

Allen Quincy

**The Outdoor Chums on a
Houseboat: or, The Rivals of
the Mississippi**



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The Outdoor Chums on a Houseboat Or The Rivals of the Mississippi

CHAPTER I – GLORIOUS TIMES AHEAD

“Own up, Will, you’ve got hold of some great news, and you’re just keeping it back to tease us! How about that, Bluff?”

“You’re right, Frank, for I can see it in his face. His eyes are just dancing with a big secret. But wait up; here comes Jerry across the campus. Now he’ll just have to open the box, and show us.”

The college boy, called Will by his comrades, and whose last name was Milton, laughed good-naturedly, and then nodded his head.

“Why, fellows,” he said, “I saw Jerry coming, and meant to wait for him. When all four members of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club, who call themselves the Outdoor Chums, are present, I’ve got something to say that is going to set you all just wild.”

At that the young chap who went by the name of Bluff made frantic gestures for a fourth lad, just then heading in their direction, to hurry along.

Evidently this freshman must have suspected that something unusual was brewing, for he started on a run, and came up almost panting for breath.

“What’s in the wind, fellows?” he demanded, glancing from one eager face to the others. “Don’t tell me you’ve made up your minds where the club is going to put in the vacation just ahead of us, because that would be too good news. Who’s going to take pity on me, and relieve my suspense?”

“Why, Will here has got something to tell us, and wanted to wait till you joined the crowd,” said Frank Langdon, who was just a little taller, and more manly-looking than any other in the group; though they were all bright, able lads, who had seen considerable of life.

“Listen, boys,” said Will, who was inclined to be less given to healthy color than the rest, and who seemed to be not quite so sturdy in build; “I’ve had a letter from my Uncle Felix, down in New Orleans; and he made the queerest offer you ever heard about. You see, through my mother he must have learned about some of the adventures that came our way the last two years; and, what do you think? he wants the Outdoor Chums to take a voyage all the way down the Mississippi, just as soon as school closes.”

“What!” ejaculated Jerry Wallington, as though rather staggered by the sudden outlook; “a voyage down the Mississippi? What on; a floating log? – because we don’t happen to own any kind of a boat just now.”

“Well, Uncle Felix does, you see,” Will went on, coolly. “It’s some sort of a houseboat, that he used to live aboard for several years. For some reason, that he doesn’t take the trouble to explain, he wants it brought down to New Orleans, where he’s recovering from a bad accident, so that he just can’t come up himself. And, boys, he enclosed a check for a hundred dollars in the letter.”

“Wow! what was that for?” demanded Bluff Masters, who had a little habit of being impetuous, though at heart he was as true as steel to his chums, and always fair toward even his bitterest enemy.

“Why, to buy eats, of course!” declared Will. “You see, a houseboat doesn’t often have any way of moving along, only with the current, at least this one doesn’t, I know; and so it just has to wander down the river. That takes a heap of time; and four healthy boys have to eat sometimes five times a day to keep from starving to death; anyhow, Bluff here does, I happen to know.”

“Well, a hundred dollars ought to buy a heap of grub,” remarked Jerry, with a wide grin on his good-natured face. “But after we get there, how do you suppose we’re ever to get back home again, unless we draw some of our little nest-egg out of bank, and foot the railroad bill?”

“Trust Uncle Felix for that,” Will remarked. “He says he’ll see that we all get back home safe in good time. And, as he’s got bushels of money, and is a bachelor in the bargain, that part of the job needn’t worry us.”

“Where’s the houseboat now?” asked Frank,

“Tied up in the boatyard of a man named James Whittaker in St. Paul. There was an order on him to deliver the boat to us with all the fixtures, whatever that may mean,” Will continued.

“Oh! say, did you ever hear of such luck?” cried Bluff, throwing his cap up in the air and catching it deftly again as it fell.

“Perhaps it’s just like a palace, if a rich old bachelor has been knocking around in it for some years,” suggested Jerry.

Frank noticed that Will did not think to offer any information on this score, if he happened to possess the knowledge. Perhaps he was willing that his three chums should live in expectation, and be surprised by the wonders of the houseboat upon which Uncle Felix seemed to set such store.

“By the way,” continued Will, “there was one funny part to Uncle’s letter.”

“Tell us about it. If we’re going to make a cruise in the houseboat of a millionaire, we ought to know,” remarked Bluff.

“He says,” Will went on, “he’s mighty particular about whom he allows aboard his boat, and wants to impress upon us all that during the cruise we must keep off all undesirable characters.”

“Sure thing,” remarked Bluff, with a wise nod. “I’ve always heard that the Mississippi is a tramp’s paradise, and that they just swarm down there. It’s only right that a rich man would want us to keep such characters off his fine houseboat.”

“Hold on there,” broke in Will, “I haven’t said it was such a palace, have I, Frank? Here Bluff keeps on getting more and more extravagant with his adjectives every time he mentions the boat.”

“Oh! well,” the other ventured, “it stands to reason that a rich old chap who spends lots of his time on board a pet boat would have things just scrumptious. Me for the first choice of bunks aboard! Wonder if he has silk eiderdown quilts for covers. Yum! yum! we’re just the luckiest lot of freshmen that ever squeezed through their first year at college; and, Will, I feel like giving you a bear’s hug for bringing us this great news.”

“Please don’t!” cried Will, half alarmed, for Bluff was a bit rough in his way; “because I’m carrying a bunch of lantern slides in my pocket; and I’d hate to have them broken;” but the observing Frank detected what seemed to be a gleam of suppressed amusement on Will’s face, that gave him an inkling as to the true state of affairs.

Will had always been the official photographer of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club, and was something of an expert at snapping pictures to commemorate stirring and unusual events in the outdoor experiences of the chums.

“Was that all he said about not letting strangers aboard unless they brought letters of introduction?” asked Jerry.

“He warned us to be particularly careful not to harbor a certain party named Marcus Stackpole, who seems to be some sort of particular enemy of my uncle, though just why he would want to get aboard the houseboat I can’t imagine.”

“Say, that’s queer, now,” remarked Bluff.

“Guess he’s had some reason for believing this Stackpole to be a thief, and he thinks he’s run away with some of the things your uncle carries aboard,” Jerry suggested.

Will simply elevated his eyebrows as he replied, evasively:

“I don’t know, and that’s all I can say, fellows; but suppose we go over to my rooms, where we can read the letter again, and take a look at the course of the Mississippi River from St. Paul to New Orleans.”

It happened that Will and Frank had rooms at some little distance from the college buildings, making quite a walk along the road that ran beside the little river. And as they are trudging along, indulging in considerable excited talk, we can devote a few paragraphs to some of the pleasant things that in times past were experienced by these four comrades.

