

FICTION

Kirk Munroe

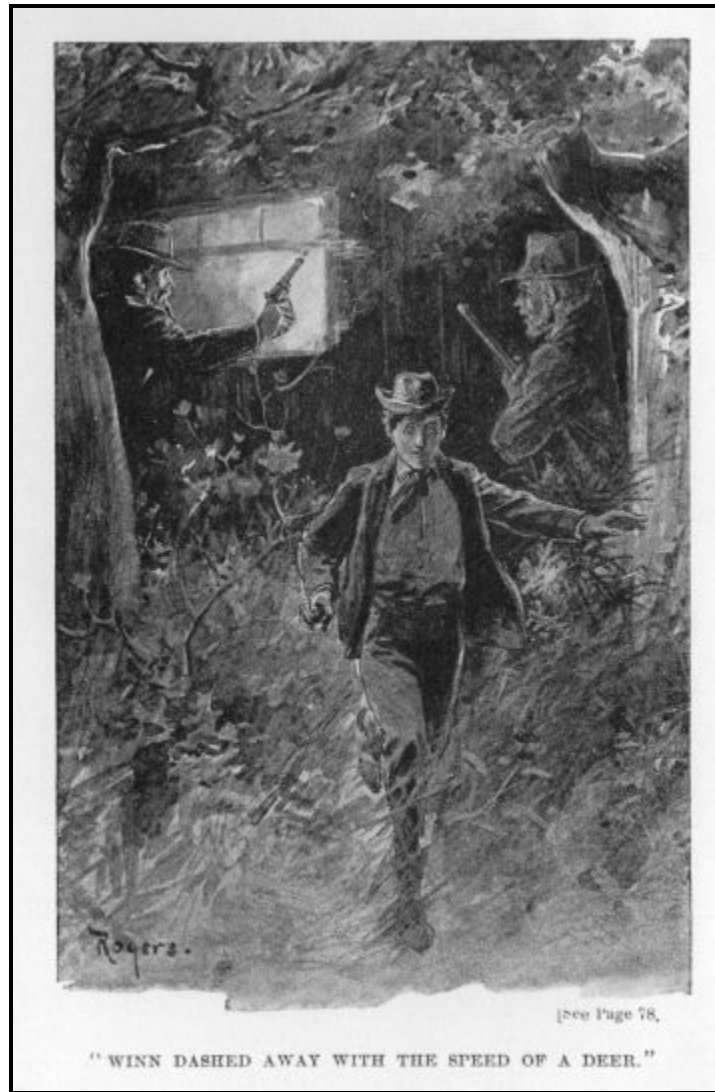
Raftmates

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION



[Frontispiece: "Winn dashed away with the speed of a deer."]

RAFTMATES

A STORY OF THE GREAT RIVER

BY

KIRK MUNROE

AUTHOR OF

"DORYMATES" "CAMPMATES" "CANOEMATES" ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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A REUNION OF "MATES"

RAFT MATES.

CHAPTER I.

THE RAFT.

Although the *Venture* was by no means so large a raft as many that Winn Caspar had watched glide down the Mississippi, he considered it about the finest craft of that description ever put together. He was also a little more proud of it than of anything else in the whole world. Of course he excepted his brave soldier father, who had gone to the war as a private, to come home when it was all over wearing a major's uniform; and his dear mother, who for four weary years had been both father and mother to him, and his sister Elta, who was not only the prettiest girl in the county, but, to Winn's mind, the cleverest. But outside of his immediate family, the raft, the *Venture*, as his father had named it, was the object of the boy's most sincere admiration and pride. Had he not helped build it? Did he not know every timber and plank and board in it? Had he not assisted in loading it with enough bushels of wheat to feed an army? Was he not about to leave home for the first time in his life, to float away down the great river and out into the wide world on it? Certainly he had, and did, and was. So no wonder he was proud of the raft, and impatient for the waters of the little river, on a bank of which the Caspar's lived, to be high enough to float it, that they might make a start.

Winn had never known any home but this one near the edge of the vast pine forests of Wisconsin. Here Major Caspar had brought his New England bride many years before. Here he had built up a mill business that was promising him a fortune in a few years more at the time when the war called him. When peace was declared, this business was wellnigh ruined, and the soldier must begin life again as a poor man. For many months he struggled, but made little head-way against adverse fortune. The mill turned out lumber fast enough, but there was no demand for it, or those who wanted it were too poor to pay its price. At length the Major decided upon a bold venture. The Caspar mill was but a short distance from the Mississippi. Far away down the great river were cities where money was plenty, and where lumber and farm products were in demand. There were not half enough steamboats on the river, and freights were high; but the vast waterway with its ceaseless current was free to all. Why should not he do as others had done and were constantly doing--raft his goods to a market? It would take time, of course; but a few months of the autumn and winter could be spared as well as not, and so it was finally decided that the venture should be undertaken.

It was not to be a timber raft only. Major Caspar did not care to attempt the navigating of a huge affair, such as his entire stock of sawed material would have made, nor could he afford the expense of a large crew. Then, too, while ready money was scarce in his neighborhood, the prairie wheat crop of that season was unusually good. So he exchanged half his lumber for wheat, and devoted his leisure during the summer to the construction of a raft with the remainder.

This raft contained the very choice of the mill's output for that season--squared timbers, planks, and boards enough to load a ship. It was provided with two long sweeps, or steering oars, at each end, with a roomy shanty for the accommodation of the crew, and with two other buildings for the stowing of cargo. The floors of these structures were raised a foot above the deck of the raft, and were made water-tight, so that when waves or swells from passing steamboats broke over the raft, their contents would not be injured. In front of the central building, or "shanty," was a bed of sand six feet square, enclosed by wooden sides, on which the camp-fires were to be built. Much of the cooking would also be done here. Besides this there was a small stove in the "shanty" for use during cold or wet weather.

The "shanty" had a door and three windows, and was in other ways made unusually comfortable. The Major said that after four years of roughing it, he now meant to take his comfort wherever he could find it, even though it was only

on a raft. So the *Venture's* "shanty" was very different from the rude lean-to or shelter of rough boards, such as was to be seen on most of the timber rafts of the great river. Its interior was divided into two rooms, the after one of which was a tiny affair only six by ten feet. It was furnished with two bunks, one above the other, a table, two camp-chairs, and several shelves, on one of which were a dozen books of travel and history. This was the sleeping-room that Winn was to share with his father.

A door from this opened into the main living-room of the "shanty." Here were bunks for six men, a dining-table, several benches, barrels, and boxes of provisions, and the galley, with its stove and ample supply of pots, pans, and dishes. The bunks were filled with fresh, sweet-smelling wheat straw, covered with heavy army blankets, and the whole affair was about the most comfortable "shanty" ever set up on a Mississippi timber raft. To Winn it seemed as though nothing could be more perfect or inviting, and he longed for the time when it should be his temporary home.

For a whole month after the raft was finished, loaded, and ready to set forth on its uncertain voyage, it remained hard and fast aground where it was built. To Winn's impatience it seemed as though high-water never would come.

"I don't believe this old raft is ever going to float any more than the mill itself," he remarked pettishly to his sister Elta one day in October, as they sat together on the *Venture* and watched the sluggish current of the little river.

"Father thinks it will," answered Elta, quietly.

"Oh yes. Of course father thinks so; but he may be mistaken as well as other folks. Now if I'd had the building of this craft, I would have floated all the material down to the mouth of the creek. Then everything would have been ready for a start as soon as she was finished."

"How would you have loaded the wheat?" demanded Elta.

"Why, boated it down, of course."

"And so added largely to its cost," answered the practical girl. "You know, Winn, that it was ever so much cheaper to build the raft here than it would have been 'way down there, and, besides, father wasn't ready to start when it was finished. I heard him tell mother that he didn't care to get away before the 1st of November. Anyhow, father must understand his own business better than a sixteen-year-old boy, even if that boy's name is Winn Caspar."

"Oh, I never saw such a girl as you are!" exclaimed Winn, impatiently. "You are always making objections to my plans, and telling me that I'm only a boy. You'd rather any time travel in a rut that some one else had made than mark out a track for yourself. For my part, I'd much rather think out my own plans and try new ways."

"So do I, Winnie; but--"

"Oh, don't call me 'Winnie,' whatever you do! I'm as tired of pet names and baby talk as I am of waiting here for high-water that won't ever come."

With this the petulant lad rose to his feet, and leaping ashore, disappeared among the trees of the river-bank, leaving Elta to gaze after him with a grieved expression, and a suspicion of tears in her brown eyes.

In spite of this little scene, Winn Caspar was not an ill-tempered boy. He had not learned the beauty of self-control, and thus often spoke hastily, and without considering the feelings of others. He was also apt to think that if things were left to his management, he could improve upon almost any plan proposed or carried out by some one else. He had mingled but little with other boys, and as "man of the family" during his father's four years of absence in the army, had conceived a false estimate of his own importance and ability.

Absorbed by pressing business cares after resuming the pursuits of a peaceful life, Major Caspar had been slow to note the imperfections in his boy's character. He was deeply grieved when his eyes were finally opened to them, and held many an earnest consultation with his wife concerning the son, who was at once the source of their greatest anxiety and the object of their fondest hopes.

CHAPTER II.

WINN ASSUMES A RESPONSIBILITY.

It was during one of these conversations with the boy's mother that Major Caspar decided to take Winn with him on his raft voyage down the Mississippi.

"If I find a good chance to place the boy in a first-class school in one of the large cities after the voyage is ended I shall do so," said the Major. "It is only fair, though, that he should have a chance to see and learn something of the world first. After all, there is nothing equal to travel as an educator. I honestly believe that the war did more in four years towards educating this nation by stirring its people up and moving large bodies of them to sections remote from their homes than all our colleges have in fifty."

"But you mean that Winn shall go to college, of course?" said Mrs. Caspar, a little anxiously.

"If he wants to, and shows a real liking for study," was the reply; "but not unless he does. College is by no means the only place where a boy can receive a liberal education. He may acquire just as good a one in practical life if he is thoroughly interested in what he is doing and has an ambition to excel. I believe Winn to be both ambitious and persevering; but he is impulsive, easily influenced, and impatient of control. He has no idea of that implicit obedience to orders that is at the foundation of success in civil life as well as in the army; and, above all, he is possessed of such an inordinate self-conceit that if it is not speedily curbed by one or more severe lessons, it may lead him into serious trouble."

"Oh, John!" expostulated the mother. "Do you realize that you are saying these horrid things about our own boy--our Winn?"

"Indeed I do, dear," answered the Major, smiling; "and it is because he is our boy, whom I love better than myself, that I am analyzing his character so carefully. He has the making of a splendid fellow in him, together with certain traits that might easily prove his ruin."

"Well," replied Mrs. Caspar, in a resigned tone, "perhaps it will do him good to go away and be alone with you for a while. It is very hard to realize, though, that my little Winn is sixteen years old and almost a man. But, John, you won't let him run any risks, or get into any danger, will you?"

"Not knowingly, my dear, you may rest assured," answered the Major. But he smiled as he thought how impossible it was to keep boys from running risks and getting into all sorts of dangerous positions.

So it was decided that Winn should form one of the crew of the *Venture* whenever the raft should be ready to start on its long voyage; and ever since learning this decision the boy had been in a fever of impatience to be off. So full was he of anticipations concerning the proposed journey that he could talk and think of nothing else. Thus, after a month of tiresome delay, he was in such an uncomfortable frame of mind that it was a positive trial to have him about the house. For this reason he was encouraged to spend much of his time aboard the raft, and was even allowed to eat and sleep there whenever he chose. At length he reached the point of almost quarrelling with his sister, whom he loved so dearly; but he had hardly plunged into the woods, after leaving her on the raft, before he regretted his unkind words and heartily wished them unsaid. He hesitated and half turned back, but his "pride," as he would have called it, though it was really nothing but cowardice, was too strong to permit him to humble himself just yet. So, feeling very unhappy, he tramped moodily on through the woods, full of bitter thoughts, angry with himself and all the world. Yet if any one had asked him what it was all about, he could not have told.

Winn took a long circuit through the silent forest, and by the time he again reached the river-bank, coming out just above the mill, he had walked himself tired, but into quite a cheerful frame of mind. The mill was shut down for the night, its workers had gone home, and not a sound broke the evening stillness. The boy sat on a pile of slabs for a few minutes, resting, and watching the glowing splendor of sunset as reflected in the waters of the stream at his feet. At length he started up and was about to go to the house, where, as he had decided, his very first act would be to ask Elta's forgiveness. The house stood some distance from the river-bank, and was hidden from it by the trees of a young apple orchard. As Winn rose to his feet and cast a lingering glance at the wonderful beauty of the water, he noticed a familiar black object floating amid its splendor of crimsons and gold.

"I wonder how that log got out of the boom?" he said, half aloud. "Why, there's another--and another! The boom must be broken."

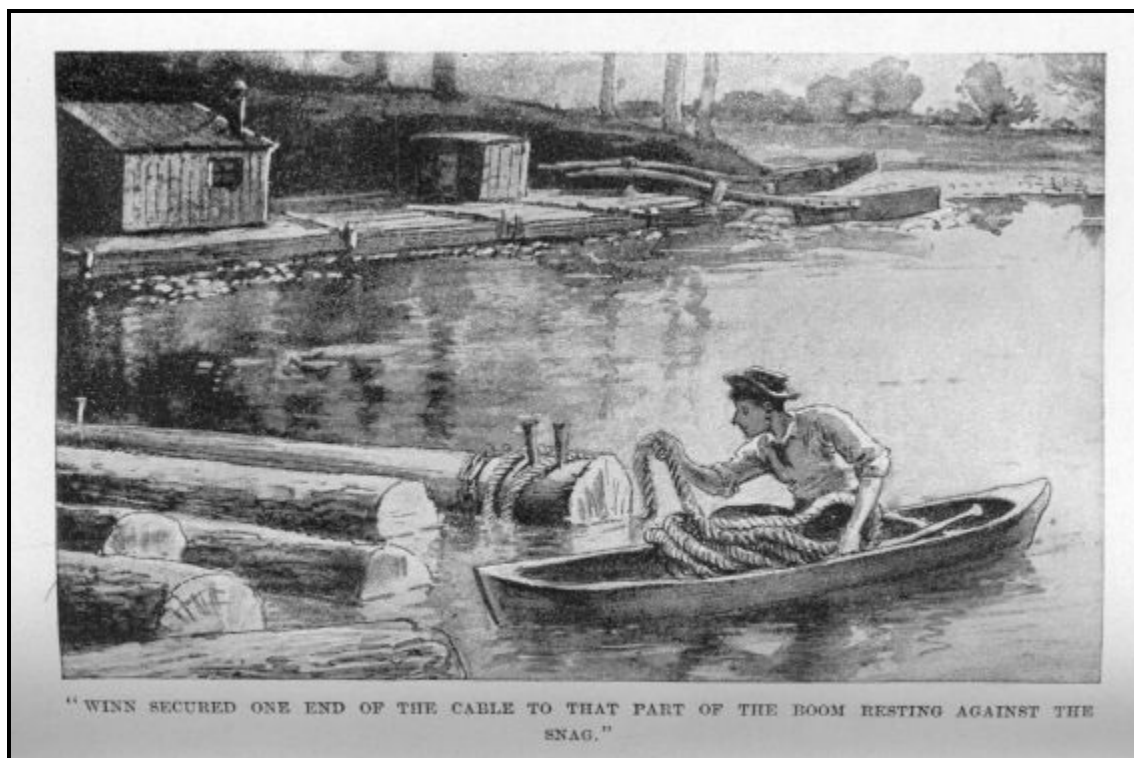
Yes, the boom of logs, chained together end to end and stretched completely across the creek to hold in check the thousands of saw-logs that filled the stream farther than the eye could see, had parted near the opposite bank. The end

thus loosened had swung down-stream a little way, and there caught on a snag formed of a huge, half-submerged root. It might hold on there indefinitely, or it might get loose at any moment, swing wide open, and set free the imprisoned wealth of logs behind it. As it was, they were beginning to slip through the narrow opening, and those that had attracted Winn's attention were sliding downstream as stealthily as so many escaped convicts.

The boy's first impulse was to run towards the house, calling his father and the mill-hands as he went. His second, and the one upon which he acted, was to mend the broken boom and capture the truant logs himself. "There is no need of troubling father, and I can do it alone better than any number of those clumsy mill-hands," he thought. "Besides, there is no time to spare; for if the boom once lets go of that snag, we shall lose half the logs behind it."

