

ARUNDEL LOUIS

MOTOR BOAT BOYS'
RIVER CHASE; OR, SIX
CHUMS AFLOAT AND
ASHORE

Louis Arundel

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or, Six Chums Afloat and Ashore**

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CHAPTER I READY FOR THE START

“What are we waiting for, Commodore Jack?”

“Yes, I’m the last one to be in a hurry, boys, but it seems to me we ought to be getting away. The river ain’t waiting up for us, you notice.”

“Hold your horses, Buster, and count noses; perhaps you’ll find that there are only five of us present.”

“Huh! guess you’re right, Josh Purdue; but what’s become of Jimmie. I never heard a splash, and I don’t see him swimmin’, if he is a regular water duck. Water’s too cold any way, this fine April day, for goin’ in.”

“Why, Jack sent him back to the post office to see if there was any mail. He’s thinking of George here, who’s expecting a letter from that sweet little Southern girl he met last fall, when we were knocking around the Florida Keys in our motor boats, after coming down the coast.”

“Rats! speak for yourself, Josh!” exclaimed the fifth member of the party, whose name seemed to be George, and who was a nervous, active boy, one of those kind who are always wanting to do things in a hurry; “didn’t I see you get a lavender colored letter only last week, and when I walked past him purposely in the post office, fellows, oh! my goodness! you ought to have sniffed the lovely perfume that oozed out of that envelope. Did Josh tear the end off? Not that I could notice; but he took out his knife, and cut it so carefully like, you’d think – ”

“Sure we’ve got all the grub aboard, Jack?” asked the said Josh, who had turned more or less red in the face with confusion at being so unexpectedly attacked, “because it’d be a mighty tough thing to get snugly settled in the first camp of the season, and find you’ve gone and left that elegant home-cured ham to home.”

“Our ham’s safe, all right; I’m looking right at it now!” declared George, as he stared at the rosy face of Josh, and chuckled aloud.

“I’ve gone over the list, and checked things off, with the help of Herb here; and so far as we could tell, there’s nothing missing. Things seem to be in good shape, after lying all winter in the boat-yard. And the engines work splendidly,” was the report of the boy named Jack, to whom the others seemed to look as though he might have some right to that title of “Commodore,” being the chief officer of the motor boat club.

They were standing on the river bank just below a small town that was situated on the Upper Mississippi; and fastened to the shore by stout cables were three power boats of vastly different patterns.

One of them, owned by George Rollins, was a speed boat, narrow of beam, and capable of doing wonderful stunts in the way of annihilating space, whenever the big powered motor chose to act decently, which happened more frequently in these days than in the past, when it used to give the skipper much trouble. This boat was known as a freak, and went under the name of the Wireless.

The second was a good, roomy craft, which George called a “punkin-seed,” because it took up so much room. Herbert Dickson was the satisfied owner of this boat, and as it bore the name of Comfort, it may readily be understood that the captain was a quiet, unassuming lad, who as a rule minded his own business, and always wanted comfort before speed. Still, it had often happened that

Herb got to his destination long before George, who spent so much time tinkering with his balky engine, while that of the roomy craft had never been known to act sulky, or quit business, but worked right along like a well-oiled clock.

The third boat was a happy medium between the other two, and went under the name of the Tramp. Jack Stormways held the wheel of this, and as a rule the absent member, Jimmie Brannagan, served as the crew. The Tramp was a reliable article, and probably better fitted for cruising than either of the others, when one wanted an all-round craft, capable of speed, and yet not cramped for room, or cranky in action.

These six lads had formed a club, and during the last two years had been able, by reason of fortunate circumstances whereby they came into a considerable sum of money, to make several long cruises.

These have been narrated at length in previous volumes of this Series, and the reader of the present book, who has not had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Jack and his chums up to now, and would know more about them, is referred to the earlier numbers for full particulars, with the assurance that he will find an abundance of lively reading there.

Their first cruise had been down the Father of Waters all the way to New Orleans, where they had a mission to perform. After that they had the boats shipped to Clayton on the St. Lawrence; and for the better part of vacation time cruised among the Thousand Islands, and on the Great Lakes, going up through the wonderful Soo Canal, and seeing everything that was worth while in that enchanted region.

Then, in the winter, they were given a glorious chance to start down the Atlantic coast, taking the inside route away from the ocean, and reaching Florida after some of the most stirring adventures ever told.

And as their time had not been exhausted, they put in some weeks of pleasure in navigating among the Keys of the Florida peninsula, meeting with many stirring adventures, all of which have been faithfully chronicled for the reading of our boys.

And now, here were the Easter holidays come, and a little river excursion planned, down to a big island that lay some ninety miles or more below the home town, and which was an object of more or less curiosity to the passengers on the river steamboats, because of the strange stories that were told about mysterious lights seen there, and queer noises that had been heard from time to time.

Fishermen sometimes stopped there, in several little old huts they had erected; but of late years they seemed to have rather abandoned the island for other more favored localities; declaring that the fishing was no longer good there, and all that; but it was secretly passed around that they had been frightened off through some means; and so the island had come to have a bad name.

These bold lads liked nothing better than to explore such a place, and learn for themselves whether there was any truth in the wild stories going around. There was always a sort of peculiar fascination for them in exploding silly stories about haunted houses, and mills, and all such things. On several occasions Jack and his five chums had just looked into such affairs, and proved how foolish the talk had been. And during the winter they had often talked about Bedloe's Island, and what people were saying about it; until finally some one proposed that when Easter came along, with more than a week of freedom from school duties, they take a run down the river, and camp there; fish and loaf, and just have the best possible time, in spite of all the ghosts that ever rose up from the grave when the solemn hour of midnight came around.

And here they were, only waiting for the return of Jimmie, when they meant to go aboard, cast off the lines, float out upon the swirling waters of the great river, and then starting their engines, go speeding down the current.

Although George, always in a hurry, might be expected to show impatience, even stout Buster, who was well named, had confessed to a feeling of anxiety to get started. They all loved this life on

the water so much, that after being shut up between the walls of the high school building for some months now, five days in a week, they were just wild to be afloat.

“What d’ye suppose Clarence Macklin’d say if he saw our bully little flotilla all ready, with steam up, to start on this new voyage?” Buster asked, a few minutes afterwards, as they stood there, keeping an anxious eye toward the border of the near-by town, and along the river road which Jimmie would have to use to reach them.

This same Clarence had always been a thorn in the flesh of the motor boat boys ever since the club was started. He had certain habits that the others did not like, and when he applied for admission, it was no surprise that he had been black-balled.

After that Clarence, who was of a mean disposition, could never forgive Jack and his chums; and he had lost no opportunity to annoy them, often going to extremes in his desire to make them all the trouble that he could.

During their cruise down the Mississippi, and when upon the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes he had bobbed up every little while, with his fast boat, known under the name of Flash, and there were times when Jack and his friends just hated the sight of that contemptuous face of Clarence Macklin.

