could make the trip along the Great Lakes, and they’re well worth seeing. My daughter and I would make you comfortable, I’m sure.”

“It’s very kind of you to give the boys that invitation,” said Mr. Masterson. “I’m afraid it’s too long a trip for them.”

“Oh, nonsense!” exclaimed Mr. Hayward. “They can go by boat all the way. It’s a fine trip.”

“I’m sure you would enjoy it,” said Ruth, smiling at Fenn.

“Then we’ll go!” exclaimed Stumpy, with more energy than the occasion seemed to call for.

“I wish you would,” added Mr. Hayward, and then he and Mr. Masterson began a discussion of business matters.

A little later that evening Fenn, going in the parlor for a book, saw Ruth sitting there in the darkness.

“What’s the matter?” he asked with ready sympathy. “Are you ill? Shall I call my mother?”

“No – no, I’m all right – I’ll be all right in a little while. Please don’t call any one,” and the girl seemed much alarmed. “I – I was just thinking of – ”

“Is there anything worrying you?” asked Fenn boldly, as the memory of what she had said in her delirium came back to him. “Can I do anything to help you? Is it about a cave?”

“Hush!” exclaimed Ruth, in such tones that Fenn was startled. “Don’t speak of that. Oh, I don’t know why I mentioned it. I was not myself! Forget it, please. It might cause a dreadful – Oh, I can’t talk about it!”

She was whispering tensely, and she came close to Fenn. In the next room Mr. Hayward could be heard telling Mr. Masterson something about his large business interests.

“Don’t let my father hear you,” pleaded Ruth.

“But perhaps I can help you,” insisted Fenn.

“No – no one can – at least not now,” she said. “Don’t ask me. I must go now. Good-night,” and she hurried from the room, leaving a much-puzzled lad behind. He forgot all about the book he wanted, so wrought up was he over what Ruth had said. He decided it would not be proper to question her any further, though he wanted very much to aid her if he could.

The next morning Mr. Hayward announced that he felt well enough to proceed. The auto had been repaired, and the gentleman and his daughter, bidding their hosts farewell, started off. They had decided to return home, as Ruth was so upset over the accident that a camping trip was out of the question.

“Now don’t forget, I expect you boys out to visit me,” called Mr. Hayward, as the four chums waved their hands to father and daughter when the auto puffed off. “Come early and stay late!”

“Poor girl,” murmured Mrs. Masterson, as she went back into the house. “She seems worried over something, but I don’t see what it can be, for her father is very wealthy, according to his talk, and she has everything she wants. Maybe she misses her mother. She told me she had been dead only a few years.”

But Fenn knew it was something about the mysterious cave that was worrying Ruth, and he wished, more than ever, that he could do something to aid her.

It was a week after this when, school having closed for the summer term, the four chums were gathered at Fenn’s house. Frank, Ned and Bart had arrived at the same time, to find Stumpy absorbed in the pages of a big geography.

“Going to take a post-graduate course?” asked Bart.

“No, he’s looking for Bayville, to see if he can’t catch a glimpse of Ruth,” spoke Ned.

“I was planning a vacation trip,” replied Fenn, with dignity.

“A vacation trip? Where?”

“On the Great Lakes,” answered Fenn. “I think it would be just the thing. I’ve been looking it up. We could go down the Still River to Lake Erie, and then to Lake Huron. From there we could visit the Straits of Mackinaw, and then, after a trip on Lake Michigan, go through the Sault St. Mary to Lake Superior. Then – ”

“Yes, and then we could sail to Bayville and you could visit Ruth while we sat on the bank and caught fish!” interrupted Frank. “Oh, Stumpy, it’s easy to guess what you are thinking about!”

CHAPTER V

CAPTAIN WIGGS'S PROPOSAL

Fenn had to stand considerable “jollying” on the part of his chums, but, though he blushed and was a little annoyed, he took it in good part.

“You can talk about Ruth all you like,” he said, “but, just the same, if you have any plans to beat a cruise on the Great Lakes, why – trot ’em out, that’s all. We’ve got to go somewhere this vacation, and I don’t see any better place, though I’ve looked through the whole geography.”