Thus thinking, Winn ran around the mill and sprang aboard the raft that lay just below it. Glancing about for a stout rope, his eye lighted on the line by which the raft was made fast to a tree. "The very thing!" he exclaimed. "While it's aground here the raft doesn't need a cable any more than I need a check-rein, and I told father so. He said there wasn't any harm in taking a precaution, and that the water might rise unexpectedly. As if there was a chance of it! There hasn't been any rain for two months, and isn't likely to be any for another yet to come."

While these thoughts were spinning through the boy's brain, he was casting loose the cable at both ends and stowing it in his own little dugout that was moored to the outer side of the raft. Then with strong deep strokes he paddled swiftly upstream towards the broken boom. After fifteen minutes of hard work he had secured one end of the cable to that part of the boom resting against the snag, carried the other to and around a tree on the bank, back again to the boom, and then to the inshore end of the broken chain. Thus he not only secured the boom against opening any wider, but closed the exit already made.



[Illustration: "Winn secured one end of the cable to that part of the boom resting against the snag."]

"That's as good a job as any of them could have done," he remarked to himself, regarding his work through the gathering gloom with great satisfaction. "Now for the fellows that got away."

It was a much harder task to capture and tow back those three truant logs than it had been to repair the boom. It was such hard work, and the darkness added so much to its difficulties, that almost any other boy would have given it up in despair, and allowed the three logs to escape. But Winn Caspar was not inclined to give up anything he had once undertaken. Having determined to do a certain thing, he would stick to it "like a dog to a root," as one of the mill-hands had said of him. So those logs had to go back inside of that boom, because Winn had made up his mind that they should; but they went so reluctantly, and gave him so much trouble, that it was long after dark and some hours past

supper-time before the job was completed.

When Winn at length returned to the raft he was wet, tired, and hungry, though very proud of his accomplished task. He was shivering too, now that his violent exertions were ended, for the sky had become overcast, and a chill wind was moaning through the pine-trees.

"I wonder if I can't find something to eat here?" he said to himself. "I'm good and hungry, that's a fact, and they must have had supper up at the house long ago." Entering the "shanty," and feeling carefully about, the boy at length found matches and lighted a lamp.

Hello! There was plenty to eat; in fact, there was a regular spread at one end of the table, with plate, cup and saucer, knife, fork, and napkin, all neatly arranged as though he were expected. "What does it mean?" thought Winn; and then his eye fell on a bit of folded paper lying in the plate. It was a note which read as follows:

"DEAR BROTHER,—As you didn't come home to supper, I thought perhaps you were going to spend the night on the raft, and so brought yours down here. You can heat the tea on the stove. I'm awfully sorry I said anything to make you feel badly. Please forget it, and forgive your loving sister,—ELTA."

"Bless her dear heart!" cried the boy. "She is the best sister in the world. The idea of her asking my forgiveness, when it is I who should ask hers. And I will ask it, too, the very minute I see her; for I shall never be happy until we have kissed and made up, as we used to say when we were young ones. I guess, though, I'll eat the supper she has brought me first. And that's a good idea about heating the tea, too. I can get dry by the stove at the same time. I'll have a chance to see Elta before bedtime, and she'd feel badly if I didn't eat her supper anyway."

All of which goes to show how very little we know of what even the immediate future may bring forth, and that if we put off for a single hour doing that which ought to be done at once, what a likelihood there is that we may never have a chance to do it.

CHAPTER III.

A MUD-BESPATTERED ARRIVAL FROM CALIFORNIA.

Acting upon the suggestion contained in Elta's note, Winn lighted a fire in the galley stove, and was soon enjoying its cheery warmth. When the tea was heated, he ate heartily of the supper so thoughtfully provided by the dear girl, and his heart grew very tender as he thought of her and of her unwearying love for him. "I ought to go and find her this very minute," he said to himself; "but I must get dry first, and there probably isn't any fire up at the house."

To while away the few minutes that he intended remaining on the raft, Winn got one of the books of exploration from a shelf in the little after-room, and was quickly buried in the heart of an African forest. Completely lost to his surroundings, and absorbed in tales of the wild beasts and wilder men of the Dark Continent, the boy read on and on until the failing light warned him that his lamp was about to go out for want of oil.

He yawned as he finally closed the book. "My! how sleepy I am, and how late it must be," he said. "How the wind howls, too! It sounds as if we were going to have a storm. I only hope it will bring plenty of rain and high-water. Then good-bye to home, and hurrah for the great river!"

By this chain of thought Winn was again reminded of Elta, and of the forgiveness he had meant to secure from her that evening. "It is too late now, though," he said to himself. "She must have gone to bed long ago, and I guess I might as well do the same; but I'll see her the very first thing in the morning."

With this the tired boy blew out the expiring flame of his lamp, and tumbled into his bunk, where in another minute he was as sound asleep as ever in his life.

In the mean time the high-water for which he hoped so earnestly was much nearer at hand than either he or any one else supposed. The storm now howling through the pines had been raging for hours about the head-waters of the

creek, and the deluge of rain by which it was accompanied was sweeping steadily down-stream towards the great river. Even as Winn sat by the stove reading, the first of the swelling waters began to rise along the sides of the raft, and by the time the storm broke overhead the *Venture* was very nearly afloat.

Although Winn slept too soundly to be disturbed by either wind or rain, the storm awoke Major Caspar, who listened for some time to this announcement that the hour for setting forth on his long-projected journey was at hand. He had no anxiety for the safety of the raft, for he remembered the stout cable by which he had secured it, and congratulated himself upon the precaution thus taken. "Besides, Winn is aboard," he reflected, "and he is almost certain to rouse us all with the joyful news the minute he finds that the raft is afloat." Thus reassuring himself, the Major turned over and went comfortably to sleep.

Elta knew nothing of the storm until morning, but hearing the rain the moment she awoke, she too recognized it as the signal for the *Venture's* speedy departure. From her window she had heretofore been able to see one corner of the raft; but now, peering out through the driving rain that caused the forest depths to appear blue and dim, she could not discover it. With a slight feeling of uneasiness, she hastily dressed, and went to Winn's door. There was no answer to her knock. She peeped in. Winn was not there, nor had the bed been occupied.

"He did spend the night on the raft, then, and so of course it is all right," thought the girl, greatly relieved at this discovery. "The *Venture* must be afloat, though. I wonder if father knows it?"

Just then Major Caspar appeared, evidently prepared to face the storm.

"Well, little daughter," he said, "high-water has come at last, and the time of our departure is at hand. I am going down to see what Winn thinks of it."

"Oh, can't I go with you, papa? I should dearly love to!" cried Elta.

"Well, I don't know," hesitated the Major. "I suppose you might if you were rigged for it."

This permission was sufficient, and the active girl bounded away full of glee at the prospect of a battle with the storm, and of surprising Winn on the raft. Three minutes later she reappeared, clad in rubber boots and a water-proof cloak, the hood of which, drawn over her head, framed her face in the most bewitching manner.

The Major attempted to protect her still further with a large umbrella; but they had hardly left the house before a savage gust swooped down and gleefully rendered it useless by turning it inside out. Casting the umbrella aside, the Major clasped Elta's hand firmly in his. Then with bowed heads the two pushed steadily on towards the river-bank, while the wind scattered bits of their merry laughter far and wide.

It took them but a few minutes to reach the little stream, when their laughter was suddenly silenced. There was the place where the *Venture* had been put together, there was the tree to which it had been so securely moored; but the raft that had grown into being and become a familiar sight at that point no longer occupied it, nor was it anywhere to be seen. Only a flood of turbid waters, fully two feet higher than they had been the evening before, swept over the spot, and seemed to beckon mockingly towards the great river.

"Why, the raft has gone!" exclaimed Elta, in a dismayed voice.



[Illustration: "'Why, the raft has gone!' exclaimed Elta"]

"It certainly has," answered the Major, grimly; "and as it cannot possibly have floated up-stream, it must have gone towards the Mississippi. I only hope that Winn managed in some way to check and hold it before it reached the big water; otherwise we may have a merry hunt for it."

While he spoke they had been hurrying to a point a short distance down-stream, around which the creek made a bend. From here they could command a view of half a mile of its course, and somewhere along this stretch of water they hoped to see the raft safely moored. They were, however, doomed to disappointment; for as far as the eye could see there was no sign of the missing craft. Full of conjectures and forebodings of evil they reluctantly turned back towards the house.

The mill-hands, some of whom were to have formed the crew of the *Venture*, had already discovered that it was gone. Now they were gathered at the house awaiting the Major's orders, and eagerly discussing the situation.

Mrs. Caspar, full of anxiety, met her husband and daughter at the open door, where she stood, regardless of the driving rain.

"Oh, John!" she cried, "where is Winn? What has become of the raft? Do you think anything can have happened to him?"

"Certainly not," answered the Major, reassuringly. "Nothing serious can have befallen the boy on board a craft like that. As to his whereabouts, I propose to go down to the mouth of the creek at once and discover them. That is, just as soon as you can give me a cup of coffee and a bite of breakfast, for it would be foolish to start off without those. But the quicker we can get ready the better. I shall go in the skiff, and take Halma and Jan with me."

Nothing so allays anxiety as the necessity for immediate action, especially when such action is directed towards

removing the cause for alarm. So Mrs. Caspar and Elta, in flying about to prepare breakfast for the rescuing party, almost worked themselves into a state of hopeful cheerfulness. It was only after the meal had been hastily eaten, and the Major with his stalwart Swedes had departed, that a reaction came, and the anxious fears reasserted themselves. For hours they could do nothing but discuss the situation, and watch for some one to come with news. Several times during the morning Elta put on her water-proof and went down to the mill. There, she would gaze with troubled eyes at the ever-rising waters, until reminded that her mother needed comforting, when she would return to the house.

On one of these occasions the girl was surprised to see a saddle-horse, bearing evidences of a hard journey, standing at the hitching-post near the front door. But this first surprise was as nothing to the amazement with which she beheld her mother clasped in the arms of a strange young man who was so bespattered with mud that his features were hardly recognizable. Mrs. Caspar was laughing and crying at the same time, while both she and the young man were talking at once. Near them, and regarding this tableau with the utmost gravity, was a powerful-looking bull-dog, who would evidently be pure white when washed.

For a full minute Elta stood in the doorway gazing wonderingly at this strange scene. Then her mother caught sight of the girl's wide-eyed bewilderment, and burst into a fit of laughter that was almost hysterical.

"It's your uncle William!" she cried, as soon as she could command her voice. "My little brother Billy, whom I haven't seen for twelve years, and he has just come from California. Give him a kiss, dear, and tell him how very glad we are to see him."

Then Elta was in turn embraced by the mud-bespattered young man, who gravely announced that he should never have recognized her.

"No wonder, for she was only a baby when you last saw her!" exclaimed Mrs. Caspar; "and I'm sure I should never have recognized you but for your voice. I don't know how you look even now, and I sha'n't until you wash your face."

"What's the matter with my face? Is it dirty?" asked the young man.

For answer Mrs. Caspar led him in front of a mirror.

"Well, I should say it was dirty! In fact, dirty is no name at all for it!" he laughed. "I believe I look about as bad as Binney Gibbs^[1] did when he covered himself with 'mud and glory' at the same time, or rather when his mule did it for him."

"Who is Binney Gibbs?" asked both Mrs. Caspar and Elta.

"Binney? Why, he is a young fellow, about Winn's age, who went across the plains with me a year ago. By-the-way, where is Winn? I want to see the boy. And where is the Major?"

Then, as Mrs. Caspar explained the absence of her husband and son, all her anxieties returned, so that before she finished her face again wore a very sober and troubled expression.

"So that is the situation, is it?" remarked the new-comer, reflectively. "I see that Winn is not behind his age in getting into scrapes. He reminds me of another young fellow who went campmates with me on the plains, Glen Matherson--no, Eddy. No; come to think of it, his name is Elting. Well, any way, he had just such a habit of getting into all sorts of messes; but he always came out of each one bright and smiling, right side up with care, and ready for the next."

"He had names enough, whoever he was," said Elta, a little coldly; for it seemed to her that this flippant young uncle was rather inclined to disparage her own dear brother. "Yes, he certainly had names to spare; but if he was half as well able to take care of himself as our Winn is, no one ever had an excuse for worrying about him."

"No, indeed!" broke in the young man, eagerly; "but I tell you he was-- Why, you just ought to have seen him when--"

"Here comes father!" cried Elta, joyfully, running to throw open the door as she spoke.

[1] See *Campmates*, by the same Author.

CHAPTER IV.

BILLY BRACKETT STARTS DOWN THE RIVER.

It needed but a glance at Major Caspar's face, as, dripping and weary, he entered the house, to show that his search for the raft had been fruitless. His wife's mother-instinct translated his expression at once, and the quick tears started to her eyes as she exclaimed,

"My boy! What has happened to him?"

"Nothing serious, you may rest assured, my dear," replied the Major. "I have not seen him; but I have heard of the raft, and there is no question as to its safety. We reached the mouth of the creek without discovering a trace of it. Then we went down the river as far as the Elbow, where we waited in the slack-water to hail up-bound steamboats. The first had seen nothing of the raft; but the second, one of the 'Diamond Jo' boats, reported that they had seen such a raft--one with three shanties on it--at daybreak, in the 'Slant Crossing,' ten miles below. If I could have got a down-river boat I should have boarded her and gone in pursuit, sending the men back to tell you what I had done. As we were unable to hail the only one that passed, I gave it up and came back to report progress."

"Oh, I am so glad you did!" cried Mrs. Caspar.

"So am I," said the young stranger, speaking for the first time since the Major's entrance. The latter had glanced curiously at him once or twice while talking to his wife, but without a gleam of recognition. Now, as he looked inquiringly at him again, Mrs. Caspar exclaimed:

"Why, John, don't you know him? It's William--my own brother William, just come from California."

"So it is," replied the Major, giving the young man a hearty hand-shake--"so it is, William Brackett himself. But, my dear fellow, I must confess I was so far from recognizing you that I thought your name was--"

"Mud' I reckon," interrupted the other, laughing; "and so it will be before long, if I don't get a chance to clean up. But, Major, by the time both of us are wrung out and dried, and sister has looked up some dinner, I'll be ready to unfold a plan that will make things look as bright for you and Winn and the rest of us as the sun that's breaking away the clouds is going to make the sky directly."

Mrs. Caspar's brother William, "Billy Brackett," as all his friends called him, was a young civil engineer of more than usual ability. He had already gained a larger stock of experience and seen more of his own country than most men of his age, which was about twenty-six. From government work in the East and on the lower Mississippi he had gone to the Kansas Pacific Railway, been detailed to accompany an exploring party across the plains, and, after spending some time on the Pacific coast, had just returned to the Mississippi Valley--out of a job, to be sure, but with the certainty of obtaining one whenever he should want it. From the moment of leaving San Francisco he had intended making the Caspars a visit, and had directed his journey towards their home. In Chicago he had run across an engineering friend named Hobart, who was at that moment regretting the pressure of business that forbade his trying for what promised to be a most profitable contract. It was one for furnishing all the bridge timber to be used in the construction of a new railway through Wisconsin. The bids were to be opened in Madison two days later. Acting upon the impulse of the moment, Billy Brackett hastened to that city and tendered a bid for the contract, which, to his surprise, was accepted.

In doing this the young engineer had counted upon the assistance of his brother-in-law, from whose mill he expected to obtain the timber he had thus contracted to furnish. As the work must be begun immediately, he hurried on to the Major's house with an offer of partnership in this promising undertaking, and arrived as we have seen.

"It's a big thing Major," the young man said in conclusion, after explaining these details at the dinner-table; "and it's not only a big thing in itself, but it will lead to other contracts equally good."

"I should like nothing better than to join you in such an enterprise Billy," replied the Major; "but I don't see how I can go into it just now, with this affair of Winn and the raft on my hands. You say the work must be begun at once?"

"Yes. It really should be started this very day, and it can, if you'll agree to the rest of my plan. You see, I've only

told you the half I thought out before getting here. Since then I have added as much more, which is something like this: Suppose you and I change places. You take my horse and go to Madison in the interests of the contract, while Bim and I will take your skiff and start down the river in the interests of Winn and the raft. You know a heap more about getting out bridge timber than I do, while I expect I know more about river rafting than you do. Not that I'm anything of a raftsman," he added, modestly, "but I picked up a good bit of knowledge concerning the river while on that government job down in Arkansas. If you'll only give me the chance, I'll guarantee to find the raft and navigate it to any port you may choose to name--Dubuque, St. Louis, Cairo, New Orleans, or even across the briny--with such a chap as I know your Winn must be for a mate. When we reach our destination we can telegraph for you, and you can arrange the sale of the ship and cargo yourself. As for me, I've had so much of dry land lately that I'm just longing for a home on the rolling deep, the life of a sailor free, and all that sort of thing. What do you say? Isn't my scheme a good one?"