So when Buster mentioned it now, the boys looked at each other, with a little anxious expression on their faces.

“Oh! I guess we needn’t look for any more trouble from Clarence,” Jack remarked. “He’s kept clear of us all winter, you know; and perhaps he’s let the whole thing drop. I hope so, anyway.”

“Well, I know Clarence better than the rest of you,” said Herb, “because I used to chum with him before I found better fellows to go with; and you can take it from me that when he’s quiet, that’s the time he’s to be feared most of all, for he’s sure to be hatching up mischief. That brain of his is never still. And ever since we got back from Florida he’s been listening, second-hand, to the great stories we had to tell, and just eating his heart out with envy because he couldn’t have been there too.”

“Yes,” put in Josh Purdue, with a frown, for he had had many unpleasant experiences with the said Clarence, and the mention of that name acted on him as a red flag would on a bull; “and I happen to know that Bully Joe, the feller Clarence still hangs on to for his crony, heard me tell a gentleman about the trip we expected to take during Easter holidays; and when I saw him running down the street so fast you could a-played marbles on his coat-tail, I just knew he was in the biggest hurry ever to tell Clarence all about it.”

“Oh! then that explains why you’ve been keeping an eye out on the river so much all the time we’ve been standing here,” remarked Jack. “Now, I thought you were only trying to figure on the strength of the current, and how long it ought to take us to drop down to Bedloe’s Island.”

“We’ll be there before the sun drops out of sight; that is, wind and weather, and the engine of the Wireless permitting,” said Josh.

“Now, never you mind about what my motor is going to do,” spoke up George, who, in spite of all the tricks that had been played on him by his balky engine, still had an abiding faith in its ability to do wonders, and was always sure he had solved the combination that had been bothering him, this time for good. “I’ve been working a whole lot on that same machine since our last cruise down among the oyster reefs of Florida, and I’m dead sure I’ve got it fixed now so that she’ll never go back on me again. P’raps she won’t be quite as swift as before, but then I’m coming to the conclusion that speed ain’t everything when you’re on a long trip. You fellows used to take it so comfy, while I was always fretting, and worrying over my motive power.”

“Hear! hear!” exclaimed Jack, “the old buccaneer has seen a great light, and is half converted right now. Chances are, Herb, he’ll be offering to trade with you before long.”

At that George looked daggers at the Comfort, riding like a contented duck on the water near by.

“Perhaps I may, when I want a tub,” he said, severely; “but I don’t think that day’ll ever arrive, Jack.”

“All the same,” spoke up Josh, who had often been Herb’s companion on the beamy boat, and knew the luxury of having plenty of room, without being told a thousand times to keep still, because he was rocking the boat; “I can remember the time when you were mighty glad to come aboard that same tub, and beg a breakfast from the skipper, because your silly cranky Wireless was out of commission or sunk. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, George. Time may come again when you’ll feel like begging the pardon of that noble craft. Many’s the happy day I’ve had while serving my time on her. She’s a dandy, that’s what.”

“Thank you, Josh!” said Herb, quietly; but there was a satisfied gleam in his eyes that spoke louder than words; for Herb really loved his boat, and took it to heart more than easy-going, reckless George imagined, when the scornful member of the club chose to speak slightly of her.

Possibly George felt twinges of remorse, as his memory carried him back to certain occasions in the adventurous past; for he tossed his head, and went on to say:

“Oh! she’s all right, for those who don’t care anything about getting along in a rush; but you know I never could stand that sort of thing. I’m too much a bundle of nerves. When I’ve set my mind on doing a thing I don’t like to be kept waiting. Herb wouldn’t fancy my boat any more’n I do his; and there you are.”

“Well, we’ll soon be off now,” remarked Buster, joyfully.

“Yes, because there comes Jimmie,” added Jack.

Jimmie Brannagan was an Irish boy, as his name announced. He was a sort of ward of Jack’s father, who held some little money in trust until the lad came of age. His parents had been of a good family, and while Jimmie chose to talk in a species of brogue, that was amusing to his mates, he could really use as good language as any fellow, if he chose to exert himself. He lived with the Stormways, and was much in the company of Jack, being a warm-hearted boy, impulsive, and a friend who would stick through thick and thin.

He was seen to be half running along the road, as though eager to join his comrades, and get started on the joyous trip; for Jimmy was as happy as a bird when aboard a boat. As a rule he acted as Jack’s team-mate; but there were times when changes in the crews had to be made, owing to a disinclination on the part of Buster, Jimmy, and Josh to serve any great length of time aboard the wobbly Wireless; for they declared that the narrow boat was just about as nervous as its skipper, and kept the crew on edge all the time.

“What’s he waving that newspaper for, d’ye think?” Buster asked, presently.

“You might guess a thousand years, and never know,” remarked George, “but he’ll be along right soon now, and then we’ll find out. Take a sprint, Jimmie; stretch a single into a two-bagger, and slide for second! Here you come, old top! Now, what’s all the row about; tell us?”

Jimmie, red-faced, freckled, good-natured Jimmie, grinned, and held out the open newspaper toward them.

“Sure and they do be havin’ the dickens av a time up beyant us. Look at the illegant head-lines, would ye? ‘Bowld robbery! Thaves break into the Bank, and loot the Safe av a Forchune! Lawrence all excited over the visit av yeggmen! Reward offered for tha apprehension av the Rascals.’ Whoop! now, don’t that sound loike another time when we was sthartin’ down the river. History, begorra, does love to repate itsilf. But for the love av goodness lit’s get off. I’m that ager to feel the water gurgling underneath the keel av a boat, I could straddle a log, and take me chances av a cruise down the ould river. Jack, darlint, give the worrd!”

CHAPTER II

THE CRUISE BEGUN

“All aboard!” sang out Jack, as he thrust the paper containing such sensational news into his pocket, to be glanced over at some more convenient season, and little suspecting how it would enter into the fortunes of the party of fun-loving boys while on their Easter holidays’ cruise.

Everybody immediately seemed to be in motion, and the way in which the various crews stood by to cast off hawsers, while the skippers looked to their engines, was well worth seeing.

“Let go!” called the commodore of the boat club, when he saw that everything was ready.

The ropes were unfastened, and the three lads sprang aboard, just as the current began to grip each boat, and cause it to slowly start upon the new voyage that appeared so mild in the beginning, yet which was destined to be written down as one of the most adventurous of all those the six boys had enjoyed.

“Whoop! we’re off!” yelled Buster, as he scrambled on board the Wireless, in his usual clumsy way, that brought a word of warning from George, and caused the boat to careen badly.

“You will be off, if you try that sort of racket many times,” declared the skipper. “What d’ye take this racer for, a canalboat? Be more careful Buster, how you lounge around. I guess they nicknamed you right when they called you Hippopotamus, Pudding, and all that sort. Now, sit down exactly in the middle, and when you do have to move, be careful not to shift your weight too sudden-like. No boat can do its prettiest when it isn’t on an even keel.”