The organization of the club, and what happened to the boys shortly afterward, has been detailed, at length, in the first book of this series, called: “The Outdoor Chums; Or, The First Tour of the Rod, Gun and Camera Club.” In the second story are given some of the wonderful happenings that befell them while camping on an island in Camelot Lake, which had, up to that time, been shunned by most people, because of the fierce bobcats that were said to hold possession there. These exciting events you will find narrated in “The Outdoor Chums on the Lake; Or, Lively Adventures on Wildcat Island.”

During the Easter holidays another campaign was undertaken in search of excitement and pictures, as well as camping experiences. It had been reported that a ghost roamed over a certain section of the country some miles away from the town of Centerville; and the four boys determined to find out the truth of this rumor. As to what befell them, the reader will find the full details in the third volume, called “The Outdoor Chums in the Forest; Or, Laying the Ghost of Oak Ridge.”

When Christmas came, the chums received permission to pay a visit to the Sunny South. And what strange things happened to them on a Florida river, as well as upon the great Mexican gulf, have been told in the fourth book, under the title of “The Outdoor Chums on the Gulf; Or, Rescuing the Lost Balloonists.”

Then came a delightful visit to the Far West, where they saw what life on a cattle ranch was like, and had some thrilling times among the wild animals that Will was always anxious to take pictures of, at no matter what risk to himself. You can find all these narrated at length in the fifth book, just preceding this, and bearing the title of “The Outdoor Chums After Big Game; Or, Perilous Adventures in the Wilderness.”

“There’s that fancy dresser, Oswald Fredericks, and some of his chums, coming this way, Frank!” remarked Bluff, as the four boys were walking along the road.

Frank frowned. If there was one fellow in all the hundreds attending college with whom he had never been able to get on, it had been the rich man’s son, Oswald Fredericks. They had never actually come to blows, but for some reason the other had shown jealousy toward Frank, and seldom let an opportunity pass for sneering at him, or doing some small thing to indicate what his feelings toward Frank were.

“And we’re bound to meet the bunch just in that narrow part of the road, too, where the river runs close beside it,” remarked Will, in disgust.

“Well,” spoke up fiery Bluff, “you don’t expect that we’re going to stand here, and wait for the procession to pass by; do you? I guess four of us ought to be a match for as many of the Fredericks crowd, if they try to muss us up.”

“Oh! I don’t think Fredericks would try anything like that,” Frank remarked.

“You never know what such a fellow might do,” declared Jerry. “Once I used to like him; but he got going with a fast set, and I had to cut him dead. He isn’t altogether bad, but apt to feel himself superior because his dad’s a millionaire.”

“And the queer thing about it,” broke in Will just then, “is that he lives in St. Paul, where we have to go after our houseboat, and I’ve often heard him tell about the dandy craft his father owns, used for making cruises down the river. It’s got an engine aboard, too, and can run like a steamboat.”

“Oh! shucks! I just wish he’d take a notion to make a cruise about the same time as we did,” said Bluff in a low voice, for the other party was now quite close by. “Say, wouldn’t we have some bully times, though, running races with his old tub?”

Frank somehow felt that the other students were up to mischief. He had noticed that they kept their heads together, and seemed to be whispering suspiciously.

On that account he was on the lookout for trouble. Consequently, when, just as the two parties were passing, some of the others gave Oswald a sudden shove, as doubtless arranged beforehand, and he was thrown toward Frank, the latter deftly jumped aside.

The consequence was that the well-dressed Oswald, not running up against the object he had anticipated shoving over the edge of the bank into the river, made a few wild movements of his arms, as though seeking something to stay his own progress; and then quickly vanished from view over the edge, to the dismay of his companions, and the delight of Bluff and Jerry.

They heard him give a sharp yelp; and then a splash announced that he had plunged into the swiftly-running stream.

CHAPTER II – LAYING PLANS

“Listen to that, will you?” cried Bluff Masters. “He’s in, all right!”

The boys hastened to the edge of the bank. The river ran about six feet below, and as there was a fair stage of water at this time of year, Oswald had ducked completely under when he fell in.

He was making frantic efforts to drag himself out, and was spouting water like a geyser. One of his comrades immediately hastened to lower himself by means of some friendly rocks, so as to give the unfortunate Oswald a helping hand.

Dripping from head to foot, and looking like a half-drowned rat, the son of the St. Paul millionaire finally managed to regain the road. He was certainly a forlorn-looking figure. Even a couple of his friends grinned a little behind his back; while Bluff and Jerry made no pretense of hiding their delight. Frank half expected that the other would attack him, though there was not the slightest reason for it, since he had not even touched young Fredericks when so deftly stepping aside.

“What did you do that for, Langdon?” spluttered the other, shivering, either with the cold, or the excitement following his unexpected dip in the water.

“I don’t know that I did anything, except to get out of your way,” returned Frank, quietly. “You seemed to want the whole road, and I was for giving it to you. What do you find about that to complain of, Fredericks?”

“Oh! go on,” sneered the other. “You knew mighty well that if you jumped out of the way I’d go into the river.”

“Well,” remarked Frank, steadily, keeping his eyes on Oswald, “it was either you or me; and I wasn’t at all anxious to get wet; so since you would have it, I let you have first choice. If you’d kept to your side of the road nothing would have happened. You’ve only yourself to blame. You tried to put up a little game on me, and the biter got bitten himself; that’s all there is to it.”

“Think you’re pretty smart; don’t you, Langdon?” snarled the other, who in his anger quite forgot his elegant ways, and seemed ready to descend to the manner of a common bully. “You set up that game on me, and you know it. Didn’t I see you telling Bluff Masters what you would do if I happened to brush up against you? I’ve a good notion to give you what you ought to have had long ago.”

“You don’t say?” remarked Frank, pleasantly; “and suppose you tell me what that might be, Fredericks.”

“A sound drubbing; and I can do it, too, I want you to know!” snarled the other, making a forward movement, though two of his boon companions managed to get a grip on his shoulders and hold him back.

Frank deliberately took off his coat, and handed it to Will Milton.

“That’s a new coat,” he said, calmly, “and I wouldn’t want to get it soiled by rubbing up against your dirty and wet clothes. Now, suppose you start in, and give me what you say I need; because tomorrow may be too late, as we start for home in the morning. This is a nice, quiet spot, and we stand little chance of being bothered by any outsiders.”

“Let me go; can’t you, fellows?” cried Oswald, making a great show of trying to break away from the detaining hands of his chums; though Bluff noticed that it was something of a pretense after all.