"I declare I believe it is!" exclaimed the Major, who had caught a share of his young kinsman's enthusiasm, and whose face had visibly brightened during the unfolding of his plans. "Not only that, but I believe your companionship with Winn on this river trip, and your example, will be infinitely better for him than mine. I have noticed that young people are much more apt to be influenced by those only a few years older than themselves than they are by persons whose ideas they may regard as antiquated or old-fogyish."

"Oh, papa, how can you say so?" cried Elta, springing up and throwing her arms about his neck. "How can you say that you could ever be an old fogy?"

"Perhaps I'm not, dear, to you," answered the Major, smiling at his daughter's impetuosity; "but to young fellows mingling with the world for the first time nothing pertaining to the past seems of any value as compared with the present or immediate future. Consequently a companion who is near enough of an age to sympathize with the pursuits and feelings of such a one can influence him more strongly than a person whose thoughts are oftener with the past than with the future."

"I can't bear to hear you talk so, husband," said Mrs. Caspar. "As if our Winn wouldn't be more readily influenced by his own father and mother than by any one else in the world! At the same time, I think William's plan well worth considering, for I have hated the idea of that raft trip for you. I have dreaded being left alone here with only Elta, too, though I wouldn't say so when I thought there wasn't anything else to be done."

With this unanimous acceptance of the young engineer's plan, it took but a short time to arrange its details, and before dark everything was settled. The Major was to leave for Madison the next morning, while Billy Brackett was to start down the creek that very evening, so as to be ready at daylight to begin his search for the missing raft at the point where it had been last reported. By his own desire he was to go alone in the skiff, except for the companionship of his trusty Bim, who made a point of accompanying his master everywhere. The young man was provided with an open letter from Major Caspar, giving him full authority to take charge of the raft and do with it as he saw fit.

Both Mrs. Caspar and Elta wrote notes to Winn, and gave them to Billy Brackett to deliver. The major also wrote a line of introduction to an old soldier who had been his most devoted follower during the war. He was now living with a married niece near Dubuque, Iowa, and might possibly prove of assistance during the search for the raft.

Thus equipped, provided with a stock of provisions, and a minute description of both the raft and of Winn, whom he did not hope to recognize, the young engineer and his four-footed companion set forth soon after supper on their search for the missing boy. An hour later they too were being swept southward by the resistless current of the great river.

CHAPTER V.

HOW THE VOYAGE WAS BEGUN.

When Winn Caspar turned into his comfortable bunk aboard the raft on the night of the storm, it never once occurred to him that the *Venture* might float before morning. She never had floated, and she seemed so hard and fast aground that he imagined a rise of several feet of water would be necessary to move her. It had not yet rained where he was, and the thought that it might be raining higher up the stream did not enter his mind. So he went comfortably to bed, and slept like a top for several hours. Finally, he was awakened so suddenly that he sprang from the bunk, and by

the time his eyes were fairly opened, was standing in the middle of the floor listening to a strange creaking and scratching on the roof above his head. It had aroused him, and now as he listened to it, and tried in vain to catch a single gleam of light through the intense darkness, it was so incomprehensible and uncanny, that brave boy as he was, he felt shivers creeping over his arms and back.

Could the sounds be made by an animal? Winn knew there were wild-cats and an occasional panther in the forests bordering the creek. If it was caused by wild-cats there must be at least a dozen of them, and he had never heard of as many as that together. Besides, wild-cats wouldn't make such sounds. They might spit and snarl; but certainly no one had ever heard them squeak and groan. All at once there came a great swishing overhead and then all was still, save for the howling of the wind and the roar of a deluge of rain which Winn now heard for the first time.

The boy felt his way into the forward room and opened the door to look out, but was greeted by such a fierce rush of wind and rain that he was thankful for the strength that enabled him to close it again. Mingled with the other sounds of the storm, Winn now began to distinguish that of waves plashing on the deck of the raft. Certainly his surroundings had undergone some extraordinary change since he turned in for the night, but what it was passed the boy's comprehension.

After a long search he found a box of matches and lighted the lamp, forgetting that all its oil had been exhausted the evening before. It burned for a few minutes with a sickly flame, and then went out. Even that feeble light had been a comfort. It had showed him that everything was still all right inside the "shanty," besides enabling him to find and put on the clothes that he had hung near the stove to dry. As he finished dressing, and was again standing in utter darkness puzzling over his situation, he was nearly paralyzed by a blinding glare of light that suddenly streamed into the window nearest him. It was accompanied by the hoarse roar of steam, a confusion of shoutings, and the loud clangor of bells. Without a thought of the weather, Winn again flung open the door and rushed into the open air. So intense and dazzling was the flood of yellow light, that he seemed to be gazing into the crater of an active volcano. It flashed by as suddenly as it had appeared, and the terrified boy became aware that a big steamboat was slipping swiftly past the raft, but a few feet from it. The bewildering glare had come from her roaring furnaces; and had not their doors been thrown open just when they were, she would have crashed at full speed into the raft, with such consequences as can easily be imagined. As it was she was barely able to sheer off in time, and a score of voices hurled back angry threats at the supposed crew of the raft, whose neglect to show a lantern had so nearly led to death and destruction.

So long as he could detect the faintest twinkle of light from the rapidly receding boat, or hear the measured coughings of her exhausted steam, Winn stood gazing and listening, regardless of the rain that was drenching him to the skin. He was overwhelmed by a realization of his situation. That steamboat had told him as plainly as if she had spoken that the *Venture* was not only afloat, but had in some way reached the great river, and was drifting with its mighty current. He had no idea of how long he had thus drifted, nor how far he was from home. He only knew that the distance was increasing with each moment, and that until daylight at least he was powerless to help himself.

As he turned towards the door of the "shanty," he stumbled over something, which, by stooping, he discovered to be the branch of a tree. To the keen-witted boy this was like the sight of a printed page.

"That accounts for the noise on the roof that woke me," he said to himself. "The raft was passing under those low branches at the mouth of the creek, and I can't be more than a mile or so from there now."

For an instant the idea of paddling home in his canoe and leaving the raft to its fate flashed across his mind, but it was dismissed as promptly as it had come. "Not much I won't!" he said, aloud. "I've shipped for the voyage, and I'm going to see it through in spite of everything. Besides, it's my own fault that I'm in this fix. If I hadn't carried away that cable this thing never could have happened. What a fool I was! But who would have supposed the water could rise so quickly?"

The thought of his little dugout caused the boy to wonder if it were still attached to the raft where he had made it fast the evening before. Again he ventured outside to look for the canoe, but the darkness was so dense and the violence of the storm so bewildering that, after a narrow escape from stepping overboard, he realized that without a light of some kind the undertaking was too dangerous. "There must be a lantern somewhere," he thought. "Yes, I remember seeing one brought aboard." Finally he discovered it hanging near the stove, and, to his joy, it was full of oil. By its aid his search for the canoe was successful, and he was delighted to find it floating safely alongside, though half full of water, and in danger of being stove against the timbers of the raft by the waves that were breaking on deck. With infinite labor he at length succeeded in hauling the little craft aboard and securing it in a place of safety. Then, though he would gladly have had the comfort of a light in the "shanty," the thought of his recent narrow escape warned him to

guard against another similar danger by running the lantern to the top of the signal-pole, and leaving it there as a beacon.

He could do nothing more; and so, drenched, chilled, and weary, the lonely lad crept back into the "shanty." How dreary it was to be its sole occupant! If he only had some one to talk, plan, and consult with! He felt so helpless and insignificant there in the dark, drifting down the great river on a raft that, without help, he was as incapable of managing as a baby. What ought he to do? What should he do? It was so hard to think without putting his thoughts into words. Even Elta's presence and counsel would be a comfort, and the boy laughed bitterly to recall how often he had treated the dear sister's practical common-sense with contempt because she was only a girl. Now how gladly would he listen to her advice! It was pretty evident that his self-conceit had received a staggering blow, and that self-reliance would be thankful for the backing of another's wisdom.

As Winn sat by the table, forlorn and shivering, it suddenly occurred to him that there was no reason why he should not have a fire. There was plenty of dry wood. How stupid he had been not to think of it before! Acting upon this idea, he quickly had a cheerful blaze snapping and crackling in the little stove, which soon began to diffuse a welcome warmth throughout the room. By a glance at his watch--a small silver one that had been his father's when he was a boy--Winn found the night to be nearly gone. He was greatly comforted by the thought that in less than two hours daylight would reveal his situation and give him a chance to do something. Still, the lonely waiting was very tedious, the boy was weary, and the warmth of the fire made him sleepy. At first he struggled against the overpowering drowsiness, but finally he yielded to it, and, with his head sunk on his folded arms, which rested on the table, was soon buried in a slumber as profound as that of the earlier night.

At daylight the unguided raft was seen in the "Slant Crossing" by the crew of an up-bound steamboat, and they wondered at the absence of all signs of life aboard it. Every now and then the drifting mass of timber touched on some sand-bar or reef, but the current always swung it round, so that it slid off and resumed its erratic voyage. At length, after floating swiftly and truly down a long straight chute, the *Venture* was seized by an eddy at its foot, revolved slowly several times, and then reluctantly dragged into a false channel on the western side of a long, heavily-timbered island. Half-way down its length the raft "saddle-bagged," as the river men say, or floated broadside on, against a submerged rock. It struck fairly amidship, and there it hung, forming a barrier, around the ends of which the hurrying waters laughed and gurgled merrily.

With the shock of the striking Winn awoke, straightened himself, and rubbed his eyes, wondering vaguely where he was and what had happened.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. GILDER AND HIS RUDE RECEPTION.

After emerging from the "shanty," it did not take the solitary occupant of the raft long to discover the nature of his new predicament. The water was sufficiently clear for him to make out an indistinct outline of the rock on which the raft was hung, and as the rain was still falling, he quickly regained the shelter of the "shanty," there to consider the situation. It did not take him long to make up his mind that this was a case in which assistance was absolutely necessary, and that he must either wait for it to come to him or go in search of it. First of all, though, he must have something to eat. He had no need to look at his watch to discover that it was breakfast-time. The condition of his appetite told him that.

Now Winn had never learned to cook. He had regarded that as an accomplishment that was well enough for girls to acquire, but one quite beneath the notice of a man. Besides, cooking was easy enough, and any one could do it who had to. It was only necessary to put things into a pot and let them boil, or into an oven to bake. Of course they must be watched and taken from the stove when done, but that was about all there was to cooking. There was a sack of corn-meal in the "shanty," and a jug of maple syrup. A dish of hot mush would be the very thing. Then there was coffee already ground; of course he would have a cup of coffee. So the boy made a roaring fire, found the coffee-pot, set it on the stove, and filled a large saucepan with corn-meal.

"There may be a little too much in there," he thought; "but I can save what I can't eat now for lunch, and then fry it, as mother does."

Having got thus far in his preparations, he took a bucket and went outside for some water from the river. Here he remained for a few minutes to gaze at a distant up-bound steamboat, and wondered why he had not noticed her when she passed the raft. Although the river seemed somewhat narrower than he thought it should be, he had no idea but that he was still in its main channel, and that the land on his left was the Wisconsin shore.

Still wondering how he could have missed seeing, or at least hearing, the steamboat, the boy reentered the "shanty." Thinking of steamboats rather than of cooking, he began to pour water into the saucepan of meal, which at once began to run over. Thus recalled to his duties, he removed half of the wet meal to another pan, filled it with water, and set both pans on the stove. Then he poured a stream of cold water into the coffee-pot, which by this time was almost red-hot. The effect was as distressing as it was unexpected. A cloud of scalding steam rushed up into his face and filled the room, the coffee-pot rolled to the floor with a clatter, and there was such a furious hissing and sputtering that poor Winn dropped his bucket of water and staggered towards the door, fully convinced that he was the victim of a boiler explosion.

When the cloud of steam cleared away, the boy ruefully surveyed the scene of disaster, and wondered what had gone wrong. "I'm sure nothing of the kind ever happened in mother's kitchen," he said to himself. In spite of his smarting face, he determined not to be daunted by this first mishap, but to try again. So he wiped the floor with a table-cloth, drew another bucket of water from the river, and resolved to proceed with the utmost care this time. To his dismay, as he stooped to pick up the coffee-pot, he found that it had neither bottom nor spout, but was a total and useless wreck. "What a leaky old thing it must have been," soliloquized the boy.

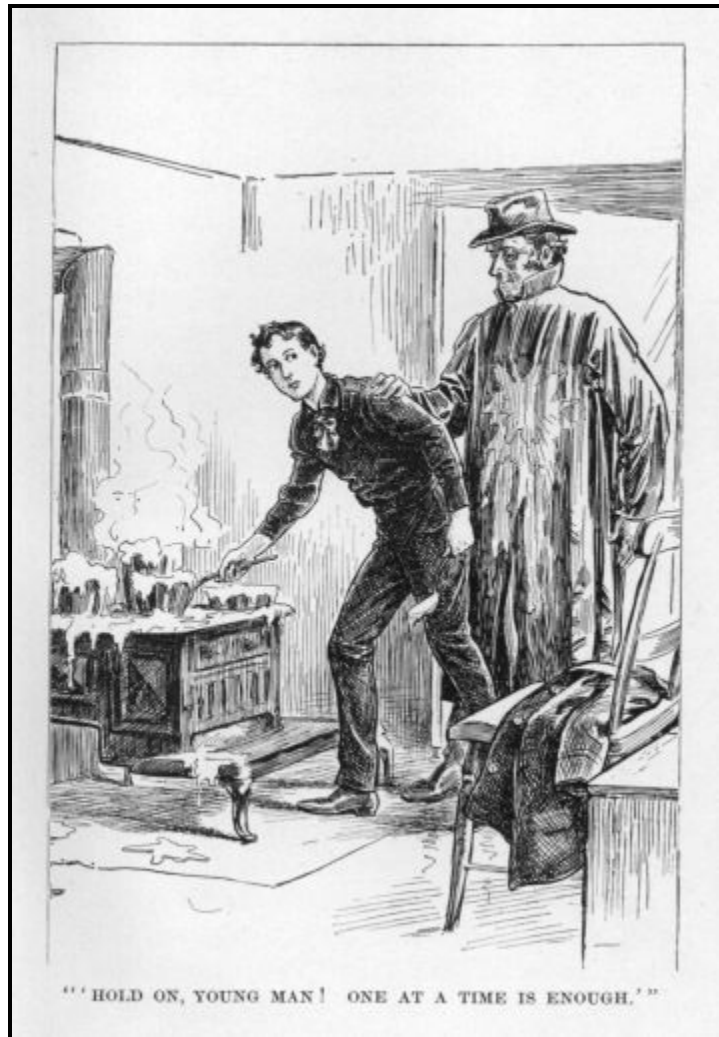
Just then his attention was attracted by another hissing sound from the stove and a smell of burning. Two yellow streams were pouring over the sides of the saucepans.

"Hello!" cried Winn, as he seized a spoon and began ladling a portion of the contents from each into a third pan. "How ever did these things get full again? I'm sure I left lots of room in them."

At that moment the contents of all three pans began to burn, and he filled them with water. A few minutes later all three began to bubble over, and he got more pans. Before he was through with that mush, every available inch of space on the stove was covered with pans of it, the disgusted cook was liberally bedaubed with it, and so was the floor. The contents of some of the pans were burned black; others were as weak as gruel; all were lumpy, and all were insipid for want of salt.

For a moment Winn, hot, cross, and smarting from many scalds and burns, reviewed the results of his first attempt at preparing a meal with a comical expression, in which wrath and disgust were equally blended. Then, yielding to an impulse of anger, he picked up one of the messes and flung it, pan and all, out through the open door. He was stooping to seize the next, which he proposed to treat in a similar manner, when a hand was laid on his shoulder, and he was almost petrified with amazement by hearing a voice exclaim:

"Hold on, young man! One at a time is enough. It's very pleasant to be greeted warmly, but there is such a thing as too warm a reception. I'll allow you didn't see me coming, though if I thought you did, I'd chuck you overboard for that caper."



[Illustration: "Hold on, young man! One at a time is enough."]

The speaker, who stood in the doorway striving to remove the mess of sticky mush that had struck him full in the breast and now covered a large portion of his body, including his face, was a man of middle age and respectable appearance, clad in a rubber suit and a slouched hat.