“Say, is my hair parted exactly in the middle, George? If it ain’t, please let me get it straight before you start!” observed the fat boy, with a touch of satire in his voice, something Buster seldom indulged in; but he had sailed the stormy seas with George before and could look back to many a sad time aboard that most uncomfortable Wireless; still the three fellows had drawn lots to see who would have to stand for the agony on this new cruise, and it had fallen to poor Buster to play the part of victim.

George did not reply to this shot. He was busy with his engine, and both the other boats were already moving off, with the rapid popping of their exhausts announcing that everything was working in apple-pie order.

“Please don’t tell me that we’re all up the flue, even before we get started, George?” pleaded Buster, turning pale with apprehension.

“Keep still, won’t you, Buster; you bother me,” replied the other, still working at his engine. “It’s only a little thing, that don’t matter much. And you see, it gives us a chance to let the others get a lead. You know how much I like to come up from behind, and rush ahead? Well, that’s what we’re going to do now. Be a sport, Buster, and don’t whine so much. Everything’s going to be lovely, and the goose will hang high, I can tell you.”

“I guess it will,” sighed the fat boy, with a resigned expression on his face, as though he realized that he was in for it, and might as well make the best of a bad bargain.

The boat was floating down the current, as Buster had pushed out from the shore with a pole, after getting aboard. The other craft had gotten some little distance away, and doubtless those on board were indulging in the usual “I told you so’s” that accompanied every mishap on the part of the Wireless, for both Jimmie and Josh could be seen looking back, and even waving their hands, as though saying good-bye.

Then all at once there came a quick series of sharp sounds, and George looked up with a proud expression on his face, as the little power-boat began to rush through the water at racehorse speed.

“What did I tell you, Buster?” he observed, as he clutched the wheel, and turned the boat’s head in a direct line with the others of the little fleet; “and after this, please don’t act so impatient.

Leave it all to me. An engine's a delicate thing to handle, and as full of whims as a girl. Even the weather affects them at times; and they just have to be coaxed, and led along. But I flatter myself I've got this thing down fine, now, and we won't have any trouble with it on this trip, while I cut circles around the other fellows."

That was a pet hobby with George, making speed, and "running rings" around his comrades. Nothing tickled him more than to be able to do this, even though it failed to bother Jack or Herb in the least.

"Mebbe you're right, George," replied Buster, meekly, "you see, when it comes to mechanics my education has been sadly neglected, and I couldn't run an engine if my very life depended on it. All I've noticed is, that the other motors don't seem to bother about weather, or any old thing. They go plodding right along like they had business to do, and didn't mean to be halted."

"That's just it, Buster," remarked the other eagerly, "they never have troubles of their own because they're slow-pokes, like heavy farm horses. It's the highly bred racer that's all nerves, you know. But look at us eating up space, will you? Don't we fly along, though? This is what I like, Buster. What are you looking at me that way for?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to sneeze, George, and I hope it won't – ker-chew! oh! my, it's coming again, ker-chew! Excuse me, George. I'll try and not let that happen often, if I can help it."

George looked at his companion rather suspiciously. He could not tell whether Buster really meant what he said, or was speaking in irony. But the gallant way in which the narrow boat was cutting the water gripped his attention again, and after that he could not bother himself with minor things.

They soon overtook the other two boats moving along in company. Jack could have easily gone ahead of the beamy Comfort had he wished, but he preferred to stay by Herb, so that the crews could exchange opinions from time to time. In his mind a large part of the pleasure to be gotten out of cruising came from this sociability; whereas George would be rushing off by himself, satisfied if only he could make a mile in a fraction less time than at any previous time.

In ten minutes George was far ahead, and making the water fly out on either side as he urged his engine on to do its prettiest.

"Up to his old tricks again," remarked Josh, as he tidied up a little aboard the Tramp, secretly delighted that luck had given him a berth with the commodore, whom he admired greatly.

"Well, what did you expect?" replied Jack, who was taking things easy, with his engine working like a charm, "what's bred in the bone can never be beaten out of the flesh, they say; and George, with his nervous ways, cares only for racing, whenever he can coax anybody to give him a go. But mark what I say, Josh, it's only a question of time before he rubs up against his old motor troubles again. He's never satisfied when he's got the thing running smoothly, but has to go tinkering at it to see if he can't get another fraction of speed out, and then all at once it balks, and refuses to work at all."

"Yes," remarked Josh, with a wide grin, "we may be towing the Wireless back home yet; and it wouldn't be the first time, either, Jack."

"Well, hardly," mused the skipper, smiling himself as memory carried him back to other scenes connected with their numerous cruises in these same boats.

"Does George know that we expect to tie up at noon, and have a bite ashore; or will he be silly enough to want to rush along that way, and get to the island long before we think of pulling in there?" Josh went on to ask.

"He knows our plans all right," answered the other, "though you can never tell what George will do, he's so full of notions. But as stuff to eat is aboard the roomy Comfort, and we're carrying the rest, unless he wants to starve poor old Buster, so as to cut down his weight, and make less ballast for the speed-boat to carry, I guess he'll haul in about eleven and wait for us."

"Oh! I don't envy Buster his job of holding down that bucking broncho of a Wireless," Josh chuckled. "I c'n see him right now, sitting there, holding on, and looking like he was tryin' to

accommodate his breathin' with the panting of the engine, while George he looks daggers every time Buster gulps in a wad of air at the wrong time."

"Oh! come now, Josh, it isn't quite so bad as all that," declared Jack, with a shake of his head. "And even George couldn't keep Buster from having his own way, once he gets started. It's good he learned how to swim long ago, because chances are, he'll be overboard more than once before this voyage is done."

"Mebbe George'll throw him over, when he gets nervous, and Buster keeps wobbling around, making the boat roll to beat the band, eh, Jack?"

"Well, you know how that is yourself, because that's what happened when you had the job of crew aboard his boat," the skipper of the Tramp went on to say; which reminder seemed to afford Josh considerable amusement, to judge from his laughter.

They went on steadily, putting mile after mile behind them. Now and then some river craft was encountered, though these were of course not near so numerous as would have been the case below the confluence of the Missouri and Ohio with the Father of Waters. Sometimes it was a steamboat that was breasting the current; or it might be a plodding towboat, with a barge or two alongside. And then again they overtook a queer looking shantyboat, which had the appearance, with its cabin, of a cheese box on a raft.

All these familiar sights were eagerly observed by Jack and his companion, as well as the two upon the other boat, for they recalled pleasant memories.

George had gone so far ahead that his little boat looked like a dot upon the water; but possibly he would remember in time that he had no means of satisfying hunger aboard the Wireless, and might anchor to await their coming, giving Buster a chance to wet a line, for the fat boy had taken a great fancy for fishing, and was always complaining that he did not get half the opportunities to indulge in his favorite sport that he would like.