“And the only place you could get to was Bayville,” interrupted Ned. “It’s all right, Stumpy. I agree with you, that it would be a fine trip.”

“How could we make it?” asked Frank.

“Walk, of course,” replied Bart, with a grin. “It’s water all the way.”

“Funny!” answered Frank, poking his sarcastic chum in the ribs. “I mean where could we get a boat?”

“Hire one, I s’pose,” put in Fenn, who had been busy marking an imaginary cruise in lead pencil on the map of the Great Lakes.

“That would be pretty expensive,” said Bart. “We’re not millionaires, though we each have a little money salted away in the bank.”

The boys discussed the proposed cruise for some time longer, but there seemed no way of going on it. To hire a steamer or motorboat for such a long trip was practically out of the question for them, and, with much regret they all admitted it could not be considered.

“Come over to-morrow night,” invited Fenn, when his chums left that evening. “Maybe we can think of something by then.”

The next afternoon Fenn, who had gone to the store for his mother, stopped, on his way back, at the public dock of the Still River, where several vessels were loading with freight for Lake Erie ports. There was much hurrying about and seeming confusion; wagons and trucks backing up and going ahead, and scores, of men wheeling boxes and barrels on board lighters and steamers.

“Port! Port your helm!” suddenly called a voice, almost in Fenn’s ear, and he jumped to one side, to allow a short, stout man, with his arms full of bundles, to pass him. “That’s it!” the man went on. “Nearly run you down, didn’t I? Thought you were a water-logged craft in my course. Why, hello! If it isn’t Fenn Masterson!”

“Captain Wiggs!” exclaimed Fenn, recognizing the commander of the *Modoc*.

“Looking for a berth?” went on the captain, as he placed his bundles down on the head of a barrel. “I can sign you as cleaner of the after boiler tubes, if you like,” and he looked so grave that Fenn did not know whether he was joking or not. It was a habit the captain had, of making the most absurd remarks in a serious way, so that even his friends, at times, did not quite know how to take him. “Yes,” he went on, “I need a small boy to crawl through the after boiler tubes twice a day to keep ’em clean. Would you like the job?”

“I – I don’t believe so,” replied Fenn, with a smile, for now he knew Captain Wiggs was joking.

“All right then,” said the commander, with an assumed sigh. “I’ll have to do it myself, and I’m getting pretty old and fat for such work. The tubes are smaller than they used to be. But I dare say I can manage it. Where you going?” he asked Fenn suddenly, with a change of manner.

“No place in particular. Home, pretty soon. Why?”

“I was going to ask you to come aboard and have a glass of lemonade,” invited the captain. “It’s a hot day and lemonade is the best drink I know of.”

“Oh, I’ll come,” decided Fenn, for Captain Wiggs’s lemonade had quite a reputation. Besides there were always queer little chocolate cakes in the captain’s cabin lockers, for he was very fond of sweet things, as Fenn knew from experience.

“Haven’t saved any more sinking automobiles, lately, have you?” asked the commander, when Fenn was seated in the cabin, sipping a glass of the delicious beverage.

“No. Mr. Hayward has gone back to Bayville.”

“Bayville? Is that where he lives?” asked Captain Wiggs.

“That’s it,” replied Fenn. “Why?”

“That’s odd,” mused the captain. “I’m going right near there, this cruise. You see I’ve got a mixed cargo this trip,” he explained. “I’ve got to deliver some things at several lake ports, but the bulk of the stuff goes to Duluth. Now if you would only ship with me, as cleaner of the after boiler tubes, why you could go along.”

“Could I?” asked Fenn eagerly.

“Sure.”

“And – and could you take any other boiler tube cleaners, or – or any other help?”

“Well, I need a couple of lads to dust the coal,” said the captain, so seriously that Fenn thought he meant it. “You see if coal is dusty it doesn’t burn well,” he added. “We have to dust off every lump before we can put it in the boiler. Now a couple of handy lads, who were quick and smart could – ”

“Maybe you could use three,” suggested Fenn, with a smile.