Filled with shame and contrition at this unexpected result of his foolish action, Winn was profuse in his apologies, and picking up the useful table-cloth that had already served him in one emergency, stepped forward with an offer of assistance. The stranger waved him back, and removed the greater part of the mess by taking off his rubber coat. At the same time he said:

"There's no harm done, and worse might have happened. You might have been pitching stove lids, or hot soup, or knives and forks, you know. So, you see, I'm to be congratulated on getting off as well as I have. But where is the boss of this raft, and the crew? How did you happen to run in here out of the channel? You are not alone, are you?"

"Yes, sir," replied Winn. "I'm captain and crew and everything else just at present--excepting cook," he added, hastily, as he noted the stranger's amused glance at the stove and its surroundings.

"Who is cook, then?"

"There isn't any," answered Winn; "and for that reason there isn't any breakfast, nor likely to be any, for I'll starve before I try my hand at it again."

"There seems to be plenty of breakfast, such as it is," said the stranger, gravely, indicating by a glance the many pans of spoiled mush. Then seeing that the boy was really in distress, and not in a joking humor, he added, "But let me help you set things to rights, and then I'll see if I can't show you how to get up some sort of a breakfast. I'm not a regular cook, as perhaps you may guess; but then, again, I am one, in a way, as all we river-traders have to be."

"Are you a river-trader?" asked Winn.

"Yes; and there are three of us. But I'll tell you all about it, and you shall tell me your story after we've had breakfast."

To Winn, the expeditious manner in which his recent culinary disasters were repaired and a simple but well-cooked breakfast was made ready by this stranger was a source of undisguised admiration. Even coffee, clear and strong, was made in a tin can. One edge of the can was bent into the form of a rude spout; then it was filled two-thirds with water, and set on the stove. When the water came to a boil, half a cupful of ground coffee, tied loosely in a bit of clean muslin, was dropped into it, and allowed to boil for three minutes. A kind of biscuit made of flour, water, shortening, baking-powder, and salt, well mixed, and rolled thin, was quickly baked, first on one side and then on the other, in an iron skillet on top of the stove. At the same time a single cupful of corn-meal, well salted, and boiled for half an hour, furnished a large dish of smoking mush. Half a dozen thin slices of bacon broiled on a toaster completed what Winn enthusiastically declared was the very best breakfast he had ever eaten. Still, the boy was so ravenously hungry that it is probable even his own burned and lumpy mixture of corn-meal would not have tasted so bad as it looked.

While he was busy with the breakfast, the stranger, who said his name was Gilder, talked pleasantly on many subjects. At the same time he managed somehow to learn all about Winn and his family, the raft and how it happened to be where it was, without giving a single item of information concerning himself in return.

When Winn finally declared that he could eat no more, Mr. Gilder also pushed back his chair, and said:

"Now, then, for business. First, I must tell you that you are in a very serious predicament. I examined the position of this raft before coming aboard, and arrived at the conclusion that both it and its cargo are in a fair way of becoming a total loss. As soon as the river falls again, which it is likely to do at any time, the raft will probably break in pieces of its own weight. In that case you would lose both it and your wheat. The only plan I can suggest for saving the raft is to lighten it until it floats clear of the rock on which it is hung, by throwing the wheat overboard; or, if you can manage it, land your wheat on the island, where it can remain until you can take it away. Of course the decision as to which of these things you will do rests entirely with yourself; but you must make up your mind quickly, for with this uncertain state of water there isn't an hour to lose."

CHAPTER VII.

A GANG OF "RIVER-TRADERS."

For a whole minute Winn sat silent, while from the opposite side of the table Mr. Gilder regarded his perplexed countenance with an expression that was not altogether pleasant. Winn, suddenly looking up from his hard thinking, was a bit startled by it; but as it instantly melted into one of smiling sympathy, his confidence in the man remained unbroken. Had he seen Mr. Gilder two hours earlier, instead of one, his opinion of the individual who had just prepared such a capital breakfast, expressed so great friendliness, and now showed him so plainly the unpleasant predicament into which he had fallen, would have been decidedly different.

At that time Mr. Gilder was kneeling beside an opening in the floor of a log-hut, in the centre of the island, and lifting from it a tray of odd-looking but beautifully made tools. The hut was small and rudely constructed. It was surrounded by a dense forest growth, and stood in a tiny clearing from which no road or trail could be seen to lead. All its appointments were of the most primitive description, and yet a single glance into its interior would have impressed one with the belief that its occupants were millionaires. The effect of piles and stacks of greenbacks, enough to form the capital of a city bank or fill the vaults of a sub-treasury, amid such surroundings, would certainly have startled even those accustomed to the handling of great wealth. The bills, all of which were new and crisp, were done up in neat packages, each of which was marked with the number of hundreds or thousands of dollars it contained. In one corner of the room stood a small printing-press of exquisite make. Besides this press, a work-bench, table, and several rude stools, the single room of the hut contained only the piles of greenbacks.

A man sat beside the table counting and sorting a large number of bills, the worn appearance of which showed them to have been in active circulation for some time. This man was small, and had a weazened face devoid of hair except for a pair of bushy, iron-gray eyebrows, beneath which his eyes gleamed as cunningly bright as those of a fox.

He answered to the name of Grimshaw; and as he counted bills with the deftness and rapidity of a bank cashier, he also paid a certain amount of attention to the remarks of his companion, who was talking earnestly.

"I tell you what it is, Grim," the other was saying, as he bent over the secret opening in the floor, "it's high time we were moving. This is a first-class location, and we've done well here; but you know as well as I do that our business requires a pretty frequent change of scene, and I'm afraid we've stayed here too long already. One of those mill fellows said only yesterday that we must have collected a powerful lot of stuff by this time, and asked if we weren't about ready to invite him up to inspect and bid on it. I told him we were thinking of putting it into a raft and taking it down-river. Never had such an idea, you know, but the notion just popped into my head, and I'm not sure now but what it's as good a one as we'll strike. What do you think?"

"It'll take a heap of hard work, and more time than I for one want to spare, to build a raft large enough for our purpose," answered Grimshaw. "Still, I don't know as the idea is wholly bad."

"It would take time, that's a fact," answered Mr. Gilder, lifting his tray of tools to the table and proceeding to polish some of them with a bit of buckskin. "And it looks as though time was going to be an object with us shortly. That last letter from Wiley showed that the Chicago folks were beginning to sniff pretty suspiciously in this direction. I've been asked some awkward questions lately, too. Yes, the more I think of it, the more I am convinced that we ought to be getting out of here as quickly as we can make arrangements. We must talk it over with Plater, and come to some decision this very day. He's-- Hello! Something's up. Plater was to stay in camp till I got back."

Again came the peculiar, long-drawn whistle that had arrested the attention of the men, and which denoted the approach of a friend. Mr. Gilder stepped to the door and answered it. Then he looked expectantly towards a laurel thicket that formed part of the dense undergrowth surrounding the hut. In a moment the dripping branches were parted near the ground, and a man, emerging from the bushes on his hands and knees, stood up, shook himself like a Newfoundland dog, and advanced towards the open door. He was a large man with long hair and a bushy beard. He was clad in flannel, jeans, and cowhide boots, and was evidently of a different class from Mr. Gilder, who appeared to be a gentleman, and was dressed as one. "What's up, Plater?" asked the latter.

"Big raft, three shanties on it, in false channel, saddle-bagged on the reef pretty nigh abreast of camp. Can't see nobody aboard. Reckon she broke adrift from somewheres while her crew was off on a frolic."

"You don't say so!" cried Mr. Gilder, excitedly. "Perhaps it's the very thing we are most in need of, sent by a special providence to crown our labors with success. I'll go down and have a look at her, while you stay here and help Grim pack up the stuff. We might as well be prepared for a sudden move, and he'll tell you what we have just been talking about."

So Mr. Gilder, donning his rubber coat, a garment that Plater would have scorned to wear, left the clearing through another bushy thicket on the opposite side from that by which his confederate had entered it. An almost undiscernible path led him to the shore of the island that was washed by the main channel of the river. Here he struck into a plainly marked trail that followed the water's edge. In this trail Mr. Gilder walked to the southern end of the island, and up its other side until he reached a comfortable camp that bore signs of long occupancy. It stood high on a cut bank, and just below it a rude boom held a miscellaneous assortment of logs, lumber, and odd wreckage, all of it evidently collected from the stray drift of the great river.

From the edge of the bank, a short distance from this camp, the man commanded a good view of the stranded raft, and for several minutes he stood gazing at it. "There's the very thing to a T, that we want," he said to himself. "Not too big for us to handle, and yet large enough to make it seem an object for us to take it down the river. I can't see what they want of three shanties, though; one ought to be enough for all the crew she needs. Our first move would be to tear down two of them, and lengthen the other; that alone would be a sufficient disguise. We haven't got her yet, though, and she isn't abandoned either, for there's smoke coming from that middle shanty. I reckon the cook must be aboard, and maybe he'll sell the whole outfit for cash, and so give us a clear title to it." Here Mr. Gilder smiled as though the thought was most amusing. "I'll go off and interview him anyway, and I'd better be about it too, for the river is still rising. She won't hang there much longer, and if the fellow found his raft afloat again before a bargain was made he might not come to terms. In that case we should be obliged to take forcible possession, which would be risky. I'm bound to have that raft, though. It is simply a case of necessity, and necessity is in the same fix we are, so far as law is concerned."

While thus thinking, Mr. Gilder had stepped into a light skiff that was moored near the boom, and was pulling towards the stranded raft. He first examined its position, and assured himself that very little labor would be necessary

to float it; then he stepped aboard, and very nearly lost his customary self-possession upon the receipt of Winn's warm greeting. He was on the point of returning it in a manner that would have proved most unpleasant for poor Winn, when he discovered that his supposed assailant was only a boy, and that the act was unintentional. It took the shrewd man but a few minutes to discover the exact state of affairs aboard the raft, and to form a plan for gaining peaceful, if not altogether lawful, possession of it. This plan he began to carry out by the false statement of the situation made to Winn at the conclusion of the last chapter. This beginning was not made, however, until he had first gained the lad's confidence by a deed of kindness.

When Winn looked up from his hard thinking he said, "I hate the thought of throwing the wheat overboard, even to save the raft. There are two thousand bushels of it, and I know my father expects to get at least fifty cents a bushel. So it would seem like throwing a thousand dollars into the river. Then, again, I don't see how it will be possible to land it, and so lighten the raft. It would take me a month to do it alone with my canoe. Besides, father is sure to set out on a hunt for the raft the moment he finds it is gone, and so is likely to come along most any time."

"All the greater need for haste," thought Mr. Gilder; but aloud he said, "That is very true, but in the mean time your raft will probably break up, and your wheat be spilled in the river anyway. Now suppose you agree to pay me and my partners a hundred dollars to get the wheat ashore for you and reload it after the raft floats."

"I haven't a cent of money with me," replied Winn.

"That's bad," said the other, reflectively. "It's awkward to travel without money. But I'll tell you what we'll do. I hate to see a decent young fellow like you in such a fix, and I'm willing to take a risk to help him out of it. Suppose I buy your wheat? I told you that I and my partners were river traders. To be sure, our business is mostly in logs, lumber, and the like; but I don't mind taking an occasional flyer in wheat, provided they are willing. You say your father expects to get fifty cents a bushel for this wheat. Now I'll give you forty-five cents a bushel for it; that is, if my partners agree. That will leave five cents a bushel to pay us for landing it, transferring it to some other craft, and getting your raft afloat. What do you say?"

"I wish I could ask father about it," hesitated Winn, to whom, under the circumstances as he supposed them to exist, the offer seemed very tempting.

"Oh, well," sneered Mr. Gilder, "if you are not man enough now to act upon your own responsibility in such an emergency, you never will be. So the sooner you get home again and tie up to your mother's apron-string the sooner you'll be where you belong."

The taunt was as well worn as it was cruel, and should have given Winn an insight into the true character of his new acquaintance; but on a boy so proud of his ability to decide for himself, and so ignorant of the ways of the world as this one, it was sufficient to produce the desired effect.

Winn flushed hotly as he answered: "The wheat is my father's, and not mine to sell; but for the sake of saving it as well as the raft, I will let you have it at that price. I must have the cash, though, before you begin to move it."

"Spoken like the man I took you to be," said Mr. Gilder, heartily. "Now we'll go ashore and see my partners. If they agree to the bargain, as no doubt they will, we'll get to work at once, and have your raft afloat again in no time."

CHAPTER VIII.

DISAPPEARANCE OF THE RAFT.

When Winn and his new acquaintance stepped outside of the "shanty," it did not seem to the boy that the river was falling, or that the raft was in a particularly dangerous position. He would have liked to examine more closely into its condition, but his companion so occupied his attention by describing the manner in which he proposed to remove the wheat, and so hurried him into the waiting skiff, that he had no opportunity to do so.

The "river-traders'" camp was not visible from the raft, nor did Mr. Gilder, who handled the oars, head the skiff in its direction. He rowed diagonally up-stream instead, so as to land at some distance above it. There he asked Winn to wait a few minutes until he should discover in which direction his partners had gone. He explained that one of them had

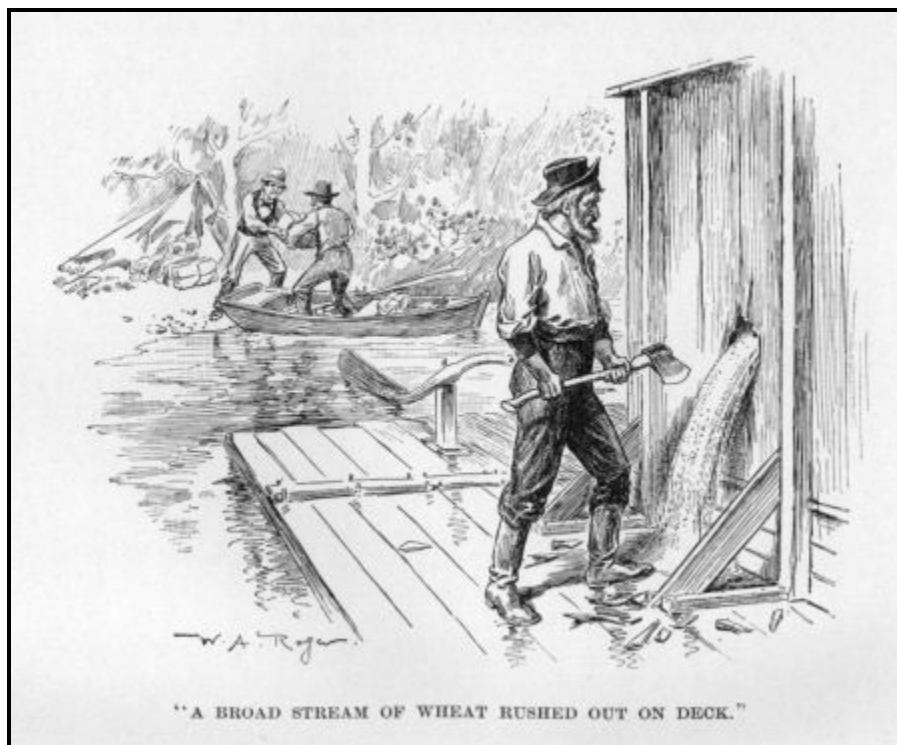
been left in camp at a considerable distance from that point, while he and the third had been rowing along the shore of the island in opposite directions, searching for drift-logs. Thus he alone had discovered the stranded raft. Now he wished to bring them to that point, that they might see it for themselves before he explained the proposed wheat deal. With this Mr. Gilder plunged directly into the tall timber, leaving Winn alone on the river-bank.

It was fully fifteen minutes before the man returned to the waiting lad, and he not only looked heated but anxious.

"I can't think what has become of those fellows!" he exclaimed, breathlessly, as he wiped the moisture from his forehead with a cambric handkerchief. "I've been clear to camp without finding a trace of either of them. Now there is only one thing left for us to do in order to get them here quickly. You and I must start around the island in opposite directions, because if we went together we might follow them round and round like a kitten chasing its tail. If you meet them, bring them back here, and I will do the same. If you don't meet them, keep on until you are half-way down the other side of the island, or exactly opposite this point; then strike directly into the timber, and so make a short-cut back here. In that way you will reach this place again as soon as I, for the island isn't more than three hundred yards wide just here. Be sry, now, and remember that the safety of your raft depends largely upon the promptness with which we get those other fellows here."