Now and then they would pass a town upon either shore of the river, although as a rule these were not so plentiful in this section, where the banks were inclined to be marshy.

The morning was gradually wearing away, and everything seemed to be going smoothly. Josh expressed himself as surprised that hours had passed, and still the nettlesome speed-boat continued to keep going along, as though George had indeed finally mastered the secret of its precious unreliable behavior.

"But when George is around, you c'n expect any old thing to happen," he wound up with, "and even when things are working smoothly, he won't be satisfied till he upsets the combination again, you see if it ain't so."

Jack did not attempt to contradict his prediction, because he also knew George like a book and thought pretty much the same way.

Just about eleven, Josh declared that they seemed to be gradually getting nearer the pilot boat of the party, as George liked to have his craft called; though for that part he would have made a most unreliable guide, and had the others chosen to follow him, they would have been led into many more messes than actually fell to their lot.

"That's because Buster has rebelled," Jack observed, "there's been a mutiny aboard that craft; and George had been told that for one Buster doesn't mean to miss his lunch at noon, just because the Wireless is making a record run."

"Oh! you mean they've thrown the old mud hook over, and are waiting for us slow-pokes to come along, eh, Jack?"

"Just about that; but we're getting all the fun we want out of making slower time; and our engines won't go back on us either, in spite," laughed the other.

"Well, while we're gliding along in this fine way – I always like to use that word when speaking of cruising, it sounds so fine – I'll be getting up the menu for our first dinner ashore. It makes my mouth water just to think of a campfire again, after all that time. Brought your little old Marlin along,

didn't you, Jack? P'raps we might get a few late ducks while we're out, if all of 'em ain't gone north by now. And if Buster only does his duty, and grabs up a fish now and then, why, it'll be just great."

So Josh, who used to be something of a cook in times past, amused himself in a way that suited his fancy, while they drew closer and closer to the place where the speed-boat awaited them.

George was full of boasting as usual, and predicted a record run for his craft. None of the others disputed his assertions, but they exchanged looks, for they had heard all this sort of talk before, and then seen poor disappointed George only too glad to take a tow in the end, with his engine stubborn, or broken down.

Together they continued on down the river; where they could readily tie to the bank, and go ashore to cook dinner.

There was a great deal of climbing back and forth, and everybody but George seemed bustling with business; he sat there, and potted with his engine, as though some new idea had seized hold of him, and he meant to try one of his everlasting experiments that always ended so disastrously.

Then the voice of Buster was heard in the land, lamenting.

"It was there yesterday, because I put it in away with my own hands; and George here says he never opened that locker once; but now that I want to put it on, my new sweater has disappeared the funniest way ever. I wouldn't be surprised, fellers, if we found that some thief got aboard our boats last night, and couldn't resist taking that bully sweater with the red moon on the front; and that's what!"

CHAPTER III

BUSTER CAPTURES A FISH

“Chances are you left it behind in the shed where the boats were kept,” George remarked, looking up from his work, “but I wish you’d just step ashore, and let me go on with my little job here, Buster. Excuse me for saying it, but whenever you swing around it makes the boat rock just awful.”

“Oh! I’m a-goin’ right away, George, and only too glad for a chance to set foot again on something solid, that won’t sway every time I breathe wrong. Wait till I get my fish lines, will you? P’raps if I can’t have the pleasure of wearing my new sweater, I might manage to pick up a few small finny denizens of the mighty Mississippi. And when it comes to *fish*, I know you fellows are fond of most any kind that swims.”

“Except dog-fish; I draw the line there,” objected Josh. “But here’s some meat to bait your line with, Buster; you see, Jack brought a steak along, thinking we’d miss it all of a sudden; and we’re going to fry some onions with that. Makes your mouth water, don’t it?”

“Makes me eyes run a-peelin’ these same onions!” groaned Jimmie; “somebody please do be koinde enough to take out me hanky, and woipe me tears away. ’Tis remimberin’ me ould grandmither I am at this blissed minute and that’s what makes me cry.”

Buster kindly performed that brotherly duty, and then busied himself with his fish lines. Rod or pole he had none, nor did Buster ever bother with such a thing as a reel. A large hook, with a hunk of meat fastened to it, and dropped overboard, suited his ideas all right; after which he trusted to luck to bring him a capture.

The fire was started by Jack, and already Josh could be seen getting ready to serve as chef. He had fetched along a cute little white cap without a peak, which he donned whenever he had to serve as the “dish-slinger and pot wrestler,” as he was fond of calling his occupation. It was intended to stand for his badge of authority; and when he had it on, the rest were supposed to be his willing slaves, ready to jump at his bidding.

There is no part of an outing that suits boys better than preparing meals, unless it is in disposing of the same after they are cooked. With appetites whetted to a keen edge by the air, and freedom from anxiety, they can hardly wait until called to the feast, but wander around, begging the cook to please hurry, if he does not want to have a funeral on his hands.

There was always more or less merry talk passing back and forth while these six comrades tried and true, got dinner ready; for they were a good-natured lot, and very fond of each other, despite frequent bickerings, usually between George on the one hand, and some chum on the other.

Buster had managed to set his two lines, as best the conditions allowed. Since George was so touchy about his rocking the narrow boat with his clumsy movements, Buster had gone out to the beamy Comfort, and fastened one of his stout lines to a cleat he found handy. The other he had thrown out from the shore above, and tied to a stake driven into the earth, just as he had seen a snubbing-post used down in Florida, when sharks were being fished for around the inlets.

Every little while he would glance toward these lines, having arranged so that if a fish took hold, a little piece of white rag would be hoisted as a signal; very much on the order of that frequently used by pickerel fishermen, when watching a dozen or two holes cut through the ice, each with its separate line.

The cooking progressed slowly. Josh said he was out of practice, but that when he got his hand in, all would be smooth sailing again.

He had plenty of assistance, for every one but George and Buster hung around, ready to lend a hand; and after he had fixed his snares with the baited hooks at the end, even the fat boy was willing to do anything Josh asked.

Finally the cook announced that everything was ready, and that they could draw up to the board. Of course this latter was only a figure of speech, for there was not a sign of a board around; the things were placed right on the ground, while the diners were expected to get their supplies on a tin platter, and in a tin cup; after which they were at liberty to squat like tailors, with their legs drawn up under them; or else retreat to the boats for more comfortable seats.

“Talk to me about your banquets,” remarked Herb, as he started in on his rasher of steak and fried onions, “this beats anything that was ever invented. I wouldn’t change places with a king, right now.”

“Them’s my sintimints!” echoed Jimmie, as well as a fellow could who had his mouth crammed full at the moment, so that he had to talk from one side.

“Hurry up, George, or you’ll get left!” called Josh, noticing that the skipper of the speed boat had not come ashore.