“Don’t be a fool, Ossie,” said Raymond Ellis, in a low voice; “you know that Langdon’s said to be as strong as an ox. He made the baseball team, and will be in the football squad next fall. Let it drop; can’t you? It was a bad job all around, and you got caught in your own trap.”

“But I tell you I can do him up right now, if you only let me loose!” declared Fredericks, with another vain effort to break away, making his friends only seek the harder to keep him back, the third one now lending a hand, and trying to soothe him with soft words. “What have I been taking boxing and wrestling lessons all winter for, if not just this opening? I knew some day we’d have it out; and why not now? Let loose, Duke Fletcher; I want to show him!”

“Well, you just can’t right now, and that’s all there is about it,” declared the lad last named, as he tightened his grip. “You’re soaked to the skin, and excited in the bargain; while he’s as cool as a cucumber. Just hold your horses, and maybe some fine day you’ll get your chance on even terms.”

They started to lead the expostulating Oswald away. Every little while he would break out into another wild series of exclamations, and struggle with the chums who kept their detaining hands on him.

Frank quietly recovered his coat and put it on. There was a curl to his lips as he turned his face toward his chums.

“What do you think of it, boys?” he asked.

“He never wanted to fight, even a little bit!” declared Bluff, scorn in his tones.

“That’s right,” remarked Jerry. “For all his squirming, he didn’t want to break away from his friends. Why, he could have done it in the start, easy enough; but it was all a big bluff. But say, did you ever hear a splash like that, fellows?”

“It certainly did make a noise,” remarked Frank, laughing.

“Noise!” echoed Bluff, doubling up with laughter; “why, if you didn’t know what happened, you’d think a house had dropped kerplunk into the river. Only time I can remember anything like it, was when Jerry here went overboard once – ”

“That’ll do for you, Bluff,” interrupted the one mentioned; “I could refer to a few of your troubles in the past when it comes to speaking about splashes. Just drop personal things, and let’s speak about Fredericks.”

“Oh! if I’d only had my little snapshot camera along,” exclaimed Will, suddenly remembering what a startling picture he might have taken of Oswald going over the edge of the bank; to be followed with another showing him as he climbed, dripping, out of the river.

“Well, that’s nearly always the way,” grunted Bluff. “What wonderful things we do see when we haven’t got a gun.”

“But he’s going to set that bath down against you, Frank; and some day try to hand you back something in return,” remarked Jerry.

“How could you be so cruel as to side-step, and let the poor chap go over into that cold water?” asked Bluff.

They were all in high spirits as they started once more for the room where Will and Frank boarded. Healthy boys see no shadows ahead when fortune beckons. And these chums knew of no reason why they should not look forward with delight to that long trip in a houseboat down the Father of Waters.

“I’m going to take the pains to tell Duke Fletcher what our plans are for the summer,” said Jerry, who was by long odds far from being one to seek trouble; but in this case he seemed to think it might liven things up if only Oswald and several of his cronies chose to make a similar cruise, and that fortune threw them together now and then.

Frank rather doubted the wisdom of notifying the others of the intended voyage; but he neglected to ask Jerry not to mention it, and so the fact was forgotten until later.

Once they arrived at the room, the letter, with its enclosures, was produced, and for a full hour the boys studied it.

“I declare I can’t make head or tail of it,” Jerry finally admitted, with a puzzled expression on his face.

“Me, too!” declared Bluff, ready to confess himself “stumped,” as he called it. “What do you suppose there is so valuable about this houseboat that would make anybody like Marcus Stackpole want to get it, if only he got on board?”

“Say, perhaps Uncle Felix keeps some of his expensive curios aboard, and this Stackpole knows it, and means to get hold of ’em. I’m going to make it my job to find out if that’s so, and you fellows

needn't be surprised to see me poking around in any old dark corner, and tapping the walls of the cabin to find concealed treasures."

"That sounds just like you, Jerry; always thinking you're going to strike it rich," jeered Bluff. "Now, I've got a notion it's the craft itself that's so expensively built, and Stackpole, who must have wanted to buy it from Uncle Felix, and has been refused, is just bound to get hold of it."

Frank laughed at all these wild theories. He did not know himself what the solution of the mystery could be, but felt positive that it was along different lines from anything as yet suggested in the fertile brains of his companions. Besides, he wondered what that occasional smile he saw upon the face of Will meant. Evidently the other was keeping back something from his chums; and it must have a connection with the houseboat.

As they expected to start home on the following day, it would not be long before they would arrive in St. Paul, ready to purchase their provisions for the beginning of the river trip, and start down stream.

It was the last night at college for that term and all sorts of affairs were going on among the students, who would separate for two months and more on the morrow. When morning came there was a grand exodus, and the station of the college town presented a gay appearance, as scores of young fellows, with suitcases in their hands, boarded the train that pulled out.

Those who were going later gave the college yell when the whistle of the engine announced that the parting minute had arrived. And amid a shrieking of hundreds of voices the train started that was to bear the four chums to their homes in Centerville.

"There's your dear friend, Oswald Fredericks, Frank!" said Will, as the party hung partly out of a couple of windows in the car they occupied.

"And he's got his eye glued on you, too; don't forget," remarked Jerry.

"Oh! he's a good hater, all right," said Bluff. "If he didn't have any reason to wish you all sorts of bad luck before, that souse in the river settled it. From now on he'll never hear the name of Frank Langdon without getting mad, you mark me. And some day, sooner or later, he hopes to have a chance to even up the score."

"Huh! it may come sooner, then," remarked Jerry, significantly.

"See here," remarked Frank, turning to look at the last speaker, "did you keep your word, and tell Duke Fletcher about our plans this summer?"

Jerry nodded his head coolly.

"Course I did," he admitted. "You heard me tell I was going to do it, and nobody said a word. I like to have things going on all the time! What's the use of living, if you can't have some excitement once in a while? Besides, I'm hoping Oswald will find a chance to 'hop' Frank here. You see, I know what will follow; and he needs a lesson, that upstart does, to take the conceit out of him."

"Oh! well," remarked Frank, with a whimsical smile, "I believe the old Mississippi is something of a river; and even if they do start down in another houseboat, the chances of running across us wouldn't amount to much, anyhow. So what's the use of worrying? We've got all we want to do to keep watch for this tricky Marcus Stackpole, the man Uncle Felix seems to think will try to either rob the boat, or steal the entire outfit."

"Somebody pinch me," said Bluff, as they sat down facing each other in the double seat; "because I just can't believe it's so, all these fine times ahead of us, with a houseboat all our own for weeks, and we living on the fat of the land as we go, taking toll of game and fish by the way."