With this Mr. Gilder began to walk rapidly down the shore in the direction he had chosen. Carried away by the man's impetuosity, Winn did not hesitate to obey his instructions, but started at once in the opposite direction. Mr. Gilder, noting this by a backward glance over his shoulder, instantly halted and concealed himself behind a large tree-trunk. From here he peered at the retreating figure of the boy until it was no longer visible. Then he gave vent to the same peculiar whistle with which Plater had announced his own approach to the log-hut in the woods. The sound was immediately answered from no great distance, whereupon Mr. Gilder hastened in that direction. A minute later he returned, bringing a coil of stout rope, one end of which he made fast to a tree on the bank. At the same time both Grimshaw and Plater appeared, each bearing a large package securely wrapped in canvas on his shoulder.

All three men entered the skiff and pulled out to the raft, carrying the loose end of the rope with them. Mr. Gilder and Grimshaw quickly returned to the land, leaving the burly Plater to make a vigorous attack with an axe against the sides of one of the wheat bins. He soon splintered and tore off a board, leaving an aperture through which a broad stream of wheat rushed out on the deck of the raft. This Plater began to shovel overboard, working with furious energy, as though combating a hated enemy. In ten minutes both bins were empty, and so much of the wheat had gone into the ever-rising waters that the raft, which had been on the point of floating when Plater began his operations, now did so, and swung in close to the bank at the end of its new cable.



[Illustration: "A broad stream of wheat rushed out on the deck"]

In the mean time the other men had brought several skiff-loads of their peculiar merchandise to the raft, and now it took but a few minutes to transfer what remained on the bank directly to it. Even the tent, which had been hastily torn down, together with a portion of their camp outfit, was tossed aboard, and within fifteen minutes from the time of Winn's departure the *Venture*, with its new crew at the sweeps, was moving slowly out from the island, and gathering impetus from the current for a continuance of its eventful voyage.

Without a suspicion that the gentlemanly stranger who had so kindly smoothed away his culinary difficulties, and, while apparently willing to assist him, was also anxious to make a good bargain for himself, was anything but what he appeared to be, Winn made his way briskly towards the head of the island. It was only after rounding it and starting down the opposite side without seeing a sign of those whom he sought that he began to have misgivings.

"I wonder if it is all right?" he said to himself. "What could be the man's object in telling me that the raft was in a dangerous position if she isn't? I declare I don't believe she is, though! She didn't look it when I left, and I do believe the river is still rising. I wonder if I haven't done a foolish thing in leaving the raft? If I have, the best thing to do now is to get back as quickly as possible."

By this time the boy had worked himself into a fever of apprehension, and, remembering what he had been told concerning the narrowness of the island, he determined to make a short-cut across it. This was exactly what the far-sighted Mr. Gilder had anticipated, and Winn fell an easy victim to his artfully planned trap. For nearly an hour the boy, versed in wood-craft as he was, wandered and struggled through the dense undergrowth of that island forest. Suddenly, as he burst his way through a thicket, he was confronted by the log-hut so lately occupied by the "river-traders." Winn shouted as he approached it; but, of course, received no reply. It had the lonely look of a place long deserted, and the boy paused for but a single glance into its uninviting interior. Then, getting his bearings anew by the sun that was beginning to struggle through the clouds, he pushed his way resolutely towards the western side of the island, which, somewhat to his surprise, he reached a few minutes later.

He emerged from the timber at the abandoned camp of the traders; but without stopping to examine it, he ran to the water's edge, and gazed anxiously both up and down stream. There was no sign of the raft nor of any moving object. "It must be farther up, around that point," thought Winn, and he hurried in that direction. From one point to another he thus pursued his anxious way until the head of the island was once more in sight. Then he knew that he must have passed the place where the raft had been, and that it was gone.

As a realizing sense of how he had been duped and of his present situation flashed through his mind, the poor boy sat down on a log, too bewildered to act, or even to think.

CHAPTER IX.

ALONE ON THE ISLAND.

Winn Caspar was indeed unhappy as he sat on that log and gazed hopelessly out over the sparkling waters, on which the sun was now shining brightly. Although he had explored only a portion of the island, he felt that he was alone on it. But that was by no means the worst of the situation. The raft in which he had taken so much pride, his father's raft upon which so much depended, the raft on which he had expected to float out into the great world, was gone, and he was powerless to follow it. All through his own fault, too! This thought was the hardest to bear. Why, even Elta would have known better. Of course she would. Any one but he would, and she was wiser than almost any one he knew. How dearly he loved this wise little sister, and to think that he had parted with her in anger! When was that? Only last evening! Impossible! It must have been weeks ago. It wasn't, though! It was only a few hours ago, and his father had hardly had time to come and look for him yet. Perhaps he was even now on his way down the river, and might be passing on the other side of the island.

With this thought the boy sprang to his feet, and hurrying to the head of the island, eagerly scanned the waters of the main channel. There was nothing in sight, not even a skiff or a canoe. "Even my dugout is gone," thought Winn, with a fresh pang, for he was very fond of the little craft that was all his own. Then he wondered how he should attract his father's attention, and decided to build a fire, with the hope that Major Caspar might come to it to make inquiries, and thus effect his rescue.

Having a definite object to work for cheered the boy somewhat, and his heart grew sensibly lighter as he began to collect wood for his fire. But how should he light it? He had no matches. For a moment this new difficulty seemed insurmountable; then he remembered having seen the smouldering remains of a fire at the abandoned camp on the other side of the island. He must go back to it at once.

Hurrying back around the head of the island, Winn reached the place just in time to find a few embers still glowing faintly, and after whittling a handful of shavings, he succeeded, by a great expenditure of breath, in coaxing a tiny flame into life. Very carefully he piled on dry chips, and then larger sticks, until finally he had a fire warranted to live through a rain-storm. Now for another on the opposite side of the island!

He could not carry lighted sticks the way he had come. It was too far. He thought he could get them safely across the island, though, if he only knew the most direct path. He would first discover this and then return for his fire. Quite early in the search he stumbled across a very narrow trail that seemed to lead in the right direction. By following it he came once more to the deserted log-hut in the forest, but search through the little clearing as he might, he could not see that it went any farther.

Taking his bearings, after deciding to open a trail of his own from there to the river, the boy attacked a thicket on the eastern side of the clearing with his jack-knife. A few minutes of cutting carried him through it, and, to his amazement, he found himself again in an unmistakable trail. It was narrow and indistinct, but it was none the less a trail, leading in the right direction, and the boy was woodman enough to follow it without hesitation to the river-bank. A steamboat was passing the island, but though Winn waved frantically to it and shouted himself hoarse, no attention was paid to him. With a heavy heart he watched it out of sight, and then began another collection of wood for his signal-fire.

When it was made, he again crossed the island, selected a blazing stick from the camp-fire, and started to retrace his steps. By the time he reached the log-hut he found it necessary to stop and renew his blaze by building a fire in the rude chimney. By thus establishing a relay station he finally succeeded in getting a blaze to the desired spot on the channel side of the island, and in starting a brisk fire at that point.

Here the boy would have stayed and watched for the craft that he fondly hoped would come to his deliverance; but it was now a long time since breakfast, and his hard work had made him very hungry. He might find something to eat at that abandoned camp, which he had not yet examined. At any rate he would go and look. So he piled logs on his fire until satisfied that it would last for some hours. Then picking up a bit of shingle from the beach, he wrote on it with the stump of a lead-pencil:

"I am on the island. Follow the trail and you will find me.---WINN CASPAR."

This note he stuck in a cleft sapling, from which he first cut the top, and which stood so near the fire that it was certain to attract attention. Then feeling that he could do nothing more in that place, he set forth in search of something with which to satisfy his hunger. On his way back he stopped at the hut, and made a thorough but vain search for food. There was not so much as would have fed a mouse, and the only thing of value that the boy discovered was a rusty fish-hook stuck into one of the wall logs. Before leaving the hut he replenished the fire in the chimney-place, thinking that perhaps he might return there to sleep. Then he went on to the camp.

Here Winn's search for food was as unsuccessful as it had been at the hut. He found a number of cooking utensils, battered and smoked, and discovered an old axe still sticking in the log on which it had been last used. He also found some bits of rope and cord. He knotted together enough of the latter to make a rude line, attached his fish-hook to it, cut a pole, dug some bait, and began to fish just above the "river-traders" boom. For some time he sat there, patiently, but got no bites. The poor boy began to grow desperate with hunger.

"I declare! I've a great mind to swim for the main-land," he said, aloud. "No I won't, though. I can do better than that. Besides, the water is cold enough to give me a cramp. I can make a raft of these logs. Why didn't I think of it before?"

Thrusting the butt end of his pole into the soft earth of the bank, and weighting it with a good, sized stone, the boy went to the boom to examine its contents. There were plenty of logs suitable for the foundation of a raft, and more than enough lumber to deck it handsomely. But what was that brown stuff filling so many of the crevices between the logs and timbers?

"Wheat, as I'm a living boy!" exclaimed Winn, stooping and gathering some of the stuff in his hands. "Wheat! but where can it have come from? Did the *Venture* suddenly break up and go to pieces after all, as Mr. Gilder said she would?" If so, then the situation was worse than he had supposed, for until now the boy had entertained some hopes of being able to follow and perhaps recover the raft, especially if his father should come along and discover him. But if the raft were broken up, as the presence of this wheat seemed to indicate, then its loss was indeed total and irreparable.

"But if they have not gone off with the raft, what has become of those river traders?" argued the boy with himself. "They might have followed the broken sections, or even gone off on one of them. I believe that's what they have done!" he exclaimed aloud. "That accounts for their leaving in such a hurry, and taking their provisions with them. I didn't think that Gilder was such a bad sort of a chap after all. Now he is pretty sure to come back for me after he has secured what he can from the wreck. But what am I to do for something to eat in the mean time? If I could only catch a fish!"

Just then there was a great commotion in the water, and the pole left sticking in the bank began to bend ominously. Winn sprang towards it; but as he stretched out his hand it flew back into position, and the flurry in the water subsided. The wretched line had parted, and the big catfish, from which the boy could have made such a capital supper, was seeking the deepest hole in the river. The worst of it all was that he had taken Winn's only hook with him, and so put an end to any further efforts for his capture.

The boy could have cried with hunger and vexation. It wouldn't have done him any good, though, and he knew it; so he began to gather a tin cup full of the water-soaked wheat instead. This he set on a bed of coals to boil, and was so hungry that he could not wait for it to be done, but ate it half raw, without salt, butter, sugar, syrup, milk, or anything that serves to render such food palatable, and only partially cooked at that, it still seemed to Winn one of the best things he had ever eaten, and he immediately started the cooking of another mess. There was not much of the wheat in sight, and to secure a second cupful the boy scraped up every grain that he could find.

"After this comes starvation," thought Winn; "unless I can get away from this island, and I am going to begin work on that raft at once."

He carefully collected every bit of rope he could find, and thus secured enough to lash together four of the largest logs. Above these he laid a platform of boards, and longed for some nails with which to fasten them in place. He did remarkably well considering his limited means, and by sunset had completed a raft that would more than support his weight. If he could only keep it clear of snags and reefs it would also bear him in safety down the river, to some place where there were suppers and breakfasts to be had.

It would not do to attempt the voyage on such a frail structure in the dark, of course; and so, at sunset, Winn reluctantly began his preparations for passing a night of loneliness on the island.

CHAPTER X.

A NIGHT OF STRANGE HAPPENINGS.

Winn's preparations for the night were of the simplest description, because he had so little to prepare. The boy tried to console himself with this thought. "If I had provisions I should have to cook," he said to himself; "and if there is one thing in this world meaner than another it is cooking. I never realized before what mother has to go through with every day. Never complains of it, either. She's a regular angel, though, and things always seem to go right with her. Now with boys it's just the other way. See what a fix I've got into all on account of being a boy, and trying to do things. Seems to me that Gilder must have been a pretty patient sort of a boy to learn to cook the way he does. I wonder if he ever gets into scrapes? He'd be in one if he was in my place now, and I wish I knew how he'd get out of it."

While thus thinking Winn was by no means idle. He cut a number of bushes and leaned them against the ridge-pole of the "traders'" tent, the frame of which they had left standing. This shelter was so arranged as to form a wind-break on the north side of the fire, the grateful warmth being thus reflected from its inner surface. An armful of twigs and another of dry grass formed the boy's bed, and a drink of river-water his supper. He had thought of passing the night in the log-hut; but as darkness came on he could not bear the thought of its lonesomeness. It was bad enough to be alone on the river-bank, with a broad expanse of star-dotted sky to look at; but that forlorn little hut, shut in on all

sides by the dark forest! Ugh! It made him shiver to think of it. No; he was decidedly better off where he was, and even if his father came along during the night, which Winn did not think probable, he could not fail to see the notice posted beside the signal-fire. It was important that he should remain near his new raft too, so that at the first streak of daylight he could board it and be off.

After a while the lonely lad fell into a sleep filled with troubled dreams. An owl came and hooted above him; the night wind sighed weirdly through the tall timber behind him; while queer gurglings, mysterious splashings, and other strange sounds came from the swift-flowing river close at hand. Although none of these sounds wakened the boy, they tinged his dreams with their uncanniness.

For some hours he slept, and then woke with a start. He was sitting bolt upright, and felt certain that something cold and wet had just touched his face. He put a hand to his cheek. Yes, there was a wet spot. What were those two bright points shining in the dim fireglow! They looked like eyes. Winn sprang to his feet. At his movement the glowing eyeballs vanished. Some animal uttered an indescribable sound, something between a bark and a snarl, there was a rustling of dead leaves, and then all was still.

While the boy stood trembling with the vague fear that always accompanies a suspected but unknown danger, and staring blankly into the darkness, there came to his ears from the forest depths a sound that was almost as terrifying as the recent presence of the unknown animal. It seemed a mingling of howls, cries, and groanings. It rose and fell, now loud, and then almost inaudible; but it always came from the direction of the deserted log-hut. At length it ceased, and now Winn noticed for the first time that a faint light was beginning to tinge the eastern sky above the tree-tops.

"Daylight is coming," thought the boy, "and it is high time for me to be off." He was glad of an excuse for leaving a place that had all at once become filled with such unexplained terrors. Feeling his way cautiously to the river-bank, he reached the little raft without mishap. It took him some time to get it clear of the boom; but at length he succeeded, and with a very decided feeling of relief he pushed off into the current, and proceeded on his journey.

Winn's spirits rose as his clumsy craft moved out from the heavy shadows of the island, and he began to whistle to convince himself that he had not been afraid of anything after all. Suddenly he heard low voices close beside him, a dark object dashed up to his raft, and a dazzling light was flashed full in his face. The next instant two men sprang to his side, threw him down, searched him for arms, secured his knife, which was the only thing resembling a weapon that he possessed, and forced him into a large skiff containing several other men.

"Close the lantern," ordered one of these in a low but stern voice, "and pull for that fire on shore. No doubt we'll bag some more of them there." Then to Winn the man said, "So you thought you could give us the slip, did you, young fellow? Well, you found us up too early, didn't you? Now the best thing you can do is to afford us all possible aid in capturing the rest of your gang. It'll count big in your favor with the Judge, I can tell you. How many are there on the island?"

"I don't know what you mean--" began Winn, indignantly; but a heavy hand was instantly clapped over his mouth.

"Shut up!" whispered the man, hoarsely, but with terrible distinctness. "If you speak another loud word I'll brain you. You'll find out what I mean when we've landed you safely in Dubuque jail. Now answer me in a whisper. How many of your pals are on the island?"

"I haven't any pals," replied Winn, putting as much force into his whisper as he dared, "and there isn't any one on the island. This is an outrage, and--"

"That will do," answered the man, sternly. "If that's the tone you are going to take, we don't want to hear any more of it."

Just then the bow of the skiff was run on the bank, and the man, grasping Winn's arm, stepped ashore, saying, "Now make yourself useful, young fellow, and lead us to your mint or den or whatever you call it. If you don't want to I'll find a way to compel you, and if you try any low-down tricks, I'll make you wish you'd never been born."

"Do you mean the log-hut?" asked Winn.

"Yes, if that's what you call it; but you want to get a move onto you in a hurry."

Bewildered and indignant as he was, Winn was yet cool enough to realize the folly of resistance. He also reflected that when these men found the hut deserted, and that there was no one besides themselves on the island, they would be willing to listen to his story. At any rate, so long as he was in their power it was best to do as they directed. So, with the leader's hand still grasping his arm, the boy led the way into the narrow trail that he had already traversed so often.

Proceeding slowly, and with such extreme caution that not a sound betrayed their presence, the men followed in single file. At the edge of the little clearing Winn halted, and was about to speak, when a hand was again clapped over his mouth with the force of a blow.