“Sure I could,” spoke the captain. “That’s it!” he added quickly. “You and your three chums! Why not? You four could come along, and, if necessary, you could all dust coal. We use a lot of it. Come on now, here’s a proposal for you,” and the captain smiled good naturedly. “You four boys come along and make the trip to Duluth with me.”

“Would it – would it cost much?” asked Fenn, seeing a chance of carrying out the cruise he had planned.

“Not a cent. I tell you I’ll use you boys in more ways than one. Dusting the coal is only a small matter. There is the smoke stack to be scrubbed, the dishes to be hand painted and the windows to be taken out and put in again.”

“Do you mean it?” asked Fenn. “I mean, do you really want us on this trip, Captain Wiggs?”

“Of course I do. I sail in three days, to be gone a month or more. If you boys want to have a good vacation come along. Get the permission of your folks and let me know to-night.”

“I will!” exclaimed Fenn, his brain whirling with the suddenness of it all. “I’ll tell the other boys right away,” and, not even pausing to thank the captain for the lemonade, he hurried up the companion ladder, out on the deck of the *Modoc* and, jumping to the dock, ran up the street as fast as he could go.

CHAPTER VI IN PERIL

“Here’s the stuff from the store, mom!” exclaimed Fenn, as he rushed into the house.

“What’s the matter?” asked his mother anxiously. “Has there been an accident, Fenn?”

“Got to find the boys! Captain Wiggs! *Modoc!* Going on a cruise! Tell you later!” was what Fenn exclaimed in jerky sentences as he hurried down the side steps and out of the yard.

“Oh, those boys! They get so excited you can’t do anything with them!” exclaimed Mrs. Masterson. “I wonder what they’re up to now?”

If she could have seen her son and his chums, whom he met on the street, soon after his hurried exit, she would have been more puzzled than ever.

“Great news! Great!” yelled Fenn, as he caught sight of Frank, Ned and Bart approaching him. “We’re going with Captain Wiggs to make a tour of the Great Lakes! Whoop! Hold me down, somebody!”

He grabbed Ned and Bart, each by an arm, and began whirling them around in a good imitation of an Indian war dance.

“Here! Let up!” cried Frank. “What’s it all about? Who’s killed?”

“Nobody, you ninny!” shouted Fenn. “We’re going on the *Modoc!*”

“Who says so?”

“When?”

“How many of us?”

“Where?”

“Are we all going?”

All Fenn could do was to nod his head vigorously. He was all out of breath. As soon as he could get enough wind to talk, he rapidly explained what Captain Wiggs had said.

“Does he mean we’re to work our passage?” asked Frank. “I don’t know as I care to shovel coal, if that’s what he means.”

“I guess he was only joking about that part of it,” answered Fenn. “I’m going, if I have to scrub the decks. It will be sport.”

“That’s right,” chimed in Bart. “I don’t mind working my way for the sake of the trip. When can we go?”

“Let’s go down to the wharf and have a talk with him,” suggested Ned, and they all agreed this was a wise idea.

A little later they were in the large cabin of the *Modoc*, which, for a freight boat, was well fitted up.

Captain Wiggs repeated the invitation he had given to Fenn. The boys would be welcome to make the trip with him, he said, as long as their parents consented. They would need an outfit of clothing, with rough garments for stormy weather, which might be encountered.

“And we’ll do anything we can to help you run the boat,” added Bart, who felt that some return ought to be given for the captain’s generosity.

“Well,” replied the commander, in drawling tones, “I don’t expect too much. But if you could manage to keep the door mats clean it would be a great help.”

“Door mats – on a ship?” questioned Ned.

“Yes; of course,” replied the captain, with an assumption of dignity. “You see the salt spray gets all over the deck, and if it’s tramped into the cabins it makes the floors dirty. My steward is very particular about clean floors, and I thought that if you could help keep the mats clean, why it

would make his work easier, and he wouldn't grumble so much. However, if it's too much trouble, why of course – ”

“Oh, we'll do it,” hastily agreed Fenn, fearing that the trip might be called off. He did not quite know how to take the captain's remarks, for the commander had not the least suspicion of a smile on his face. After all, thought Fenn, it might be necessary to clean the door mats, and he resolved to do his share of it.