"Huh!" grunted Jerry, "much game you'll get, with the law on nearly everything that flies; and Frank here a regular stickler for obeying what the law says. But say, we take our guns along, I certainly hope, boys?"

"That's a settled thing," Frank replied. "We might need them in lots of ways; and while Uncle Felix may have a stock of firearms aboard his boat, we would be foolish to take any chances."

"Hear! hear! that makes me happy!" Bluff exclaimed.

“Now he’s just thinking about that pump-gun he owns, and what havoc he can make if ever he sees a flock of ducks on a sand bar!” chuckled Will; for the gun had never been a favorite with either himself or Jerry, who declared it was unsportsmanlike to be able to send a volley into a bevy of quail, from a repeating shotgun, though with a rifle the case was different.

And, throughout all that long journey, from the college to their home town, the four chums talked of hardly anything else but the pleasure they anticipated when once they were launched on the mighty Mississippi, bound for the distant Southern metropolis, known as the Crescent City.

CHAPTER III – BLUFF NAMES THE BOAT

“Well, hold me, somebody, I’m going to faint!”

It was Jerry who made this remark; and he did actually pretend to fall over against Will, who happened to be standing next to him at the time.

The four chums were in St. Paul, and had just been shown the interior of the houseboat, on board of which they expected to make the voyage down the river, over the many hundreds of miles separating them from New Orleans.

Even Frank was smiling as though surprised; while Bluff stared around in wonder. Will was chuckling to himself, as though he had known about it all along, and wished to spring a surprise on his mates by keeping still. That was what his smiles meant, Frank now knew, at the time the others were speculating as to what the houseboat of a wealthy old bachelor might be like.

“Talk to me about a dilapidated old craft, this sure takes the cake!” ventured the plain-spoken Bluff, presently, when he could catch his breath. “Why, say, I’ve seen some shantyboats that could give this one a handicap, and still win out. Do you mean to say, Will Milton, your Uncle Felix is afraid of somebody running away with this old tub? That must be his little joke on us.”

“Oh! nobody ever said there was anything palatial about uncle’s houseboat,” Will hastened to declare; “you fellows made up that fairy story to please yourselves. If you knew my uncle, you’d never think of him wasting his money on a floating palace. Fact is, boys, I do know all about this same craft; and if you sit down I’ll tell you how he came to get hold of her in the first place.”

“Might as well take a little rest, because I do feel sort of weak after such a shock,” declared Jerry.

“Well, now,” remarked the man who had accompanied them aboard the boat, and who had unlocked the door very carefully, as though the cabin contained some wild animal he was afraid might escape, this being the boat builder, Mr. Whittaker; “I’d like to hear that myself. You see, all I know is that Mr. Milton left this boat in my charge, and I was to keep constant watch over it, for which he agreed to pay in full. I’ve looked it over from stem to stern, and I declare if I was ever able to make up my mind what there was about the old thing to cause him to be so anxious. So tell us about it, my boy, if you please.”

“Why, it’s just this way,” Will went on to say; “Uncle was knocking around down South some years ago, when he got in a tight scrape, and might have lost his life only for the fortunate coming of the man who owned this houseboat. I guess at that time it was called a shantyboat, Bluff, for a fact. Well, it seems that my uncle, who does lots of queer things, I’m told, thought so much of the boat that he bought her from the man, who was a traveling bee-keeper, and who said he had purchased the craft from a clock peddler, who used to drop down from town to town finding odd jobs to do. Now you’ve got the history of the gallant craft.”

“And what did he want her for; just to keep on account of having his life saved by her coming at the right time?” demanded Jerry.

“Oh!” said Will, readily enough; “he used her several seasons as a houseboat; and after drifting as far down the river as he cared to go, he’d have her towed up again. Few shantyboats ever come back again, you know. Once they get South, they’re sold, and broken up for firewood. But I rather think Uncle Felix must have had some pleasant days and nights aboard this same boat, and that’s why he values her, in one way.”

Bluff broke out into laughter, doubling up like a hinge.

“It makes me weep, boys, to think of the adjectives we’ve wasted on the old tub. I reckon among the lot we’ve called her everything that stood for a grand outfit. Why, I’ve often shut my eyes, and tried to picture the finest thing that ever was built. And now to see this old boat gives me a fit. Where do you suppose the silk-covered eiderdown quilts are stowed away; eh? And the mahogany

trimmings; with the gas range Jerry was speaking about? Oh! my, here's a little old wood-burning stove, with one lid cracked. And well, here's luck, boys, just four bunks, arranged on the two sides of the cabin, one for each."

Frank had not allowed himself to indulge in any of the high-flown anticipations that had captured his two chums. That queer little smile on Will's face had warned him against such a course. And so now he was in a position to look at things from a sensible point.

"Hold on, fellows," he remarked, quietly; "if you've had to take a tumble, whose fault is it but your own? Will never gave you to understand that this was going to be a voyage in a floating palace; you just chose to picture all that sort of stuff for yourselves. And after all, when you take an inventory of things here, it isn't so bad a handout."

"Good for you, Frank," said Will, as if pleased.

"Just forget all that nonsense you imagined about sailing down in a gilt-edged houseboat, boys, and look the thing squarely in the face. The boat is still in good condition, and as staunch as anything. There's plenty of room for getting around, and for storing our stuff, bedclothes and eatables. Will you tell me what more the Outdoor Chums need in order to have a jolly good time?"

Bluff and Jerry looked at each other. The former scratched his head, and then the disappointed expression vanished from his face.

"I guess you're about right there, Frank," he admitted; "we've been through all sorts of times, and we never yet asked for more than just ordinary comforts. Leave the millionaire boats for the sons of rich men, who are so soft and pampered that they just can't rough it any. We've shown we could stand a lot; and anyhow, we can have a heap of fun aboard this old she-bang, once we cut loose from St. Paul."

"But what strikes me in the funny bone is this," declared Jerry. "If it looked queer to us why a fellow named Marcus Stackpole would want to sneak aboard a palatial craft to steal something, or get away with the boat itself, now what under the sun could anybody in their right senses expect to find on this tub worth taking; tell me that, will you?"

And all of the others only shook their heads in the negative, as though the conundrum were too much for them.

"Ask me something easy," remarked Bluff; "like the number of stars in the Milky Way, and I might give a guess; but I'm stumped when you want me to say why anybody would spend good hard-earned dollars to have this old boat guarded for months in Mr. Whittaker's yard here; and then warn us to be careful how we let any strangers travel with us."