"Whisper!" came the order.

"Well there's your hut," whispered the boy, as soon as he was given the chance, "and if you find any one in it, then I'm a liar, that's all."

The hut was plainly visible by the firelight that streamed from its open window. Winn wondered at the brightness of this light, for it seemed as though the fire he had left there the evening before ought to have burned out long ago. He also wondered that he did not remember having closed the door. As no light came from its direction, it certainly appeared to be closed now. As these thoughts flashed through the boy's mind, the man who held him, and who was evidently the leader of the party, whispered,

"You say there isn't anybody in there, but it looks to me as if there was. Anyhow, we'll find out in another minute, and if you've led us into a trap or played us false, I'll see that you swing for it, or my name's not Riley. Bill, you stay here and see that this chap doesn't put up any game on us while we surround that den of thieves. Have your guns ready for use, men."

Although all this was spoken in a whisper, inaudible beyond its immediate group of hearers, there was no mistaking the man's stern meaning, and Winn experienced an uneasy dread such as he had not heretofore felt throughout this strange adventure.

Suppose there should be some one in the hut? Suppose the "river-traders" had returned to the island and should resent this intrusion even to the point of resisting it? In such a case what would happen to him? If his captors were triumphant they would declare he had led them into a trap, for doing which they had promised to hang him. If, on the other hand, the "river-traders" had returned and should make a successful fight, would not their wrath also be directed towards him for leading their assailants to the hut? In either case, it seemed to the bewildered boy that his position was decidedly unpleasant, and he awaited the immediate developments of the situation with no little anxiety.

Those who had followed him had disappeared like shadows, and Winn could not detect a sound save the suppressed breathing of the man who had been detailed to guard him, and who now held his arm.

Suddenly a dog's bark broke the stillness, and a loud challenge, followed by a pistol shot, rang out through the night air. There was a confused trampling; the forest echoed with a roar of guns; the door of the hut was burst open, and a furious rush was made for the interior.

In his excitement Winn's guard loosed his hold of the boy's arm and took a step forward, the better to distinguish what was going on.

Winn was free, and acting upon the impulse of the moment, he slipped behind a great tree-trunk, stole noiselessly a few paces farther, and then dashed away with the speed of a deer back over the trail leading to the river. He did not pause when he reached the camp in which he had passed the night so unhappily, but bounded down the bank to the water's edge. Here he cast loose the painter of the skiff that had brought Mr. Riley and his men to the island, and, with a mighty shove towards the channel, gave a spring that landed him at full length in its bottom. Here he lay breathless and almost motionless for the next thirty minutes, or until his craft had drifted below the tail of the island, and was spinning down the main channel of the great river.

CHAPTER XI.

BILLY BRACKETT'S SURPRISING SITUATION.

When Billy Brackett set forth on his search for a nephew and a runaway raft he did not anticipate any difficulty in finding them. The appearance of the raft had been minutely described to him, and, according to this description, it was too distinctive in its character to be mistaken for anything else. Three shanties, and they of unusual construction, on a raft of that size formed a peculiarity sufficient to arrest the immediate attention of all river men. Thus the young engineer felt certain that by making an occasional inquiry and proceeding at a speed at least double that of the raft, he could easily trace and overtake it, even though it should not run aground, which he thought more than likely to happen early in its voyage.

So Billy Brackett rowed down the creek without a trace of anxiety to mar the pleasure of the adventure into which he had so unexpectedly tumbled. One peculiarity of this light-hearted young man was that no proposition to leave a beaten track and strike into an unexplored trail, even though it led in exactly the opposite direction, could be too absurd or unexpected to meet with his ready approval, always providing it promised plenty of adventure. At the same time he never lost sight of the fact that he had a living to earn, besides a professional reputation to win and maintain. Consequently he generally managed to make his adventures keep step with his duties. In the present instance he felt that Major Caspar's aid was necessary to the fulfilling of his timber contract. He also realized that the only way to obtain it was by taking his brother-in-law's place in searching for the lost raft and navigating it down the river to a market. He had no family ties to bind him to times or places, and with Bim for company he was ready to start at any moment for any portion of the globe.

"Bim" was a diminutive of Cherubim, a name bestowed by its present owner upon the wretched puppy that he had rescued from an abandoned emigrant wagon high up in the California Sierras, because like Cherubim and Seraphim he "continually did cry." The little one was nearly dead, and its mother, lying beside it, was quite so, when they were discovered by the tender-hearted engineer. He had fought his way through a blinding snowstorm and high-piled drifts to the abandoned wagon on the chance of finding human beings in distress. When he discovered only a forlorn little bull-pup, he buttoned it warmly under his blanket overcoat and fought his way back to camp. During that struggle the helpless creature won its way to Billy Brackett's heart, as all young things, human or animal, were sure to do, and assumed a place there that had never since been resigned.

From that day Bim, or "U-Bim," as he was sometimes called, had so thrived under good feeding, kind care, and judicious training that when he started with his master to voyage down the great river he was as fine a specimen of a full-blooded bull-dog as could be found in the country. He was pure white, bow-legged, and broad-chested. His upper lip was drawn slightly back, so as to display his teeth; but this expression of ferocity was relieved by the almost human intelligence of his eyes. He was absolutely fearless, but as loving and gentle as he was brave. He understood every word spoken within his hearing, and his master declared that for his wisdom he ought to be named "Solomon." He never made an unprovoked assault upon a living creature, and would stand any amount of abuse from children or those weaker than himself. Let an indignity be offered to his beloved master in his presence, though, and his fury was as terrible as that of a young lion. Then woe to the unfortunate in whose flesh those gleaming teeth were once fastened. From the vise-like grip of the powerful jaws behind them nothing but death or Billy Brackett's command could effect a release.

Such were the occupants of the skiff that soon after dusk shot out from the mouth of the Caspar Creek on the broad bosom of the great river. Billy Brackett talked to his dog as he would to a human companion, and at that moment he was saying:

"Look here, Bim, I've a great mind to play a joke on that young nephew of ours when we find him. You see, he won't know us from Adam, and probably doesn't remember that he has an Uncle William in the world. Now what is to hinder us from working the stranger racket on him? Wrecked, or broke, or something, and want to earn a passage down the river on a raft, it being easier as well as more sociable and pleasanter in every way than a steamboat. What's to hinder us from doing it, eh? Nothing? Right you are, old dog, and we'll do it, too, if we get the chance. Thus will we discover what sort of stuff he is made of, and get acquainted with his inside self, as Glen Eddy used to say. So you understand, U-Bim, that you are not to give us away or let on that we are any kin to the Caspars. *Sabe?* All right. Now for a twenty-mile spin down-stream, and then we'll hunt a place to lie by for the night."

With this the young man bent lustily to his oars, while Bim sat in the stern of the skiff, alert to every movement made by his master, and swaying his body like that of a genuine cockswain.

Billy Brackett recognized the "Slant Crossing," when they reached it, from the description he had received of its length and direction; but below that point the river for a thousand miles was a blank so far as his personal knowledge of it was concerned.

Although the night was dark, and there were but few guide-lights on the river in those days, he found no difficulty in keeping the channel until the skiff passed through the chute at the head of Winn's island. At this point the false channel seemed, in the darkness, to be as wide and desirable as the true one, and for a minute he was puzzled as to which he should take. "Not that I suppose it would make any great difference," he remarked to Bim. "It's about time to tie up, though, and we want to be sure to do that on the main channel, so as not to miss a chance of seeing the raft at daylight."

For answer Bim left his seat, ran to the bow of the boat, uttered a short bark, and fixed his gaze pointedly downstream.

"A light, as sure as you are a dog of wisdom!" cried Billy Brackett, looking in the direction thus indicated. "I vow, Bim, your name ought to be 'Solomon Minerva,' and I must have a 'howl' engraved on your collar the first chance I get. That is, if you ever arrive at the dignity of owning any collar besides that old strap. Your light looks as though it might proceed from a camp-fire, and I reckon it's on the main channel too. At any rate, we'll pull down there and make inquiries."

A few minutes later the skiff was run ashore near the beacon blaze that Winn Caspar had left on the eastern side of the island, and its occupants were searching the vicinity for those whom Billy Brackett had so confidently expected to find near it.

"It is very strange," he muttered. "Some one must have built this fire; but why he did so if he didn't want to camp beside it beats me. Hello! What's this? Hooray; we are on the right track after all! But what foolishness is that boy up to? and what can he be doing on this island? Thirdly, where is the raft? Eh, Bim! You haven't seen a stray raft round here, have you? No. I thought you would have mentioned it if you had. So he is on this island is he? and leaves word that we can find him by following the trail? Perhaps the trail leads to the raft; but where is the trail? Hello! you've struck it, have you? Good dog! Here, let me tie this bit of twine to your collar. There, now you're better than a lantern."

As we all know, the trail upon which Billy Brackett and Bim were thus started led directly to the log-hut in the forest. When the former discovered this, he fully expected to find his nephew within. To his surprise, although a fire smouldered on the hearth, there was no other sign of human occupancy. Then the young man searched in vain for some hit of writing, such as had guided him to this point.

"I declare!" he exclaimed at length; "the corollary is worse than the theorem, and things are becoming so decidedly mixed that we must begin to go slow. I for one propose to replenish that fire, and then bunk down right here for the rest of the night."

With this the young man went out into the darkness and began groping about for wood with which to keep up the fire until morning.

In the mean time, Bim, left to his own devices, had struck the trail leading from the hut to Winn's camp, and started along it, probably thinking that his master was following him as before. The dog soon discovered Winn, and undertook to establish friendly relations with him by rubbing his cold nose against the boy's cheek. The suddenness with which Winn started up caused the dog to spring back into the darkness, from the shelter of which he regarded his new acquaintance distrustfully. Just then Billy Brackett, to cheer the loneliness of his log-hut, began to chant the ballad of "The Baldheaded Man," and Bim, hearing his master's voice, darted off in that direction.

Now Billy Brackett, though very fond of music, and possessed of an inextinguishable longing to produce melodious sounds, could not sing any more than Bim could. His efforts in this line had so often been greeted with derisive shouts and unkind remarks by his engineering comrades that he no longer attempted to sing in public. When alone, however, and out of hearing of his fellows, he still sometimes broke forth into song. Bim always howled in sympathy, but the effect of their combined efforts had never been so surprising as upon the present occasion, when they caused the precipitate flight from the island of the very nephew for whom the young engineer was searching.

In blissful ignorance of this unfortunate result of their performance, Billy Brackett and Bim sang and howled in concert, until their repertory was exhausted, when they lay down on the floor of the hut, and with the facility of those to whom camp life has become a second nature, were quickly asleep. From this slumber Billy Brackett was startlingly awakened, some time later, by Bim's bark, and a pistol shot that rang out from the profound stillness of the forest like a thunder-clap. He grasped the dog's collar and sat up. Before he could rise any farther there came a roar of guns, a trampling of feet, a confusion of voices, a rush, and a crashing of wood. The next instant the door of his hut was burst in, and the room was filled with armed men, every one of whom seemed to be pointing a rifle or a pistol straight at his devoted head.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAPPERS TRAPPED.

When the leader of the party by whom Winn had been made prisoner (as related in the last chapter but one) peered cautiously in at the open window of the log-hut to make certain that it was occupied, he was disappointed to discover but one man, where he had confidently expected to find several.

This leader, who had told Winn that his name was Riley, was a Sheriff, though such a new one that this was his first important undertaking since assuming office. Consequently he was most anxious for its success, and also somewhat nervous from anxiety. He had laid his plans well, the hut was completely surrounded, and he was elated at the thought of the prize so surely within his grasp, as well as of the glory that would be his for effecting this important capture. He expected to find several men in the hut, and counted upon their being desperate characters who would make a stout resistance before yielding themselves prisoners. The Sheriff had therefore prepared his followers for a fight, and made all his arrangements with this in prospect. Now, to discover but one man, and he peacefully sleeping, caused these warlike preparations to appear ridiculous, and called for a decided modification of Mr. Riley's plans.

Having satisfied himself by a careful survey that the man had no companions, and that the hut contained no rifles nor other fire-arms, the Sheriff retired noiselessly from the window and rejoined his followers. He explained the situation in a whisper, and then proposed that as they could not fight a single unarmed man, they should paralyze him with terror. As the Sheriff expressed it, they would "scare him stiff" by a general discharge of guns, a yell, and a rush for the door. These were to follow a signal that he would give from his post at the open window, through which he would cover the sleeping man with his revolver.

The new programme being understood, the Sheriff returned to his station, pointed his pistol at Billy Brackett's head, and was about to order him to throw up his hands and surrender, when he made a slight movement that aroused Bim. This faithful sentinel sprang up with a loud bark. In the dim light Sheriff Riley had not noticed the dog, and he was so much upset by this unexpected challenge that his finger closed on the hair-trigger of his revolver. Fortunately his aim was so wild that no harm was done by the shot that followed. It was all the signal that the Sheriff's followers needed, and they immediately carried out their part of the programme to the letter.

When the tumult subsided, the situation was as already described. Billy Brackett sat on the floor, grasping Bim's collar, and awaiting further developments as calmly as though he were merely a disinterested spectator of this unique performance. The dog, with teeth displayed to an alarming extent, stood ready to fly at the invaders whenever he should be released. In front of this group, and a few paces from it, stood half a dozen men, all of whom held guns that were pointed at the young engineer. The form of the Sheriff, with pistol still levelled at his prisoner, appeared at the open window.

"Do you surrender?" he demanded.

"Certainly," replied Billy Brackett, cheerfully; "if you desire it. I'm always ready to accommodate, especially when it's no trouble to do so."

"Throw up your hands, then," commanded the Sheriff.

"To do that," argued the prisoner, without moving, "I shall be obliged to let go my hold of this bull-dog. The moment I do so our friends with the empty guns will be apt to fancy that about a yard of particularly hot and well-greased lightning has been forged for their especial benefit. Still, if you insist--"

"Oh, hang your dog!" exclaimed Mr. Riley. "You must hold on to him, of course, until we can find a rope to tie him with. Where are your pals?"

"This is the only one I have at present," answered Billy Brackett, indicating him by a glance; "but I am in search of another, and have reason to believe that he is on this island at this very minute. Haven't seen anything of him, have you? He is a young fellow, about sixteen, named Caspar, son of Major Caspar, of Caspar's Mill, up the river a bit. He left home yesterday on a raft, and I was to join him hereabouts."

"What sort of a raft?" asked the Sheriff.

"Big timber raft. Two sweeps at each end, and three shanties on it, two of them filled with wheat."

"No," replied Mr. Riley, in a relieved tone; for on hearing the well-known name of Caspar his men had exchanged meaning looks and smiles, which indicated their belief that the Sheriff might be getting into hot-water. "I did arrest a young rascal of about that age half an hour ago," he continued, "just as he was leaving this island on a raft; but it was only a small affair, built of two or three logs, and not at all such a raft as you describe. I've got the boy out here now, and I believe him to be one of your pals, in spite of your cheeky talk. You don't want to give me any more of it, either," he concluded, in a fierce tone, assumed to reassert the dignity of his office. "So just cork up, and come along quietly, or you may find yourself in trouble."

"All right," replied Billy Brackett, calmly; "but first, perhaps you'll be kind enough to tell me who you are, why you are taking such an interest in me, and where you want me to go."

"I am the Sheriff of Dubuque County, Iowa," was the answer. "I have a warrant for your arrest as a member of the most dangerous gang of counterfeiters that has ever operated in this section of country, and I want you to go with me to the county jail, which will be only a stopping-place on your journey to State-prison."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Sheriff, and obliged for your courtesy," said Billy Brackett, politely. "Now if you will do me the favor to read the names mentioned in your warrant, I shall have nothing further to request."

"William Gresham, *alias* Gilder, *et al.*," replied Mr. Riley.

"Good. But suppose I can prove to you that I am not the person you take me to be, and that my name is neither Gresham nor Gilder, *et al.*, but that I am a civil engineer, William Brackett by name, brother-in-law of Major Caspar, whom I am certain you must know, and that you are making a rather sizable mistake in connection with this business. Supposing, also, I state that I am just now engaged on an important mission which will not admit of delay, and that in case you insist on taking me to jail, I can and will make you suffer, even to the extent of losing your office."

By this time Billy Brackett was standing up, while Bim, reluctantly obeying his stern command, lay motionless at his feet. The men of the Sheriff's posse had ceased to level their guns at the young engineer, and even Mr. Riley was so impressed with this bold attitude and declaration of innocence that he consented to come inside the hut and examine the papers offered for his inspection. He was about to declare his satisfaction with them, and admit that perhaps he had made a mistake, when the man whom he had left to guard Winn rushed up with the announcement that his prisoner had escaped.