“Well, now that that's settled,” went on the commander, as if a load had been taken from his mind, “we'll go into further details.”

He then explained to the boys what they would need in the way of clothing and baggage, and he briefly described the trip. The duration of it was a little uncertain as he could not tell how long he would have to wait at Duluth, after unloading, before he could get a cargo to bring back.

“I guess I'll get you home safe in time to begin the fall term of school,” he said, “and that ought to answer.”

“It will,” declared Ned. “It's mighty fine of you to ask us.”

“Oh, I guess you'll be worth your salt,” commented Captain Wiggs. “Besides attending to the door mats, I may expect you to look after the scuttle-butt, now and again.”

Fenn wanted to ask what the scuttle-butt was, but as the steward came in just then, to get some orders, the boys decided it was time to leave.

They promised to be on hand the day set for sailing, and then, with their minds full of the happy prospect ahead of them, they went ashore.

The parents of the lads offered no objection to their making the cruise in company with Captain Wiggs, who was well known in Darewell. In due time valises and trunks were packed and the four chums, the envy of their less-fortunate school companions, strolled down to the wharf and boarded the *Modoc*.

The steamer was a large one, and had good accommodations for passengers, though she seldom carried any. This time, besides the boys, there was only one man, who was making the trip for his health. He was Burton Ackerman, who lived in a small town not far from Darewell.

They found that their staterooms, which were of good size, adjoined one another. They put away their belongings, and then went up on deck. The *Modoc* had cast off, and was slowly gathering speed as it dropped down the river toward Lake Erie.

“Don't forget the scenery, boys!” called the captain, as he passed.

“We won't,” answered Ned, with a laugh.

The boys had often made the trip to Lake Erie, and there was little of novelty for them in this. But, when the steamer had gotten well out on the big body of water, they crowded to the rails, for they had never been out so far as this before.

“It's almost as good as an ocean voyage,” exclaimed Bart.

“What are you thinking of, Stumpy?” asked Frank, noticing that his short chum was rather quiet.

“I know,” declared Ned. “He's wondering if he'll see Ruth.”

“Oh, you – ” began the badgered one, when the attention of the boys was taken from tormenting their chum by several sharp blasts of the *Modoc's* whistle. There was an answering screech and Frank suddenly exclaimed:

“Look there, boys!”

They all looked. On the port side, bearing right down on them, and coming at full speed, was an immense grain barge. It appeared to be unmanageable, for the whistle was frantically blowing, and a man in the pilot house was waving his hand.

“Toot! Toot! Toot! Toot!” screamed the whistle of the *Modoc*.

“She's going to ram us!” cried Fenn. “We can't get out of the way in time!”

There was a confused jangling of bells from the *Modoc's* engine room, followed by more whistles, and then the steamer began to swing around. But still the grain barge came straight on. A collision seemed inevitable.

CHAPTER VII

AN ELEVATOR BLAZE

From somewhere Captain Wiggs reached the deck on the jump. He tore past the boys on the run, and fairly burst into the door of the pilot house, where the first mate was in charge.

“We’d better get ready to jump!” cried Frank. “It looks as if we were going to be cut in two.”

“Grab life preservers!” shouted Ned. “Here are some back here!”

He turned to lead the way to where, under an awning, some of the cork jackets were hung in racks. Before he could reach them a peculiar shiver seemed to run over the *Modoc*.

“She’s hit us!” yelled Bart. “Everybody jump!”

The boys made a rush for the rail, intending to trust to their swimming abilities rather than to chance remaining on the steamer after the grain barge had hit her.

But their plans were suddenly frustrated for, as they reached the rail, something that towered away above their heads loomed up, and the grain vessel came sliding along side of the *Modoc*, just as if the two craft were about to tie up together for loading purposes.