“Oh! I suppose I’ll just have to, but I’d rather be left to work here,” replied George, nervously, whereat the rest glanced at each other, and the looks thus exchanged seemed to say as plainly as anything: “Wonder now if he’s gone and done it, mixed things up with his cranky old engine, and don’t seem able to get it to working right again; that would be just like Fussy George!”

It was more than pleasant to sit there, looking out upon the broad river and enjoying the feast that had been prepared as a starter to their camp life. The very wind that came sweeping across from the further shore, cool and delicious, seemed to be of a different brand to any that they enjoyed at home; so much do surroundings have to do with things.

No one seemed in any particular hurry but George, who bolted his dinner, and was back again on his boat long before any of the others had finished.

“Are we nearly half way there, do you think Jack?” asked Herb, who knew that the skipper of the Tramp kept track of all these things and had charts as well of the river.

“We’ve come forty-five miles since starting, because, you see, the current is pretty strong; and for once we haven’t been held up by George’s cranky boat,” replied Jack, lowering his voice a little when saying this last, since there was no necessity for offending the chum whose little oddities gave them more or less fun during a cruise.

“Then that would mean we’ve still got a good fifty to go,” suggested Buster.

“Somebody get a leather medal for Buster here, our Lightning Calculator. Now, it would take me ever so long to figure that forty-five from ninety-five really leaves fifty; but just see how he grabs the answer right off the reel. It won’t be long before he has a little ‘Professor’ tacked to his name,” and Josh chuckled as though he had really said something smart.

Buster did not seem to feel hurt; in fact, many of these little shafts just glanced from him as arrows might from the thick hide of a rhinoceros; which is not saying that Buster was impervious to ridicule, for that would be far from the truth, as he could be quite sensitive at times; but Josh he treated with supreme contempt whenever the latter tried to be funny at his expense.

All this while Buster had tried to keep one eye on the places where his fishing lines were out. He fancied several times that he saw a white rag start to show, but before he could scramble to his feet, which was quite an effort for him, it was all over, and proved to be only a nibble, so that on each occasion he had to sink back again, and have patience.

There were good fish in the old Mississippi, and he knew it, so why should he not have his share of the spoils? In his moments of leisure, while preparing his hooks and lines, no doubt Buster had pictured himself as hauling in some monster that would be the envy of all his camp-mates; and beside which he must have his picture taken, as positive proof that he was the successful angler.

Jack knew that once they started they would be apt to make their destination in less than five hours; so that there was no need of haste. He had seen much of George’s hurrying, and what grievous results it often brought in its train, that somehow he felt more averse to making haste than ever.

So he and Herb and Andy sat there, chatting, as they finished their dinner, with Buster squatting alongside like a great toad, waiting for that bite which did not seem to materialize very fast, and in a sort of hazy way listening to what was said by his three chums; Josh being busy with the cooking utensils, which he liked to keep as clean as sand and water could scour them, after the most approved camp methods known.

All at once there was a heave on the part of Buster; who seemed to be actuated by some wild impulse, for he made frantic efforts to get up; but as he had been sitting on one of his legs, it had gone to "sleep," so that even after the fat boy did succeed in gaining an erect position, he came very near falling over into the fire that was still smouldering.

"Hi! what's all this mean; got a fit, Pudding?" shouted the alarmed Josh, as he supported the swaying form of the other for just five seconds; when Buster broke loose, and went limping toward the river, uttering all sorts of vaporings, in his excitement.

"Oh! it's only a fish, after all," grunted Josh, who had begun to believe that there was something tremendous the matter.

But at any rate it meant a whole lot for Buster, who, scrambling aboard the Comfort made a bee line for the spot where he had fastened his stout cord. Sure enough the piece of white rag was fluttering from the top of the rudder post, having been pulled up there when the fish had seized the bait, and started away with it.

Everybody just naturally stopped whatever they were doing at the time, to watch the fisherman. Even George poked his head up to see what all the row was about, and for the moment forgot his troubles with that cranky engine.

Buster was giving little cries of mingled delight and wonder.

"Wow! it's sure a big one this time, boys! Takes your Uncle Nick to coax the dandies to take hold. Yes, I spit on my bait every time, and that's the trick to fetch 'em. That'll do, Josh, I'm running this circus, and I'd thank you not to butt in. Watch me land him now, boys! Say, ain't this fun, though? Worth while coming fifty miles to see me do the great act. Wow!"

"Look out, Bumpus, or he'll pull you in!" called Jack; but evidently the warning meant in good earnest, fell on deaf ears. Bumpus was not going to be denied the pleasure of landing his own capture.

They saw him unfasten the cord with trembling hands, hardly able to contain himself. Then he threw himself back in a noble attitude that made Josh compare him with "Ajax defying the lightning," which every one has seen in marble.

All at once Herb gave a shout that was echoed by others.

"Whip the cord around the cleat again, Buster, quick!"

Buster attempted to obey, realizing when it was too late that he had cut off more than he could manage when he tried to land that monster fish; but unable to do so, and unwilling to let go of the line, for he had a very stubborn nature, the next thing they knew there was a great splash, and Buster was wallowing in the yellow waters of the Mississippi.

CHAPTER IV

A MYSTERY LOOMS UP

That was not the first time Buster Longfellow had taken an involuntary bath in the Father of Waters, as his comrades knew only too well. At the same time, this fact did not lessen the excitement that followed his disappearance one little atom.

Such a splashing and grunting and wallowing as there was when the fat boy took that sudden plunge; why, one could easily imagine a whole troop of hogs had been coaxed in to being scrubbed, preparatory to an exhibition at the county fair.

And the way the water flew was a caution. A young whale working its way up the river from the gulf, or rather a porpoise, since whales are not to be found often in the Sunny South, could not have created a greater racket.

Of course every fellow, after that first shock, sprang to his feet, and made for the shore as fast as his legs could carry him. It might be a ludicrous sight, all very well, but there was a little element of danger connected with it; and they were comrades true, who could not stand by, and see poor Buster dragged out into the middle of the river by a fish.

When the splashing had in a measure subsided, they discovered the stout figure of Buster. He was standing in the yellow water up to his waist and tugging with all his might at the fish line, which he seemed to have wrapped around both hands, as though just determined that his prize should not get away.

Now the boy would gain a foot, and seem to be dragging his capture toward land; when there would be a sudden tremendous effort on the part of the fish to escape, and the first thing Buster knew, he was being pulled back again, though he fought tooth and nail to hold his own.

Once his feet flew from under him, owing to the slippery condition of the mud on which he stood. At that a great "Oh!" broke out from the other five boys; and Jack, who had been hastily removing some of his outer garments, with the intention of being ready in case his help was needed, was just on the point of jumping in, when Buster again emerged from the turmoil, rising up like a Neptune, the water pouring from his head like a young Niagara.