At this the Sheriff's face clouded angrily. "We'll find him if he is still on the island!" he exclaimed. "If he has left it we'll follow him; and, at any rate, Mr. Brackett, I must now insist upon your coming to Dubuque, where you will be granted every opportunity for proving what you please. In the mean time, you and I will await here the result of the search for the escaped prisoner that my men will at once proceed to make."

To this Billy Brackett returned no answer, but stood silently considering how he should avoid the vexatious delay that now appeared inevitable. While he was thus cudgelling his brains, one of the searching party returned to report that the skiff in which they had come up the river was missing.

The Sheriff became furious. "I don't believe it!" he cried. "Here, you! Stop and guard this prisoner, while I go and take charge of the search myself."

As Mr. Riley departed, the new guard entered the hut, leaned his rifle against the wall, and took a seat near the door.

Then Billy Brackett stooped and whispered to his ever-faithful comrade, "Watch him, Bim!" and the dog answered with a low growl that spoke volumes. Turning to the guard the young engineer said, "My friend, if you make the slightest motion or shout for help, that bull-dog will fly at your throat. I am going to leave you alone with him for a minute, and as you value your life, I beg of you to keep perfectly quiet until you hear from me." With this the prisoner leaped lightly from the window and disappeared.



[Illustration: "Watch him, Bim!"]

For two minutes the guard sat as motionless as though carved from stone, his fascinated gaze fixed on the gleaming teeth and bloodshot eyes of the bull-dog that stood rigidly before him. Then a shrill whistle rang out on the still air, and at its sound the dog, dashing past him, disappeared like a flash. In another minute Billy Brackett's lusty strokes were sending his own skiff dancing out towards the middle of the main channel, while Bim, thumping with his tail in appreciation of his master's praises, occupied the stern seat as calmly as though with him such events as those just recorded were of every-day occurrence.

CHAPTER XIII.

WINN'S LONELY CRUISE.

During the half-hour that Winn allowed to elapse before he considered it safe to rise from his recumbent position in the bottom of the skiff, he had ample opportunity to recover his breath, and reflect upon the new situation into which he had been so strangely forced. At first he fancied that he heard sounds of pursuit, and momentarily expected to be greeted by a stern order from the bank to bring the skiff ashore. He wondered if a failure to comply would be followed by a rifle-shot, and then began to calculate the chances of being hit in such a case. But why should he be shot at? What had he done that he should be arrested, threatened with jail and hanging, and treated like an outlaw generally? Whom did these men take him for? and who were they? By the manner in which they had spoken of a judge, they must represent the law in some way; but why he should be an object of their pursuit puzzled the boy more than a little.

To be sure, he had now laid himself open to the suspicion of being a river thief, by carrying off their skiff. Would it not be well to return it at once? He could talk to them, and explain how he happened to be on the island, while still at such a distance from shore as to be beyond their reach. They might shoot, though, and if they really considered him the rascal they pretended, it was almost certain that they would. No, that plan would not work. The only thing left to be done was to take the skiff to Dubuque, telegraph to his father from there, or try and find one of the Major's friends in that city who would do so for him, and at the same time provide him with food and shelter until his father came. Yes, that was the best plan.

Having reached this determination, Winn sat up and looked about him. The light which he had mistaken for dawn was that of a late-rising moon, and it hardly penetrated the mist hanging low over the river. There was nothing in sight; not even the dark mass of timber on the island. Winn might have been in the middle of the ocean for all that he could see or hear. Never in his life had the boy felt so utterly forsaken and alone. He decided to pull diagonally across the current towards shore, the mere sight of which would be reassuring. But where were the oars? Until this moment he had not noticed that there were none in the boat. For some unknown reason they had been taken from it when the party landed on the island; and now the lonely navigator was utterly without the means of propelling or even guiding his craft. He tried to tear up one of the floor boards, with the idea of using it as a paddle; but it was nailed in place so firmly as to resist his utmost efforts. Finally, faint for want of food, exhausted, and disheartened, the poor boy threw himself in the bottom of the skiff and yielded to his despair. At length he fell asleep.

So the dawn of Winn's second day on the river caught him napping, as the first had done. In its gray light the skiff drifted past the little city of Dubuque, perched high on the bluffs of the western bank, but no one saw it. There were several steamboats and trading scows tied to the narrow levee, but their crews were still buried in slumber. Even had they been awake they would hardly have noticed the little craft far out in the stream, drifting with the hurrying waters. In a few minutes it was gone, and the sleeping city was none the wiser for its passing. So for hours it drifted, now bow on, then broadside to, and as often stern first; here caught and spun round by an eddy, then tossed aside and allowed to proceed on its unguided course. The cotton-woods on the tow-heads beckoned to it with their trembling fingers; but it paid no heed. Grimsnags lay in wait for it, but it nimbly avoided them, and as the hours passed each one of them saw the drifting skiff some miles farther away from the island at which this strange voyage was begun.

When Winn finally awoke, he was so bewildered, and so much at a loss to account for his surroundings, that for a minute he lay motionless, collecting his scattered senses. It certainly was late in the day, for the sun was shining full upon him from high in the heavens. He had that comfort at least; but oh! how he ached from lying on that hard floor, and how faint he was from hunger.

The boy's head rested on a thwart, and he faced the after-end of the skiff. As he was about to rise, his glance fell on something wrapped in newspaper and tucked under the stern seat. If it should only prove to be food of any description, "even burned mush," thought Winn, grimly, how happy it would make him! In another second he was undoing, with eager fingers, the lunch of crackers and cheese that Sheriff Riley's wife had so thoughtfully thrust into her husband's hands as he left the house the morning before, and which he had as thoughtfully tucked under the stern seat of his skiff. He was probably thinking of it, and wishing he had it, at this very moment. As for Winn, he was eating it as fast as possible, and thinking that he had never tasted such good crackers or such a fine piece of cheese in his life. With each mouthful his spirits rose and his strength returned, until, when the last crumb had disappeared and been washed down with a double handful of sweet river-water, the boy's pluck and cheerfulness were fully restored.

Now what should he do? He did not know that he had passed Dubuque, though he feared that such might be the case. Thinking of it brought to mind the island with those upon whom he had so recently turned the tables, and left as prisoners within its limits. He even laughed aloud as he pictured them toiling, as he had toiled the evening before, to construct a raft on which to escape. "I wonder if they found any one in that log-hut," he thought, recalling its lighted window. "And, oh! if it should have been father! It might have been. He might have seen my signal-fire, found my message, and got as far as the hut. Now what will he do? Oh, how I wish I could get back! Why didn't I think of all this before leaving the island? That was a horrid sound in the woods, though. And that animal! I wonder what it could have been?"

By this time the current had carried the skiff close in to the drowned bottom-lands of the Illinois shore. They were covered with a heavy growth of timber, and Winn knew that in many places the wellnigh impassable swamps which this concealed extended back a mile or more from the channel. Otherwise he would have abandoned the skiff and made the attempt to swim ashore.

The Iowa bluffs rose invitingly on the opposite side of the river. On them he saw a few scattered settlements, but they were too far away, and he must wait until the current set him in that direction before thinking of making a landing. He saw an occasional ferry-boat making its slow way across the river, but it was always either too far above him or too far below him for his signals to be noticed, and so the hours dragged on until it was late afternoon, and Winn was again beginning to feel the pangs of hunger.

"I can't spend another night in this wretched boat!" he exclaimed aloud, when he saw that the sun was within an hour of its setting. "I'll swim the whole width of the river first!"

During the day he had passed a number of small islands, but had not cared to attempt a landing on them. He knew

that he would be even worse off on an island than in the skiff, and so he had watched them glide by without giving them any particular thought. Suddenly it occurred to him that on any one of these islands he might pick up an oar, a paddle, or at least something that would answer in place of these, and from that instant they acquired a new interest.

The next one that he approached was only a tow-head, which is a sand-bar on which has sprung up a thick growth of slender cotton-woods, or other quick-shooting, water-loving trees.

"I might find what I want there as well as on a larger island," thought Winn, "and, at any rate, I'll make a try for it." So when the skiff had drifted as near the tow-head as it seemed likely to, and was rapidly sliding past it, the boy threw off his coat, kicked off his shoes, and, taking one end of the skiff's painter with him, plunged overboard and began to swim towards the desired point.

The distance was not more than a hundred feet, but the current swept him down so much more rapidly than he expected that he was barely able to catch one of the very last of the tow-head saplings and cling to it. While his own progress was thus checked, that of the skiff was not, and in a second the painter was jerked from his hand.

Exhausted as he was, Winn was on the point of letting go his hold on the sapling and making a desperate effort to overtake the rapidly receding skiff. Fortunately he had enough practical sense, though this is not generally credited to sixteen-year-old boys, to restrain him from such a rash act. So he crawled out on the sand beach, and sat there watching what he considered to be his only hope grow smaller and smaller until it finally disappeared. As it did so, the sun slowly sank behind the western bluffs; and though the boy did not look up from the wet sand on which he had flung himself, he knew instinctively that another night, with its darkness, its chill, and its nameless terrors, was upon him.

He was so numbed by this latest disaster that he had not the heart even to seek a place of shelter for the night. What good would anything that he could find or construct do him? He had neither matches nor food, dry clothing nor bedding. What did it matter, though? He would probably be dead before the sun rose again, anyway. So the poor lad nursed his misery, and might, in truth, have lain on those wet sands until he perished, so despairing was he, when all at once he was aroused by a sound so strange to hear in that place that, though he raised his head to listen, he thought he must be dreaming. He wasn't, though, for there came again to his ears, as distinct as anything ever heard in his life, a merry peal of clear girlish laughter. Not only that, but it sounded so close at hand that the boy sprang to his feet and gazed eagerly in the direction from which it came, fully expecting to see its author standing near him.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PEAL OF GIRLISH LAUGHTER.

In vain did Winn gaze in every direction, up and down the river, across its darkening waters, and into the shadowy thicket behind him. There were no objects in sight, save those with which he was already only too familiar. Again he began to doubt the evidence of his senses, and wonder if his mind had not become somewhat unsettled by his misfortunes. But no, there was the ringing peal of laughter again. This time it was accompanied by a strange chattering sound such as he had never heard before. At the same moment a most delicious whiff of frying bacon reached the hungry boy, mingled with the unmistakable and equally enticing odor of coffee. There was no doubt as to the direction from which these came, and plunging into the cotton-wood thicket, Winn made his way diagonally up and across the tow-head.

In less than a minute he reached its opposite side, where he halted to gaze with amazement at the very strangest-looking craft he had ever seen. At first he thought it a small stern-wheeled steamboat. She certainly had such a wheel, but then there was no chimney. Perhaps she was a trading-scow. Who ever heard, though, of a trading-scow with a pilot-house such as this nondescript craft had on the forward end of its upper deck? Besides, there were no sweeps, nor was she in the least like any trading-scow Winn had ever seen. A low house occupied her entire width, and extended along her whole length except at the curve of her bows, where there was room left for a small deck. A structure with a door and windows, that was somewhat larger than the pilot-house, rose from the upper deck near its after-end. There were three doors on each side of the main house, a large one well forward, a small one nearly amidship, and another large one well aft. There were also six small windows on each side, and from three of those nearest Winn a cheerful light was streaming, while the other three were dark. There was a name painted on the boat's side in such large

black letters that even in the fading twilight Winn managed to read it--"*W-H-A-T-N-O-T*," he spelled slowly--"*Whatnot!* Well, if that isn't the queerest name for a boat I ever heard of!"

Just then, however, there were things of far greater importance to a boy in his situation than queer names. The tantalizing odors that were pouring from that after-window, for instance, and the sound of voices that rang out merrily from the two just beyond it. The boat was moored to a tree, with her bows pointed up-stream, and had swung in so close to shore that by standing on a half-submerged log, which served as a fender to keep her off a few feet from the bank, Winn could look into one of the open windows. It was evidently that of the galley, for the odor of frying came from it, and half-hidden in a cloud of fragrant steam was the form of a negro bending over a small stove.

This was a welcome and comforting sight; but hungry as he was, Winn's curiosity was stronger than his appetite. He must see into those other windows, and discover the source of the merry laughter that had so suddenly banished his loneliness and despair of a few minutes before. Cautiously advancing a few steps along the slippery log, he reached a point that commanded a view of the room or compartment next forward of the galley. It was of good size, and occupied the entire width of the boat.

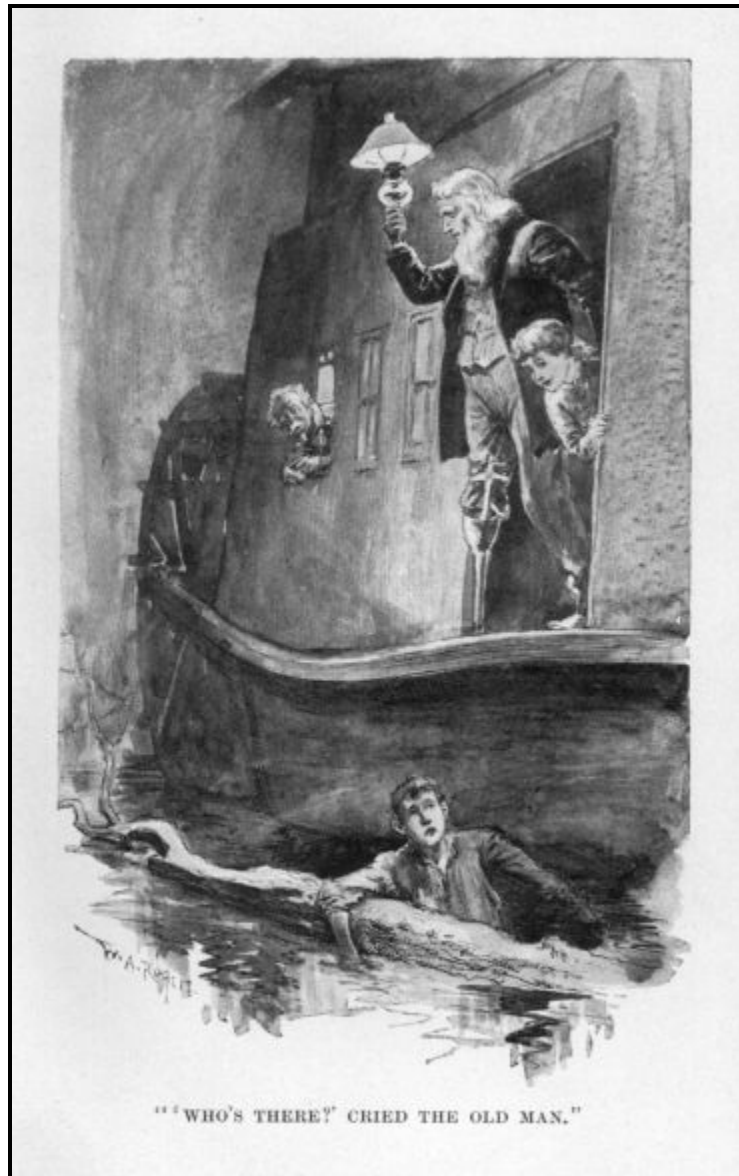
In the centre of this room was a table spread for supper, and beside it, so as to take advantage of its bright lamp, was a group that to Winn appeared both extraordinary and fascinating. A white-haired old man was seated before an easel, on which was stretched a large canvas. A young girl stood near him watching the movements of his brush with deep interest, and at the same time evidently restraining, with gentle but firm hands, the impatient struggles of something which she addressed as "Don Blossom," but whether it was a child or an animal Winn could not see. In his effort to do so he stood on tiptoe, and just as the old man began to say, "There, Sabella, that will do for this sitting," the boy's treacherous footing slipped from under him.

With a half-suppressed cry and a loud splash he was plunged headlong into the narrow space of water between the boat and the shore.

A frightened exclamation came from the interior of the boat, and then the small door on that side was flung open. At the same instant a woolly head was thrust out of the galley window, and a trembling voice cried, "Golly, Marse Cap'n! Wha' dat ar? Yo' heah um?"

"Yes, Solon, I heard it, and you want to come here as quick as you can. Some one is in trouble," answered the old man, who was standing with the girl in the open doorway. He held a lamp above his head, and was peering anxiously in the direction of the splashings and flounderings that Winn, sitting in the shallow water, but tightly wedged between the log and the boat, was making in his efforts to extricate himself.