"Well," said Jerry, "you know what I said about his having something hidden aboard, that this other fellow knew about, and wanted. I still stick to that, more than ever; and I'm never going to rest till I find out."

"Just like you, Jerry," remarked Frank; "like as not you'll be wanting to tear away the whole inside planking piece by piece, in hopes of making a discovery. There never was such a fellow for investigating things; and there never will be again."

"Sure," replied the other, with a grin. "But when do we get our duffle aboard, fellows? Can't start any too soon to please me."

The disappointment had been keen, for Bluff and Jerry had foolishly indulged in all manner of extravagant ideas concerning the luxuries they expected to find on board a houseboat owned by a rich man like Uncle Felix; but after all they were sensible boys, and could extract a lot of fun out of very small material.

The main thing was that they had a boat, strong and serviceable, to bear them on the long voyage; plenty of money with which to purchase provisions; and the whole summer before them in which to make the trip.

Imagination, such as is always rampant in the mind of a boy, did the rest. They could anticipate all manner of glorious adventures as taking place before their distant destination was reached.

Frank was ready to settle that matter without delay.

“I don’t see any reason why we couldn’t move out of here before night comes,” he remarked. “Bluff could see to getting all our stuff aboard, while some of the rest accompanied me to buy the provisions. They’ll deliver the stuff here right away; and then we can cut loose. We’ve got clothes and ammunition and all such things, including blankets for the crowd.”

“Hurrah! I’ll get a move on right away, and yank that lot of bags down here in a jiffy,” declared Bluff, always ready to do things in a hurry.

“Well,” remarked Mr. Whittaker, “I reckon you boys expect to have a great time of it this summer; and if I was some years younger I’d just like to be along with you. From the way you talk I rather imagine this isn’t the first trip you four’ve taken in company.”

At that the boys looked at each other and laughed.

“What the Outdoor Chums have gone through with would fill lots of books,” Frank took occasion to remark; “and if I had the time I’d like to tell you a few of the good times we’ve had together. But we’ve got to get a hustle on if we want to drop down the river this afternoon; because there’s always lots to do at the last minute. Off you go, Bluff; and Will, you come with me. I think Jerry had better help Bluff manage the luggage.”

And so they separated, each couple going about the business in hand with the energy boys can always display when they expect to have a good time.

“Be mighty careful with my camera case,” called out Will, after the others. “If anything happened to that tool of mine, you’d never hear the last of it. And then, however would we get any pictures of the queer things that happen by the way? I expect to snap off some striking views of you fellows doing stunts. Remember some of the ones we’ve got in the album at home?”

“Just forget about them right now,” answered Bluff, who knew that he himself figured in not a few of them, often in rather undignified attitudes, for instance where the wide-awake artist had happened to catch him sitting astride a limb, with an angry bull below.

Within two hours they had come back again to the boatyard; and Bluff, with the help of Jerry, managed to get aboard all their traps, brought from home.

“Good, there’s going to be plenty of room,” Bluff declared, as he tugged several of the last bundles up the gang-plank leading to the deck of the boat; “because we carry enough duffle to sink a small boat – guns, cooking utensils, blankets, clothes bags with changes of woollens, photographic stuff by the bushel. And there come Frank and Will, loaded to the gunwales with packages, too.”

“Is that all the grub we’re going to stack up with, for a voyage that may take four or six weeks?” demanded Jerry, in dismay, when the newcomers put their packages down aboard the houseboat.

“Oh! dear me, no,” said Will; “these are only the little extras we picked up on the way here; fruit and cakes, and some things we happened to forget in the grocery. The wagon-load will be along shortly now.”

“That sounds about right,” declared Jerry. “Honest, now, I’m that hungry a wagon-load of grub has the proper sort of ring, because I think I can make away with the entire collection at a sitting. Bring on your whole ham, and a dozen or two fried eggs. Think of the delicious coffee our friend Bluff here used to make, when he got his hand in. Oh! how can I wait till we’re afloat, for supper to come along?”

“Well, there’s the wagon right now,” said Frank; “so we needn’t be long in having Mr. Whittaker set us afloat on the river. After that some of us will have to man the big sweep here, and guide the boat.”

“And think of us wise ones figuring on having an engine to do all the work?” exclaimed Jerry, throwing up his hands. “But Bluff here has got a nice little surprise for you, boys.”

“What is it, Bluff?” asked Will, eagerly.

“It’s about a name for our new craft,” replied the other, with a knowing look on his face. “You see, we had it all made up to call her the Paragon or perhaps the Wanderer. But, fellows, after setting

my eyes on the condition of affairs here, it struck me that names like those would be sort of out of order. And while Jerry was waiting to see the rest of our things loaded on the wagon, I just stepped into a paint shop, and had him fix me up something on a neat little board. This goes over the door here, and can be read half a mile away. Now, hold your breath, boys!”

With that he began to undo a package he had brought, and which was carefully tied up in brown paper. Whipping the long narrow board free, presently Bluff held it up to the very spot where he had declared he meant to fasten it with nails. And as the others read what he had had painted on the signboard, they gave a shout of appreciation, for the name seemed to just hit the right chord.

It was “Pot Luck!”

CHAPTER IV – THE PERIL ON THE RIVER

“What do you think of it, boys?” asked Bluff, as he stood there, still holding up the board over the cabin door.

“Couldn’t have picked out a better name if you’d looked over the whole dictionary,” declared Frank. “It strikes right at the heart of things.”

“We’re sure going to take *pot-luck* while we’re aboard this jolly rover!” remarked Jerry, with a rollicking laugh, as he swept his hand around at the bare condition of the cabin’s interior. “Your uncle must have known what sort of boys we were, and how we’d manage to get along with a makeshift boat.”

“Well,” said Bluff, “I’m glad you like my choice. Just happened to think of it, you know; and seemed like it covered our case. And so *Pot Luck* goes; eh, boys?”

“There’s a hammer, and some nails on a shelf inside here, so you can hang it up where it belongs in a jiffy,” remarked Will, darting inside to bring the articles he mentioned to Bluff, who was still standing there with his arms extended.

And a few lusty blows from the hammer served to fasten the board up securely.

“Hurrah! three cheers for the good old *Pot Luck!*” cried Jerry; and they were given with a will, much to the amusement of some ship carpenters repairing a tugboat near by.

“If we had our flag hoisted now,” observed Bluff, “I’d dip the colors to the christening of the houseboat. As it is, we take off our hats to her.”

“Long may she wave; or, rather, ride the waves!” commented Frank.

“And safe may she carry the Outdoor Chums on their voyage to the Sunny South,” remarked Will. “May no tempest toss her about like a chip; and may she skip all the sand bars they say are always lying in wait to grip a floating boat.”