"Let him go, Buster; he's too much for you!" shrilled George, who was leaning over the edge of his boat with a pole in his hand, and regardless for once that the cranky Wireless careened far down until her beam end almost took in water.

"I won't!" snapped back the stubborn Buster, shaking the drops from his face, as a New Foundland dog might after a bath. "He's mine, and I'm going to grab him if it takes all summer, see?"

He had managed to get a good footing once more, and started to tug manfully with the result that he immediately gained several yards. This was the best he had done as yet, and in consequence he seemed to receive inspiration to make a still greater exertion.

After that the victory was as good as won.

Buster marched out on the bank the line over his shoulder; and as soon as they could do so without wetting themselves Josh and Herb seized hold of the stout cord.

"Wow! it sure is a whale!" exclaimed George, from his position of vantage on board his boat, as something that flapped, and made a tremendous splutter, was dragged out of the river, and up on the shore.

It was a tremendous yellow catfish, one of that species that help to make the Mississippi famous among market fishermen.

"Whee! must weigh about as much as Buster does, and that's a fact!" remarked Josh, as he surveyed the monster.

It was not a lovely spectacle, with its slippery skin, and great gaping mouth resembling that of a big bulldog.

“What whiskers it’s got, the omadhaun!” Jimmie called out, “and say the horn on his back, wud yees? Whoo! but ’tis a brave lad ye arre, Buster, to holdt sich a monster stiddy, and walk ashore wid the same. I take off me hat till yees, so I do, me laddybuck!”

Buster was panting like anything, and could hardly get his breath; but Jack believed he had never seen him look quite so happy, as when he stood over that giant Mississippi cat, and had his picture snapped off by George, who got his new kodak out especially to preserve the incident among the annals of the club.

“Get some dry clothes on you in a hurry, Buster,” suggested Jack, after they had all congratulated the hero of the occasion on his dogged pluck, “it’s all very well holding on like that, but you ought to know when it’s time to let go, too. I thought that time had come when it pulled you under. You had the cord wrapped around both hands, Buster, a very foolish thing to do, I think. If you hadn’t been able to get your footing again, and had no friends near by to lend a hand, it was apt to go hard with you. And let me tell you there have been more fishermen than a few drowned by just such a foolish trick as that. Hold on as long as you want, but never put yourself in a position where you can’t let go.”

Buster smilingly agreed that this was good advice, and promised to remember. He was feeling so remarkably happy over his great luck that he could not have taken offense at anything, and would have made the rashest sort of promises.

And while he rooted out his clothes bag, so as to get some dry togs, Jack and Andy proceeded to cut up the big fish; because they knew that, horrible looking though the creature might be to a sportsman, its flesh is highly esteemed as an article of food along the length of the whole river.

It was no easy task they had set themselves; and more than once they wished the slippery catfish had broken loose, and gone off with Buster’s hook dangling from its jaw like cheap jewelry, with which to dazzle its fellows. But in the end they managed to secure all the meat they wanted, and tossed the balance into the river to feed its kind.

“Now, let’s be getting off!” called out Jack, after he had washed up, and in some measure removed the fishy smell from his hands.

Since the other boys had taken everything aboard, there was really nothing to detain them; and presently the merry reports from the various engines told that the three motorboats had again resumed their journey down the Mississippi in the direction of Bedloe’s Island.

That was an afternoon not soon to be forgotten by any of them, for the air was just warm enough to make them delight in lying around, and taking a sun bath. No doubt George was having the time of his life with Buster, who must be so chock full of his recent triumph that every little while he would burst out with a new string of questions concerning his battle, and wishing to know what it looked like from every angle ashore.

But the time passed, and as George’s engine gave him no new trouble, the little flotilla made splendid progress while the hours crept on.

At just three-forty-seven Jack gave a blast from his old conch shell horn which he had brought up from Florida with him – in fact, every boat was provided with a similar means for exchanging signals, and the boys had arranged a regular code, so that when separated by a mile or so they could talk with each other after some sort of fashion.

This single blast just now announced that Jack believed he had sighted the island that was to be their destination, away down the river. Judging from their speed, aided by the swift current, they ought to make it inside of another half hour. This would give them plenty of time to hunt a good landing place, where they could put up their tent, and make things at least half way comfortable before night set in.

Although the boys could sleep aboard, and very comfortable too, they preferred being ashore whenever it was possible, all save George, who could seldom be coaxed to desert his beloved Wireless craft, even for a brief time. He acted as though he dreaded lest that engine think up some new trick if he left it alone; eternal watchfulness was the price of victory with George; and his chums often declared that when he was on a cruise George hardly knew what sort of country he passed through, for keeping his nose down so persistently over that motor of his.

Jack's prediction came true, and when a quarter after four came around, they were running along the shore of a wooded island which he announced was the object of their search.

"Where are we going to land, Jack?" called out Buster, for the three boats were now very close together, and the crews had been exchanging comments on the sombre appearance of the lonely island for some time past.

"I don't know," came the answer, "because I've never been here before. We'd better just float along down close to the shore, and keep an eye out for a suitable landing place. If we don't find one on this side, by the time we get to the foot of the island, why, what's to hinder our working along up the other shore, and looking for it there?"

"That's so, Jack!" admitted Buster, who was in one of his finest humors; though for that matter they seldom knew the fat boy to be anything but amiable and good-natured, as most of his kind are.

They must have passed almost to the very tail end of the long island when Josh let out a whoop, and called the attention of his comrades to what seemed to be a little bay that formed a tiny cove, with a sandy beach beyond.

"Just the ticket!" agreed Jack, "looks like it had been scooped out for a landing place."

"Bet you them fishermen come right in; and we'll be apt to find some of their huts around back there," suggested George, who had possibly heard more stories about mysterious Bedloe's Island than any of the others, for he had been making poor Buster's flesh run cold during the afternoon with accounts of strange things people said had occurred to make the place shunned.

"Then there must be good fishing around here," remarked Buster, with the air of one who ought to be consulted whenever such sport were mentioned, because he had surely won his spurs that day, if any one ever did.

"Listen to him talk," broke out Josh. "Now he's got the fishing bee on his brain and he'll just as like as not be at it morning, noon and night, till we get sick of the smell of fish. One good thing about it that I can see is, after he's been living on fish food for a whole week Buster will have brains enough to last him all summer, because they say it makes 'em, you know. Sometimes I think he's a little short in his supply, especially when he wraps a fish line around both hands, when he's got a young whale at the other end."

They had no difficulty in passing into the little "bight," as Jack called the miniature cove, for the water was deep enough for even the Wireless; although Jack said they would have to be sure and constantly keep tabs on whether the river was rising or falling each day and night, since it would be mighty unpleasant to awaken some fine morning to discover that their motor boats were high and dry; as the water had gone down a foot while they slept.

They secured the craft ashore to trees that chanced to be growing close by; for floods did not often come to this upper part of the great river as they did below the confluence with the Ohio and the Missouri.