The grain barge only bumped gently against the side of the steamer. The shrill whistles ceased. The jangling bells were silent. By the narrowest of margins a bad collision had been avoided.

Out of the pilot house came Captain Wiggs, running along the rail until he came opposite the pilot house of the grain barge. Then, standing on a signal flag locker the commander addressing the man in charge of the vessel which had given them all such a scare, exclaimed:

“Say, what in the name of the Sacred Cow are you trying to do, anyhow? Don’t you know how to steer, you inconsiderate slab-sided specimen of an isosceles triangle!”

“Sure I know how to steer,” replied the man, who was as cool as the captain was excited. “I was steering boats when you was a baby. But I’d like to know how in the name of Billy Hochswatter’s mud-turtle any one can manage a boat when the steam steering gear breaks just as another vessel gets in front of me.”

“Oh, then that’s different,” replied Captain Wiggs, with an understanding of the difficulties of the situation.

“Yes, I guess it is,” retorted the other.

“Why didn’t you use the hand gear?” asked the commander of the *Modoc*.

“That got jammed just as they were swinging my boat around, and all I could do was to signal for a clear course.”

“Well, I gave it to you, but I almost had to rip my engines off the bed plates to do it,” retorted Captain Wiggs. “I reversed at full speed, and swung that wheel around until it looked like a spinning top. Only for that we’d be on the bottom of the lake by now.”

“That’s right,” agreed the other pilot. “You had your nerve with you. Well, as long as there’s no damage done I s’pose you can go ahead. I’ll have to lay-to for repairs.”

“Um,” was all Captain Wiggs replied, for he had not quite gotten over his scare, used as he was to narrow escapes from danger. Slowly the *Modoc* was backed away from the side of the grain barge, and, when at the proper distance, she was sent ahead again, the other craft coming to anchor.

“I hope I don’t meet him again this voyage,” murmured Captain Wiggs, as he walked up to where the four chums stood. “He’s the most unlucky fellow I know. Something is always happening to his boats.”

“Who is he?” asked Ned.

“Captain Streitwetter. He’s a German from Germanville. Did you hear him mention Billy Hochswatter’s mud-turtle?”

“Yes,” said Bart. “What did he mean?”

“That is a story,” replied Captain Wiggs gravely, “which can only be told after the dinner dishes are washed. You’d better look after them,” and with that he walked away.

“There he goes again!” exclaimed Frank. “You never know what he is going to say. I believe he’s stringing us.”

“I almost know it,” retorted Fenn. “It’s only a way he has, but the trouble is we don’t know whether or not he wants us to do the things he says. I wonder if we had better do anything about the dishes?”

“Of course not,” said Frank. “The cook sees to that.”

“But maybe the cook is sick,” insisted Fenn. “Captain Wiggs might want us to help.”

“If I thought so I’d offer at once,” put in Ned. “I used to do it at home, once in a while, to help out.”

“I’ll go ask him,” volunteered Fenn, and he started to find Captain Wiggs, when he was halted by seeing the commander step from behind a pile of boxes. The captain was laughing heartily.

“That’s the time I had you guessing; didn’t I?” he demanded. “Wash the dishes. Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho! That’s pretty good!”

The boys, looking a bit sheepish, soon joined in the merriment at their expense, and the little pleasantry served to banish the nervous feeling that remained after the narrow escape from the collision.

“Billy Hochswatter’s mud-turtle!” repeated the captain. “That’s what Captain Streitwetter always says when he’s excited. I don’t believe there ever was such a person as Billy Hochswatter.”

“I either,” added Fenn.

“I must go down to the engine room to see if we suffered any damage,” the commander of the *Modoc* went on. “You boys amuse yourselves as well as you can until dinner time. You don’t have to peel the potatoes,” he added with a wink.

“We’ll have to get even with him, somehow,” suggested Ned, when the captain was out of hearing.

“How?” asked Bart.

“I haven’t thought it out yet, but we must play some kind of a trick on him. He’ll think the Darewell chums are slow if we believe all he tells us, and don’t come back at him. Try and think up something.”