The arrival of the wagon carrying their supplies put an end to further talk; and for some little time all of them were as busy as bees storing the things on board.

“Never mind where they go now,” Frank had said, in the beginning. “After we get fairly afloat we can stow them in a better way. All we want now is to make sure they don’t get under our feet.”

“Or else drop overboard,” added Jerry, who had made sure to hang a canvas-covered ham where it would be particularly safe; for fried ham was one of his favorite dishes; and Jerry had dozens of them in his list of prize feeds.

Finally the empty wagon told that all had been taken aboard. Frank checked off the articles, and announced that nothing they had paid for was forgotten.

“And now to see about getting pushed out in the current, where we’ve got to work our passage,” he observed; at which the others manifested their delight.

Will, true to his passion, had seized upon his camera, and seemed ready to get some sort of snapshot of the “launching,” as he termed it. Whenever anything out of the usual was about to take place, Will could be depended on to show up, eager to transfer the scene to a plate or film, and so insure its being enjoyed for all time to come, affording much amusement and often laughter.

Jerry was already going around the inside of the cabin, with a mysterious look on his face, sounding the wooden walls, and evidently trying to locate some place of concealment where a queer old fellow would be apt to hide a lot of valuables, and then forget all about them until stricken down by some accident in far-away New Orleans.

Apparently the others would never hear the end of that idea until the cruise came to a termination, or the persistent Jerry unearthed a solution of the mystery.

The boat builder had a way of warping the houseboat out of his enclosure, and setting it adrift on the bosom of the Mississippi. At this point the river looked to be quite a good-sized stream to

the boys; but later on they would deem this next door to a creek, after they had navigated the lower reaches, where it is sometimes twenty miles across from bank to bank.

The last word was said, and Mr. Whittaker waved his hand to the four young voyagers, wishing them the best of luck.

“Whoop! we’re off at last!” cried Bluff, as the current took the floating houseboat in its grip, and began to carry the unwieldy craft slowly along.

“Take a hand here, and be ready to swing her further out into the river,” called Frank. “It’s dangerous to keep near the shore, the boat builder said. All together, now, boys; away she goes!”

When four stout young college boys put their shoulders to the task, something has just got to be doing. And as they toiled at that big sweep the clumsy houseboat slowly but steadily lurched away from the shore, and began to get more of the force of the current, that always runs stronger toward the middle of the river.

The city lay behind them now, and none of the boys felt the least bit of regret. They loved the open, and outdoor life was with them a passion.

Looking back, they could admire the picture that was presented to Will when he snapped his camera upon the last glimpse they would have of St. Paul, lying on the upper reach of the mighty river.

“Oh! don’t I feel like whooping it up, though!” cried Jerry; “because we’ve made a start on our long voyage!”

“Makes me think of that other trip we took down in Florida, when we had that fine little launch to handle, and saw something of life along the coast after we came out of that river,” Frank was saying, as he kept pushing with the sweep, so as to clear the shore more than ever.

“Sure it does,” echoed Bluff, enthusiastically. “Fact is, fellows, we’ve been through so many exciting affairs that nearly everything that happens is bound to make us remember some other adventure. Hey! me to sound the well here, and see if she’s taking water fast. Wouldn’t be a very nice thing to have our boat go down with us, before we’d been moving an hour.”

“Oh! no danger of that, Bluff,” Frank remarked, reassuringly; “Mr. Whittaker told me he had himself looked her all over while she was there in his basin; and he gave me to understand that there wasn’t a piece of rotten wood in all her timbers. Fact is, he said she was good for many years yet.”

“That sounds all right, Frank, but the best of boats will take water; and I can pump it up right now,” Bluff insisted.

“Well, suppose you keep at work,” the other continued, obligingly. “I like to have everybody satisfied when I’m sailing a boat. Pump away till you’re tired, if you feel that way. It’s silly to carry a cargo of water, when we’ve got such a lot of better things aboard.”

So Bluff amused himself with the pump as long as he could get any considerable stream to respond to his muscular efforts.

The other three hung about the sweep; and when Frank thought they ought to work out still further from the shore below the city, he found a pair of eager assistants to help him man that guiding oar.

Frank could see the time coming when he might not have such willing hands; and when the task of pushing that sweep would bring out many a grunt and groan from Bluff and Jerry. But everything was new now, and they actually thought it fun to throw their sturdy young shoulders against the long handle, and bending to the job, urge the boat sideways through the swirling water.

“About when do we think of getting supper?” asked Jerry, after a little time had elapsed, and they could no longer see signs of the city that was situated on the eastern shore of the river.

“Listen to him; would you, Frank?” cried Bluff. “Always wanting to eat, and cut down our stock of rations. Why, it isn’t more’n four o’clock yet, and at this time of year it won’t get dark till near eight.”

“Four hours more!” called out the indignant Jerry; “do you mean we don’t get any of that good grub till then? I just won’t stand for it, that’s what! And I give you fair warning right now, that at five,

sharp, I start the fire a-going in that stove. I'm going to get the first meal aboard, because Frank said I might; so don't either one of you open your mouths to say a word."

"Oh! all right," returned Bluff; who had really been managing matters so as to coax Jerry to undertake this part of the drudgery; when he would praise up his cooking in such a way that the other could hardly wait for another meal-time to roll around; "we know there isn't a fellow aboard who can hold a candle to you when it comes to slinging dishes together; that is, if you haven't forgotten, since going to college, all you ever knew in the old days."

"Me forgot how to cook?" ejaculated Jerry, warmly, and falling into the neat little trap in a way that made Frank turn to Will, and wink his eye several times. "Why, I tell you I'm a better hand at it than ever I was. After you've tasted my supper just you tell me the honest truth; that's all."

"I will, Jerry," said Bluff, keeping a straight face, though Frank knew he was chuckling with delight over the success of his little dodge, "and you can depend on it I'll never try to deceive you. If you can beat the meals you used to dish up in the old times, sure you must be a wonder."

"There's smoke around that bend there, Frank; what do you suppose makes it?" Will asked at this interesting moment.

"I suppose some steamboat is coming up the river," replied Frank.

"That's right," added Bluff, who had very good ears. "The breeze is dead against us, but I can hear the whoof of her escape steampipes as she butts up against the stiff current. I reckon we'll all get used to that grunting sound before we wind up this trip."

"I hope she gives us plenty of room," continued Will, a little nervously, as he planted himself where he thought he could get the best view of the oncoming river boat, so that he could snap a picture of the very first craft they met after starting on their long voyage.

Bluff, being more daring by nature, started to laugh at what Will said.