Then some of the things were taken to land; and the six boys were soon working like so many beaver, fixing camp.

The tent had to be erected; and after it had been partly placed in position a better spot was discovered, so that the job had to be all done over. As the day was growing near its close and darkness might be expected to fall upon them before another hour, there was no time for loitering. Why, even George had been made to see the error of his ways, and forgot all about that everlasting motor of his for a short time, lending a hand to get things in shape around the camp.

Josh had plenty to do starting the fire, after fashioning a rude but effective cooking range out of the many stones that could be had along the shore for the picking up. They carried a little contrivance that was very effective, being a sort of spider or gridiron patterned after the shelf in most kitchen ranges. Jack had had it made by the local blacksmith, and when it was laid across two ridges of rock, between which the red coals lay, they could place the coffee-pot, a skillet and even a kettle on the bars at the same time, without the constant danger of upsetting that always exists where a camper tries to cook with only a resting place of stones for his various utensils.

The others were busy at various duties when Josh was heard calling out, with a touch of authority in his voice, as became the chef, now placed in supreme command by reason of his exalted and important office.

“Whoever took that grub I left over here by the tree, better bring it back again right away, and quit meddlin’ if he wants me to exert myself getting supper ready.”

“What’s that, Josh?” asked Jack, looking up from his work of fastening the lower rim of the tent to the pegs that had been driven securely into the earth.

“Why, you see, Jack,” explained the other, lowering his aggressive voice a little when addressing the commodore, “I thought I’d make the fire over here till I saw you’d changed the position of the tent; and then I crossed over to where she’s burning cheerfully now. So I laid some things down that I meant to cook for supper – two slices of that ham I cut off while afloat; a can of Boston baked beans, and part of the fish Buster hooked and that nearly got away with him. Now, mind you, I ain’t mentionin’ any names, but some busybody’s gone and took the entire outfit, and hid it away. How d’ye think the cook c’n perform his calling, when they’re playin’ tricks on him like that, tell me?”

There was a dead silence for about half a minute, while the boys looked at each other questioningly.

Then Buster raised his hand, and said, earnestly:

“Not guilty, Jack, sure I never even saw the old ham; and ketch me a-playin’ any tricks on the cook, and me that hungry I c’d eat any old thing.”

One by one of the others, even to George, copied Buster’s example, and solemnly denied having tried to annoy the hard-working Josh by purloining the stuff he had laid out for the evening meal.

“Must a mislaid it, that’s what, Josh,” declared Herb, consolingly. “Sometimes my mind plays hob with me that way. Everybody get a move on and look for the grub. We just can’t afford to have our goods floating around every-which-way right in the start. We’ve got to find it, that’s what.”

“Hold on, before you get to running around wild,” interrupted Jack, and somehow when he spoke in that way it seemed as if all the other fellows felt as though Jack had conceived an idea, for he was always quick along those lines.

“What’s doing, Jack?” inquired Buster.

“I want to ask Josh particularly where it was he laid that stuff out,” continued the other, impressively.

“Why, just like I said, over ther by that clump of brush,” the cook explained, as he pointed in the quarter indicated.

“On that flat stone, perhaps?” continued Jack.

“Now, that was just what I did, Jack,” Josh went on to say, “and when I stepped over just now to get the stuff, why, it wasn’t there. I scratched my head, and tried to remember moving it, but I’d take my affidavit that I never came back to get it till just now, after I got my fire good and ready. That’s the way it was, Jack.”

“Wait a bit,” remarked the other, as he started for the spot in question.

They all watched him curiously. First he bent down, and sniffed of the stone.

“He’s smelling to see if the ham ever rested there, that’s what,” declared Josh.

“And now look at him on his hands and knees, alongside that flat stone, would you?” remarked Buster, wonderingly. “Whatever do you reckon Jack’s got in his head, fellers?”

“He’s getting up now, and we’ll know right soon, which is one comfort,” George observed.

Jack beckoned them over, and as soon as they came running pell-mell, he wagged his head in a mysterious fashion, and pointed down to a spot near his feet.

“That stuff didn’t walk off on its own account, boys; if you look sharp you’ll see what did the little trick!” and as their eyes instantly turned down toward the ground they saw the plain imprint of a great big shoe there!

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST CAMP FIRE OF THE TRIP

“Holy smoke! so that’s what the matter, is it?” exclaimed Buster, as he stared at the telltale track.

“A thief, that’s what!” breathed George, angrily, as he turned to glance at the neighboring growth of trees, now partly lost in the gloom of coming night.

“And to think,” remarked Herb, “that anybody could just slip along here back of these bushes, and grab our grub without one of us seeing him.”

“Oh! we were all too busy doing our regular stunts to think of such a thing,” explained Jack. “You see, Josh had all he wanted to do with the fire; some of us were putting up the tent the second time; and George had his hands full with his pet hobby, bothering over his engine. Why, it was as easy as falling off a log for him to just crawl up behind these bushes, reach out a hand, and then good-bye to all the fine stuff Josh had laid out so nice.”

“Well, if that don’t beat the Dutch!” exclaimed Josh, staring hard at the stone which bore such an important part in all this discussion, as though he could hardly believe his eyes.

“Look here,” continued Jack, “and you can see where the ground is all rubbed up; that’s where his knees scraped on the surface when he dragged one leg after the other, you know.”

“My! it takes you to get on to these things, Jack!” declared Buster.

Andy had said nothing up to now, but seemed to be just as much puzzled and disturbed as the rest. He managed to put in his oar at about this point, however.

“Musha! they do be sayin’ that this same ould island do be ha’nted; and ’tis me own silf that will be belavin’ the same afther this, so I will!”

“Great governor! he means it was a regular ghost, Jack, d’ye hear that?” cried Buster, throwing up his chubby hands in rank despair.

Everybody seemed interested at once; for, while several of the boys, if asked to their face might have promptly declared they never believed in ghosts; still, it was so very queer, finding some unknown party on the island with the bad name, that they were inclined to listen with interest when Andy aired his views. Ghosts – of course not, – because they were all humbug, anyway; but it was mighty strange how that stuff vanished so mysteriously.

Jack laughed out loud.

He was a level-headed, practical boy, and had not a grain of superstition in his whole body. Many a time had he and Andy argued and disputed upon this very score, and the one whose ancestors had come from the island across the sea had apparently so far as outward appearances went, at least, been convinced of the error of his ways, only to have the old belief crop up again unexpectedly on the first occasion. It was in the blood; and what is there cannot be argued away.

“Stop and think, Buster, and you, Andy,” Jack went on to say, impressively, “ghosts wouldn’t be apt to wear big boots, would they, and come creeping along, when they are popularly supposed to have the power of making themselves invisible?”

“That’s so, Jack, you’re right!” burst out George, enthusiastically. “Get your gun, and we’ll take a look for the rascal, and make him stand and deliver.”