“Good idea,” commented Fenn. “We’ll have the laugh on him, next time.”

The day passed quickly, for there were many novel sights for the boys to see. Captain Wiggs was kept so busy, for there were some repairs needed to one of the engines, because of the sudden reversing, that the boys did not see him again that day. He did not appear at dinner or supper, and the steward said the commander was taking his meals in the engine room.

The *Modoc* was going along at less than her usual speed, but was making fairly good time.

“Well, I s’pose we might as well turn in, boys,” suggested Fenn, about nine o’clock. “I believe that is the proper term aboard a ship.”

“Yes, messmates,” spoke Ned, assuming a theatrical attitude, “we will now seek our downy hammocks, and court ‘tired nature’s sweet restorer, balmy sleep,’ to arise in the gladsome morning, and ‘you must wake and call me early; call me early, mother dear, for I’m to be Queen of the May, mother; I’m to be Queen of the May!’”

“We’ll call you ‘loony,’ instead of ‘early,’ if you get off any more of that nonsense,” murmured Frank.

“That’s what,” agreed Fenn. “You’re not studying English Lit. and French history now, Ned.”

“Very well, most noble gentlemen,” went on Ned. “I shall obey you, right gladly, I ween!” and he made a dive for his stateroom before Bart, who made a sudden grab could lay hands on him.

The others soon turned in, and, in spite of their new and strange surroundings and beds, were soon sound asleep.

It must have been about midnight that Fenn was awakened by hearing a great tramping on deck. It was followed by confused shouts, and then came the jangling of the engine room bells. The *Modoc* seemed to increase her speed.

“I wonder if there’s another collision coming?” he said as he sat up. He heard Bart moving in the next room, and presently Frank’s voice was heard calling:

“Say, fellows, something’s wrong.”

The noise on deck increased, and it sounded as though several men were running to and fro, dragging ropes about.

“I’m going up!” decided Fenn, jumping out of his berth and hastily pulling on his clothes. From the open doors of his chums’ rooms he could see that they, too, were attiring themselves with little regard for how they looked.

Up on deck they hurried. As they emerged from the companionway their eyes were met with a bright glare.

“A fire!” exclaimed Ned. “The boat’s afire!”

“Don’t say that! Don’t say that, young man, I beg of you!” besought a man, attired in his trousers and night shirt, as he approached Ned, who recognized him as Mr. Ackerman, the sick passenger.

“What is it?” inquired Fenn, who was right behind Ned.

“He said the ship was on fire,” repeated Mr. Ackerman. “I can’t stand it. I have heart disease. Excitement is bad for me. Do, please, one of you, go and find out how fast it is burning, and come back and tell me.”

He sat down at the head of the companionway, as coolly as though he had asked to be informed which way the wind was blowing. Evidently he knew how to take care of himself, so as not to aggravate his malady.

“The ship isn’t on fire!” exclaimed Bart, crowding past Ned and Fenn.

“But something evidently is burning,” insisted Mr. Ackerman. “I can smell smoke, and see the reflection of the blaze.”

This was not strange, considering that the *Modoc* was in the midst of a cloud of vapor, and that bright tongues of fire could be seen close to her bow.

“It’s a big grain elevator on shore that’s burning!” exclaimed Frank. “See! There it is!”

As he spoke the smoke which enveloped the steamer was blown aside. The boys could then note that, during the night the vessel had approached close to shore. They were near a good-sized city, and, among the wharfs was a big building, built to hold grain in readiness to load on the lake steamers.

From the top of this flames were shooting high into the air, and the *Modoc* was approaching it at full speed.

CHAPTER VIII

FENN HEARS SOMETHING

“What’s the matter? Can’t Captain Wiggs stop the ship?” cried Fenn, for it certainly looked as if the *Modoc* was going to run, full tilt, into the flames, which were right at the water’s edge, as the elevator was on the end of the wharf.

“Clang!”

The half speed bell sounded from the engine room. The steamer began to slacken speed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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