"You're sure the timid one, Will," he remarked, contemptuously, perhaps, or it might be in a sort of condescending way; "why, the river is big, and there's plenty of room for a dozen steamboats to pass us by; unless the pilots happen to be taking a snooze at the wheel."

"There she pokes her nose around the bend!" called out Jerry.

"Seems to me, Frank, that she's heading right at us, like there was only one little channel in this big river, and we happened to be sailing down the same. Say, don't you think we ought to get a move on, and pull farther over to the shore?" and Will dropped his camera to the deck, as he laid a hand on the steering oar, which Frank had started to push against once more.

"Jump in, boys, and go at it with all your might!" Frank called out.

Bluff and Jerry began to realize that, after all, a river may be narrow, even if the banks do seem to be far apart; since there can be only fifty or one hundred or two hundred feet in which a steamboat drawing a certain amount of water may with safety proceed.

The boat that was pushing up the river was indeed heading directly for them. Perhaps the pilot was doing something else in his little cage aloft, for just at the minute none of them could see him there. He may have stooped down to light his pipe, having secured the wheel meanwhile.

"Oh! we're going to be run down right in the start of the trip!" exclaimed Will, whose face had turned white as he saw the steamboat continuing to head in a direct line for the *Pot Luck*.

"Push harder, boys!" cried Frank, shutting his teeth tight together, and throwing his weight against the bending oar with the ferocity that a bucking "tackle" might show in a battle on the gridiron, when the fate of the game depended on his grappling with the fellow who was running with the ball for a decisive touchdown.

Bluff and Jerry saw how serious the situation was, and they bent every energy in their frames toward doing something that would cause the clumsy houseboat to move out of the way of the oncoming craft.

Already, in imagination, they could hear the crash as the bow cut them down; and the next instant they would be struggling in the current, away out from the shore, and likely to be drawn under the stern wheel of the unattached towboat.

Just then the steersman raised up his head in view in the frame that marked the window of the pilot house. They saw him stare at them as though hardly able to believe his eyes. Then he started to frantically whirl the wheel around, as if hoping to yet avert the accident that seemed so sure. The boat began to respond to his demand, but so slowly that it still looked as though only by what would be next door to a miracle could the *Pot Luck* avoid being smashed into kindling wood against the bow of the advancing power craft.

And yet, such was the boy's passion for his hobby, that Will, leaving the sweep, at which he could not find room beside his chums, sprang over to his camera, and took a picture of the nearby towboat, even while expecting to hear the shock of collision the next minute.

CHAPTER V – THE FIRST NIGHT AFLOAT

“Hard a-port!” the pilot of the river boat was calling.

Fortunately, that was just what Frank had started to do. Had his judgment been at all defective in the start, all would have been lost; for there was certainly no time to reverse, and go the other way.

It was quite an exciting time. Will managed to “snap” the three boys straining at that clumsy big steering oar called the “sweep”; with the towboat apparently dead ahead. It would, doubtless, give him an odd little creep every time he looked at the picture; for of the quartette Will was more inclined to be timid than any of his chums.

Of course the river boat had shut off steam, and was no longer pushing hard up against the current. Indeed, her stern wheel even began to churn the water wildly, in the endeavor to back, and thus at least lessen the blow, if one had to follow.

It was the onward rush of the houseboat with the current that proved the most dangerous factor in the matter; for there was no means of staying the progress of the *Pot Luck*.

Closer still they came; and Will even gripped a portion of the gunwale of the floating craft, under the impression that a collision was about due; when all of a sudden some new freak of the current seemed to seize the apparently doomed houseboat, for with a whirl the *Pot Luck* started on a new tack.

They passed so close to the side of the towboat that any one of the boys might, had they so desired, thrust out a hand, and touched the planking.

Frank sighed with relief, to realize that after all their voyage was not fated to be nipped in the bud at the very start.

“Hurrah!” cried Bluff; but his voice was too weak for the sound to be much louder than a hoarse croak.

The pilot was shaking his fist at them from above as they swept past, and uttering hard words. Little they cared for what he said, since every boyish heart was full of thanksgiving, after the scare. Possibly they were in the wrong, since the channel seemed to be no place for a helpless houseboat likely to be met at any time by an up-river tow that would stretch from side to side.

“Whew! that was a narrow escape, though!” Jerry exclaimed, as he fell back, panting for breath after his labor at the sweep.

“It ought to teach us a lesson while we’re on the upper Mississippi,” Frank remarked, himself willing to rest a bit from his labors.

“You don’t mean, I hope, that we ought to learn to talk back, so as to give these river pilots as good as they send?” ventured Will, now recovering from his attack of the “shakes,” and hoping none of his mates had noticed how pale he had been.

“That would take years of practice, even if a fellow wanted to try it,” replied Frank, with a nervous little laugh. “No, what I meant was this: while the river is as small as it is now, with only a certain channel for big boats to follow, we must keep nearer the shore, and out of the passage. Then we’ll stand no danger of being run down, you see.”

“Oh!” remarked Bluff, with uplifted eyebrows; “that’s the way it stands, eh? And I was dead sure the fault all lay with that sleepy pilot. He must have been taking a nap, not to see us, till it was nearly too late to keep from smashing into us.”

“Well, I hardly believe it was as bad as that,” Frank affirmed. “He had a pipe between his teeth when he poked his head up, and I imagine he must have stooped just to light it, so as to be out of the wind. But I hope it will be a long day before we have another shave as close as that one.”

There were still a couple of hours of daylight left before evening would descend upon them, and they considered it good policy to keep on the move for some time yet. When the sun had set they could look for a promising place at which to tie up, and spend the coming night.

To these boys, accustomed as they were to a small lake, and a stream connected with the same that was hardly more than a creek, the upper Mississippi seemed particularly grand. It was a noble river, with very picturesque shores, and something new attracting their eager attention with almost every passing minute.

Later on in the voyage, when they were navigating the lower stretches of the mighty river, its vastness might appal them, but could never excite their admiration as this early part of the cruise did.

There were not many vessels afloat at this stage. Navigation does not begin to show such bustle above Cairo as below the junction city, where the flood of the Ohio is the first considerable body of water to join forces with the Mississippi.

Still, to these boys from the interior, there was much to see; and one or the other seemed to be calling out perpetually, drawing attention to certain features of the landscape on either bank, the river itself, or some craft that appeared in view.

True to his word, Jerry, at a certain hour, vanished within the cabin; and presently smoke ascending from the pipe that projected above the flat roof announced that the first stage of supper had been taken.