But Jack paid no attention to this fiery threat; if they tried to carry out one-tenth of the things impulsive George suggested, it would surely keep them busy, well and good.

“And whoever heard of a hungry ghost?” Jack went on to say, so as to rub it in, good and hard. “This fellow, whoever he could have been, must have been hungry; for he cribbed our ham and stuff the first shot. Well, it’s gone; but thank goodness we’ve got plenty more; so I say, don’t let’s have such a little thing make us feel bad. Get busy, some of you, and fix the cook up with a second ration. Herb,

cut two more slices off the ham, and Buster, you turn your hand at carving that hunk of fish we've still got. Such a trifle shouldn't upset fellows who had been through all we have, you know."

"No more it hadn't!" cried Buster.

"Bully for the Commodore; he's the right stuff!" exclaimed Josh, waving the stick of wood he happened to be holding in his hand at the time; and looking very much like a real French chef with his cute little white cap on his head.

"But hey, let's first of all get every bit of our stuff in the tent, and keep a close watch on the same," observed suspicious George. "First thing you know we'll just have to abandon our week of fun down here because we're starved out. We didn't agree to feed all the stray fishermen, or hoboes in the country, when we laid in our supplies this time; ain't that a fact, Jack?"

It was strange how all the other boys almost invariably turned to Jack when they had advanced a proposition; as though his guarantee was all that was necessary to stamp the suggestion as a clever idea.

"Yes, you're right there, George; and while the rest of you are doing all you can to help Josh out, I'll be collecting the duffle in the tent, and fixing the same so it won't bother us much. If any chap manages to hook more of our stuff from under our very noses, he'll deserve it, that's all."

So saying, Jack started to carry things in under the canvas, for the tent had been about fully erected at the time Josh made his astonishing statement; and only needed to be fastened down a little more securely at the base, so as to be ready to stand any sort of a blow, such as might come along in the spring time here on the upper Mississippi.

The air was getting a little "nippy," as Buster called it; so that several of the motorboat boys had donned their sweaters. This made Buster start to again bemoaning the strange disappearance of his new one, that had the blue moon on the breast. He never could convince himself that he had mislaid it in the shed where the boats had been housed for the winter; and fancied that one of his chums must be hiding it from him; because every little while he would watch each one in turn, and with hope struggling afresh upon his rosy, plump face, only to have it die out again when he realized they were not dragging the familiar object out of their clothes bags.

Secretly Buster was determined that at the first chance he would rummage through each one of those bags himself, and make positive that his missing property was not reposing where it never should be found.

The supper preparations went on apace, and soon the most delightful odors ever sniffed by hungry cruisers began to permeate the surrounding atmosphere. Buster went into the tent, calling back over his shoulder:

"Just going to lie down a while on my blanket, to see how she goes, fellers. Fact is, I'm that cramped after a session aboard the speed boat that I c'n hardly stretch out. And then, to own up to the real truth, them smells make me just wild, and I can't stand it around the fire any longer. Just call me when everything's ready, Josh, that's a good feller. Oh! my! but that coffee is scrumptious; and the ham, goodness gracious! whoever smoked that pig knew how to fix things so's to set a hungry boy half crazy. Yum! yum! Don't forget to wake me, now, Josh!"

But of course it was not long before supper was declared ready, and the boys proceeded to gather around the spot where Josh had set things. Buster was not called, in fact there was no need, for he burst out of the tent like a young cyclone just at this time, and hastened to find a place to deposit his fat form in the circle.

"Hey! thought'd you steal a march on me, didn't you, fellers?" he demanded, trying to look very fierce, which was impossible, for he only screwed up his face and seemed comical at such times; "meant to just eat up my share, and then tell me you forgot all about giving me the high sign. But I was on to your little game, let me tell you. Could hear every word you said, and when Josh here told George to pass out his pannikin, that gave me my cue. Thank you, Josh, I believe I will dip in next; and Herb, fill my tin-cup with that coffee, please. Oh! ain't I glad we've got started at last. That last ten minutes was just awful to me!"

So Buster rattled on until the others begged him to stop it.

“Let the food close that trap of yours, Buster, please,” said George. “That’s the way he goes, ding-dong, the whole blessed day, fellows; until I can hardly think straight, when I’m trying to figure on how to bridle that high-stepper of a motor of mine.”

They were soon all hard at work, and after the first keen edge of their appetites had been taken off, it was a merry group that gathered near the fire, eating, chatting and with a continual flow of wit passing back and forth.

Nevertheless Jack could not forget about the mysterious disappearance of the food, and every little while he would get up, to take a stroll around to the other side of the tent; just as though he half feared that some daring intruder might try to cut into the back of the canvas, with the intention of continuing his depredations.

“How about that old paper Andy brought with him?” asked George, after they had eaten all that was possible; and even Buster was seen to shake his head when Josh asked if anybody would have any more coffee, baked beans, crackers, or cheese.

“Say, that’s a fact!” cried Herb, “we went and forgot all about it. You see, Jack crammed it in a pocket of his old jacket; and all of us were that anxious to be off we didn’t remember to have the account of the robbery read out. Got it yet, haven’t you, Jack?”

“Sure I have,” replied the other, “and if you wait a minute I’ll get the same, so we can enjoy the thrilling story right here and now. Those kind of yarns always sound better around the blazing camp fire, you know.”

“Kinder go with ghosts, and all that sort of thing, eh?” came from Buster, who was eyeing the remnant of ham in the fryingpan, and heaving a sigh, as though it really gave him a pain to think that his capacity seemed to have been reached before the last bit had been disposed of; that was next door to a sin with Buster, who would gorge himself rather than see the least thing wasted, or thrown away.

“Ghosts don’t burgle any that I ever heard of,” observed Josh, calmly picking up the said skillet, and with a fling sending a small portion of the fatty end of ham flying into the bushes, at which Buster sank back, disappointed.

“Arrah, sure they do the quarest things ye iver heard till on,” declared Andy; and then gave a quick look at Jack, as though half expecting to be taken to task because of his clinging belief in hobgoblins, and all such things.

But Jack did not see fit to pay the slightest attention to anything so trifling just then. He passed into the tent, to where he had hung his coat; for with his sweater on he had not felt the need of extra covering. And presently he came out again, carrying the paper in his hand.

“Now, isn’t that too mean for anything, boys?” he remarked.

“What’s gone wrong now, Jack; I hope more of our provisions haven’t taken wings, and skipped out?” observed George; while Buster just sat there, hugging his fat knees and holding his breath while he waited to hear the worst.

“Oh! no; nothing like that,” came the answer, “but you see I had this coat on a good part of the morning, and I guess the paper must have got wet somehow, for there’s only part of the first page left; most of the account of the robbery is gone. But I’ll read you what there is, if you want. It’s the tail end, of course. Too bad it had to happen that way.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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