By slow degrees Frank was working the boat in toward the shore on which it had been decided to pass the night. This being their first experience aboard such a craft, he believed that they had better take no risks of losing a good chance for anchoring to a friendly tree.

True, there did seem to be an anchor aboard, to be used in an emergency; but Frank had learned from Mr. Whittaker that the best way for tying up for the night was to find some means of using the stout cable. And he had also been warned to beware of getting into a shallow creek; since the river has a mean way of sometimes dropping half a foot during a single night; and in consequence they might find the houseboat stranded until another rise came along, which, in summer time, might not be for several weeks.

Perhaps the delightful aroma that began to drift out of the partly open cabin door helped to urge Frank to hasten. At any rate, in less than half an hour after Jerry disappeared, the clumsy boat was pushed in close to the overhanging shore, and nimble Bluff clambered up the bank, to whip the cable-end twice around an accommodating tree that happened to be growing just where it would prove of greatest use to the young river cruisers.

After that there was really little to do. Bluff got out a couple of fish lines and proceeded to cast them from the stern, having secured a piece of meat from the cook with which to bait them.

Before they went to bed he had hauled in quite a good-sized channel catfish, an ugly, dark-skinned creature, with keen pointed spikes along his spine, which Frank warned them must be avoided unless they wished to have a poisoned hand. Yet uninviting as the fish looked, the boys all pronounced it good eating when, in the morning, they had it for breakfast.

Night settled down about them as Jerry announced that supper was ready. The illumination of the interior of the cabin was not all that they could wish, and more than one complaint was heard as they sat around the table, which when not in use could be dropped so that it lay along the wall.

"I think I saw a big lamp somewhere about," Frank declared; "and to-morrow I'll see what I can do with it. Yes, there's where it used to hang, right over the table. If it can be made to work it ought to give us plenty of light. Bring out the two lanterns we made sure to fetch along, Bluff; with their help we might get on for one night."

Indeed, they were all so happy that it would take many shortcomings of this type to disturb them to any great extent.

It had really been a whole year now since the Outdoor Chums had enjoyed an outing together, because of being away at college. Old memories thronged their minds as they sat there, enjoying that first meal, and the talk was connected with many events of the past.

"I haven't had such a feed all the time I've been away from home," declared Bluff. "And, Jerry, honest now, I really begin to believe that you *have* improved in your cooking more'n a little."

Jerry fell into the trap in a way that made Frank smile behind his hand.

“A little!” he echoed, warmly; “why, I’m going to surprise the lot of you pretty soon. You wait and see. I used to be a greenhorn, and do things just in the old rough and ready camp way; but now I’ve studied the scientific methods of a *chef*. And I’ve got a whole lot of messes I’m going to ring on you fellows sooner or later.”

“If they’re as good as what you gave us to-night, you can’t begin too soon,” remarked Bluff, keeping his face straight; though Frank saw him send a sly wink in his direction once or twice.

All of the boys were tired, and anxious to try their bunks. These were ranged along one side of the cabin wall, two and two, “Pullman style,” as Bluff called it.

They had brought their own blankets along, because it was not known whether the boat was supplied. Plenty were found aboard in a box; but they smelled so strongly of camphor that the boys preferred to use their own.

Frank was the last one to crawl in. He had taken a turn on deck to see that all was well, and no peril hanging over them from a break in the cable. This uneasiness of the first night afloat would soon wear away, of course; when the boys might be able to take things as they came without worrying about anything.

Frank felt very comfortable in his bunk, and soon snuggled down to sleep. He lay there for half an hour or more, however, the situation was so novel to him; but finally it must have passed away.

Some time later he awoke, and in the darkness was for the moment unable to place himself. He could hear the other boys breathing hard, and also the gurgle of the river as it swirled past the blunt end of the beamy houseboat.

Then Frank received a sudden shock. Plainly he heard someone try the door of the cabin from without, as though a prowler had dropped on the deck of the *Pot Luck*, and was endeavoring to find an entrance; bent on stealing some of the goods which the young voyagers had loaded up with, when making their start on the long cruise down the Mississippi.

CHAPTER VI – WHAT FRANK FOUND ON DECK

Frank sat up part way, leaning on his elbow, as he listened for a repetition of the strange sound. His heart was beating at an unusual rate, but his mind was as clear as a bell.

Just then he remembered placing his shotgun within reach of his extended arm, if he but chose to lean out of the lower bunk. And he also congratulated himself that the choice of sleeping quarters for the voyage had favored him with one of the two bunks close to the floor of the cabin.

Yes, he certainly could hear someone, or something, tampering with the door. He knew that they had tied up in a rather lonely spot; but it was hard to imagine any wild animal coming aboard to investigate this clumsy craft.

And no wild animals, at least none found outside the countries of apes and monkeys, were able to try the handle of a door, actually turning it several times.

“What is it, Frank?” breathed a faint whisper close to his ears; and he became conscious of the fact that Will had also heard the sound, and was listening in his lower berth, his heart doubtless almost standing still with sudden anxiety.

For answer Frank slipped gently out of his bed. His outstretched hand came in contact with his gun, simply because he knew just where he had placed the weapon. It was a double-barreled shotgun, a hammerless, that had been given to Frank at his last birthday by his three chums, and which as yet he had not had the pleasure of using much.

He knew that Will must have guessed what he was doing, for he caught the intake of breath that signified renewed alarm.

Frank, however, did not creep toward the door, and fling it suddenly open, as no doubt his chum anticipated he would do. He had not the slightest idea of shooting at any intruder, his sole intention being to give the other a good scare, that would be apt to make him think twice before returning again to the moored houseboat.

There were four windows to the cabin, small affairs, each covered with the heavy wire that is used in stables, and places where, air being needed, it is also advisable to keep out intruders. But Frank happened to know that one of these had been only partly covered in this manner, and that there was plenty of room whereby he could thrust the barrels of his gun out, in order to shoot.

This he did without any further delay.

The boom of the shotgun sounded loud in the confined space of the houseboat cabin.

“Whoop!” yelled Bluff, as he came tumbling down from his elevated berth, doubtless under the impression that an earthquake had dropped in upon them for a visit.

Jerry followed suit instantly. Meanwhile, Frank was feeling for his little electric torch, which he had kept within reach of his hand, in case he wanted to see the time during the night, an alarm clock being one of the fixtures of the *Pot Luck* equipment.

“What under the sun happened?” gasped Jerry; and just then Frank snapped on the bright ray of light, when they immediately saw that he was holding his gun in the other hand.

“Get some clothes on, fellows!” said Frank, quietly; yet smiling to see the blank expression on the faces of the pair who had been aroused as if by the discharge of a cannon.

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