"Who's there?" cried the old man, who could not yet make out what was taking place; "and what are you doing?"



[Illustration: "'Who's there?' cried the old man"]

"It's me!" returned Winn, regardless of his grammar; "and I am sinking in this awful mud. Hurry up and push your boat away from the log, or I shall be drowned!"

While the old man and the negro exerted all their strength at the pole, with which they finally succeeded in pushing the boat a foot or so out into the stream, Sabella was also busy. Though greatly excited, and somewhat alarmed by the unexpected appearance of a human being in that place, and his perilous situation, she still had presence of mind enough to run for a rope, one end of which she fastened to the table. She carried the other end out through the door, and tossed it over the side just in time for Winn to catch it, as the moving of the boat once more gave him freedom of action.

Hauling himself up by this welcome rope, and at the same time being assisted by the two men, the boy quickly gained the open doorway, where he stood blinking in the bright lamplight, while mud and water ran from him in streams. He faced the occupants of the boat, who, standing a few steps back in the room, regarded him with undisguised wonder, not unmixed with suspicion. On the table behind them stood a small, gaudily-dressed object, that Winn at first took to be a child. Upon his appearance it remained motionless for a few seconds, and then, with a frightened cry, it sprang to the little girl's shoulder, from which it peered at the stranger, chattering angrily all the while.

"Well, I am blest if this isn't a most extraordinary situation!" exclaimed the old man. "It suggests a tableau of Venus rising from the sea."

"Or a alligator," said the negro.

Sabella wanted to laugh at the comical spectacle presented by the dripping, coatless, hatless, bare-footed, and generally woe-begone boy; but pitying his evident embarrassment, she exclaimed:

"Uncle, how can you! Don't you see that he is shivering? You must go at once and find him some dry clothes. Solon, show this boy to the engine-room, where he can change his wet things. Don Blossom, be quiet, sir! Aren't you ashamed of yourself!" Then, turning to Winn with a cheery smile, she said, "We are very sorry for your accident, and should like to know all about it after you are dry again. If you will go with Solon to the engine-room, he will do everything he can for you."

The Captain had already hastened away on his quest for dry clothing. As he left the room, Winn noticed that he had a wooden leg. It was not one of the modern kind, so carefully constructed as to closely resemble the real article, but an old-fashioned, iron-shod stick of timber strapped to his right knee.

As Sabella finished speaking, she too left the room, running after the Captain, and smiling cheerfully as she went at the mud-streaked boy, who still stood speechless and motionless in the doorway.

Now, at Solon's invitation he followed the negro into what had been called the engine-room, though to Winn's eye it looked as little like an engine-room as any place he had ever known. At one side was a horse-power treadmill, such as he had often seen used for the sawing of wood. Half of it was sunk below the level of the deck, and covered with a removable floor. It was geared in the most direct and simple manner to a shaft that disappeared through the rear wall of the room, and presumably connected with the stern wheel he had previously noticed. There was also a belt extending to a shaft pulley overhead, but beyond this there was no trace of machinery, nor was there either boiler or furnace. There was what looked like a stall at one end of the room, but it contained only bales of hay and sacks of oats.

"Yes, sah, we uses a mewel-ngine when we hab um. We hain't got no mewel at de present time, but we 'specs ter contrac' fer one shortly," explained the negro, noting Winn's inquiring glances, as he assisted him to remove his wet garments.

Before the boy had a chance to ask the questions that were at his tongue's end, he, as well as the other occupants of the boat, was startled by a loud hail from the river.

"Hello! What steamer is that?"

"The *Whatnot*, of Dubuque," was the answer.

"Do you know the Sheriff of Dubuque County?"

"Who--Riley? Yes, I know him."

"Do you know his skiff?"

"As well as I know my own boat, for I built it."

"Have you seen it pass down the river to-day, containing only a boy between sixteen and seventeen years old?"

"No. Haven't seen it or any other skiff. What's the matter? Has it been stolen?"

"That'll do, thank you. Good-night," came the reply, without an answer to this last question, and then the stranger passed out of hearing down the river.

CHAPTER XV.

"CAP'N COD," SABELLA, AND THE *WHATNOT*.

In order to explain the presence beside that tow-head of the queer craft on board which Winn had found shelter, and of its several occupants, who were making such kindly efforts to relieve his distress, it is necessary to take a

twenty-year glance backward. At that time Aleck Fifield, a Yankee jack-of-all-trades, who had been by turns a school-teacher, sailor, mechanic, boat-builder, and several other things as well, found himself employed as stage-carpenter in a Boston theatre. He had always been possessed of artistic tastes, though they had never carried him beyond sign-painting, and of dramatic longings, which had thus far been satisfied with a diligent reading of Shakespeare and attending the theatre at every opportunity. Now, being regularly connected with the stage, both these tastes expanded, until through one of them he blossomed into a very passable scene-painter. Through the other he overwhelmed himself with despair, and convulsed an audience with laughter, by appearing once, and once only, as Captain Thomas Codrington in the popular sea drama of "Blue Billows." His failure as an actor was so dismal and complete as to be notorious. Unkind comparisons of other bad acting with that of Cap'n Cod became stock jokes in every theatre of the country. From that day the stage name clung to him; and though it galled at first, the passage of time soothed the wound, until finally Aleck Fifield became proud of the name. As he grew older, it represented to him the fame for which he had longed when young. When the war broke out and he became one of the bravest defenders of the Union, he was everywhere known as "Cap'n Cod." After the war, in which he managed to lose a leg, he went to Iowa to live with his only relative, a widowed niece, who had but one child, a little girl.

Between this child, Sabella, and the white-haired veteran, who could tell more tales than a fairy-book, and construct more toys than Santa Claus ever dreamed of, there sprang up an affection that could not have been stronger had they been father and daughter. On one side it was based upon boundless love and admiration, and on the other upon admiration and boundless love. When Sabella went to school, the Captain's business kept him within sight of the school-house; and when school was out, the little girl was nowhere happier than in his company. For her sake he was the friend of her friends, and among the children of Dubuque no one was so popular as Cap'n Cod. They did not live in the city, but on a small farm a few miles from it, and this Cap'n Cod was supposed to manage. Farming was, however, the one occupation for which he had no taste, and but for his capable niece the annual crops would not have paid the expense of raising them.

When Sabella was twelve years old and rapidly developing into beautiful girlhood, her mother died, leaving her and her little property to the unrestricted guardianship of Cap'n Cod. Now matters went from bad to worse so far as the farm was concerned, until, to save it from the hammer, it was deemed best to rent it to a more practical farmer than the child's devoted guardian.

This gave Cap'n Cod the opportunity and an excuse for carrying out a cherished scheme that, but for the opposition of his niece, he would have put into operation long before. It was the painting of a panorama, the building of a boat to hold it, and thus equipped, to float away down the great river in search of fame and fortune. Now Sabella must of course be included in the plan; for not only did she and Cap'n Cod consider it impossible to get along without each other, but the latter declared that such a bit of travel would be the very best kind of an education for his grand-niece.

This scheme had been in the old man's mind for so long that the panorama, worked on at odd moments for more than two years, was nearly finished at the time of his niece's death. With his own savings, and largely by his own labor, he now built his boat, the *Whatnot*. When she was completed, his money was gone. But what of that? Was he not prepared to realize a fortune? He knew that it would shortly be theirs, and Sabella's faith was strong as his. She never for a moment doubted that her dear guardian was the artist he claimed to be, or that the panorama he had painted was the most perfect thing of its kind ever seen. So she was as enthusiastic concerning the project as the old man himself, and eagerly aided in his preparations to the full extent of her ability. There was but one point on which they disagreed. When Cap'n Cod had exhausted his own resources, and the motive power of the *Whatnot* still remained unprovided, Sabella begged that he would draw some of her money from the bank and use it, but this the old man firmly declined to do.

"No, Sabella," he would say; "what is mine is yours; but what is yours is your own, and it would be as bad as stealing for me to touch it."

"But it is mine," the girl would argue; "and if I want to give it to you, more than I want to do anything else with it, I don't see why you shouldn't let me."

"No, dear," her guardian would reply. "It is not yours. It is only held in trust for you until you become of age, by which time you will have many other uses for money besides gratifying an old man's whim."

"But you will pay it back long before then."

"I might, and then again I might not. There is nothing more uncertain than the things we think we are sure of."

Then the girl would throw her arms about his neck and exclaim, "Oh, you dear old stupid! How horridly honest you are! and what a beautiful world this would be if everybody in it was just like you."

"Yes, my dear; Stupidity and Honesty are apt to be comrades, and undoubtedly they would make a beautiful world if left to themselves; but it would be frightfully dull. Now don't you worry your pretty head about the mule, for we can drift with the current until we have given two or three exhibitions, and so made money enough to buy one. Then, having earned him, how much more shall we enjoy him than if he were only a borrowed mule?"

Cap'n Cod would have preferred a steamboat to one propelled by mule-power, but the expenses of machinery and an engineer were too great to be considered. He made the *Whatnot* look as much like a steamboat as he could, and even proposed ornamenting her with an imitation chimney as soon as he could afford such a luxury. He also hoped soon to be able to engage some active young fellow as deck hand and general assistant. In the mean time the *Whatnot's* crew consisted of himself, Sabella, and Solon, an old negro who had been cook of the mess to which Cap'n Cod had belonged in the army, and who had followed his fortunes ever since.

As nearly every one in Dubuque who was at all interested in such things had seen the panorama during its painting and construction, and as Cap'n Cod's dramatic reputation was well known there, he deemed it advisable to give the first exhibitions of his show in some smaller and less critical places. He called it a "show," because, even at the outset, it contained two attractions besides the panorama, and he hoped in the course of time to add still others.

Those already on hand were a monkey and a hand-organ, both of which were much greater rarities in the Mississippi Valley at that time than they are now. They formerly belonged to an Italian, who, sick, penniless, and friendless, had sunk exhausted by the road-side a few miles from Dubuque. Several persons passed him without heeding his feeble appeals for aid before Cap'n Cod happened along and discovered him. The old soldier at once engaged a team, carried the dying stranger home, and there, with Sabella's pitying aid, cared for him until the end, which came a few days later. During these last days his monkey was the man's inseparable companion. It cuddled beside him in bed, and answered his feeble terms of endearment with voluble chatterings. With his latest breath the dying stranger consigned his helpless pet to the same pitying care that had helped him over the bitterest of all human journeys. He said, "Monka, Don Bolossi, you keep-a him always."

So Don Bolossi, Americanized to "Don Blossom," transferred all his affections to Sabella, and with the hand-organ, for which no claimant could be found, was added to the attractions of "Cap'n Cod's Great Panoramic Show."

One of the Captain's last bits of work in Dubuque was to build a skiff for Sheriff Riley, and with the money thus earned to defray immediate expenses, the *Whatnot* started on her voyage down the river at sunrise of the very morning on which Winn Caspar unconsciously drifted past Dubuque in that very skiff. Being deeper in the water, the show-boat drifted somewhat faster than the skiff, and so had nearly caught up with it by the time the tow-head was reached. Here Cap'n Cod determined to tie up for the night, as he did not wish to stop at a town until his final preparations for an exhibition were made.

Among these was the painting of a life-sized representation of Don Blossom hanging by his tail from the limb of a tree, which was to be displayed on the outside of the boat as an advertisement. This was the labor upon which the Captain was engaged when Winn Caspar discovered the *Whatnot*. Sabella had undertaken to hold the restless little model from which the white-headed artist was painting, and the peals of laughter that attracted Winn's attention were called forth by the absurdities of this situation.

CHAPTER XVI.

BIM MAKES AN ENEMY.

Billy Brackett's satisfaction at his escape from a situation that promised to cause him a vexatious delay was tinged with a new anxiety concerning Winn. As he pulled swiftly across the river, so as to be lost to view from the island as quickly as possible, he expressed his feelings aloud to Bim:

"What new scrape can that young rascal have got into now--eh, old dog? It was bad enough to start down the river alone on a big raft without even bidding his folks good-bye; but now he seems to have lost the raft somewhere, to

have landed on that island, to have been arrested for something, to have escaped, and to have run off with the Sheriff's boat. It looks as though he had the same happy faculty for getting into scrapes that distinguished my young friend Glen Eddy. Somehow I have a fellow-feeling for such boys. It is strange, too, for I can't remember ever getting into any scrapes myself. We must put a stop to it, though, in Winn's case. It will never do for him to be cavorting about in this scandalous manner, so long as we are responsible for his decent behavior and safe return. We shall surely find him, and probably the raft also, at Dubuque. Then we will take our nephew in hand, and by simple force of example instruct him in that dignity of deportment that steers clear of scrapes. Eh, Bimsey?"

At this Bim sprang from his seat, and made such a violent effort to lick his master's face that the latter was very nearly tumbled over backward. By the time order was restored, daylight was beginning to appear, and the young man saw that he was far enough below the island for it to be safe to again cross the river and head for Dubuque. He reached this place soon after sunrise, or about an hour after Winn passed it, and a few minutes after the departure of the *Whatnot*.

A hasty inspection of the various craft lining the water-front of the city convinced him that the raft was not among them. He found several persons who knew Sheriff Riley's skiff, but none of them had seen it that morning. This, however, did not discourage the young engineer, for a skiff is so much smaller than a raft as to be easily overlooked. He would make a more thorough search after visiting the hotel, where he hoped Winn might also have gone for breakfast.

On his way he stopped at the telegraph office, and sent the following despatch to both Mrs. Caspar and to the Major at Madison:

"Have heard of Winn, and am on his track. The boy is all right.—W. B."

"That is true so far as it goes," soliloquized Billy Brackett, "and will relieve their present anxiety. By to-morrow, or perhaps within a few minutes, I shall certainly have something more definite to wire."

At the hotel he was greatly disappointed to find no trace of the missing lad, and after eating a hearty breakfast he made a thorough search of the water-front, though of course without avail. He had intended dropping a hint here and there of the predicament in which he had left Sheriff Riley and his followers, but on second thoughts concluded to let them work out their own plan of escape from the island, rather than run the risk of further delay.

By noon he was ready to depart from Dubuque, satisfied that there was no information to be gained in that place concerning either Winn or the raft. Although he was not discouraged, he was puzzled, and was even beginning to feel anxious at the strange aspect this affair of the lost *Venture* was assuming.

Until sunset he rowed steadily and swiftly downstream, hailing the ferrymen as he passed, and stopping at the settlements on both sides of the river to make inquiries. He also hailed passing boats, and boarded several rafts that he discovered tied to the western bank, but all in vain. He failed to learn anything about Winn, and heard that but one raft had passed down the river the day before. It was described as having a single "shanty," a tent, and a crew of three men. As that was not the kind of a raft he was looking for, this information only added to the young man's perplexity. It never occurred to him that the raft might have been stolen and disguised. So, as he was certain he had not passed it, there was but one solution to the problem. The *Venture* must have been wrecked and gone to pieces during the storm of that first night, and Winn must have escaped to the island.

Even with this explanation the mystery of Winn's second disappearance remained as great as ever, and by the time Billy Brackett hailed the *Whatnot*, as has already been noted, he was as thoroughly bewildered as ever in his life. Nor could he decide on any plan of action that seemed in the least satisfactory. He knew there was a town a mile or so below where the *Whatnot* lay, and there he had determined to spend the night. But for his desire to reach this place before darkness should wholly shut in, he would have boarded the *Whatnot* merely to gratify the curiosity excited by her strange appearance. As it was, he felt that he had no time to spare, and so hastened on.

It was quite dark as he approached the lights marking the town he was seeking; but as he drew near he discovered what appeared like a part of the levee slowly moving out from shore. Above it rose dimly a white object that he had taken for a house, and still above this shown a lantern. In a moment he saw that it was a raft resuming its voyage down the river, and he determined to make an inquiry from its crew before landing.

Pulling his skiff alongside, the young man sprang aboard. As he did so he noticed that the white object was a tent, and that there was a single "shanty" amidship. It was the very raft that had been described to him as being the only

one to pass down the river the day before. These details so occupied his attention that he did not notice a skiff made fast to the side of the raft just forward of where he tied his own. Not seeing it, he did not, of course, ask any questions concerning it. If he had, he might have learned that the raftsmen had just picked it up, floating, empty and ownerless, down the river. There had been no oars in it, but they had rowed it to the raft with an extra pair from their own skiff. In their preparations for departure they had not yet found time to examine it, and knew nothing of its contents.

As Billy Brackett walked towards the "shanty," there was a sudden commotion at its entrance. A gruff voice exclaimed,

"Get out of here, you cur!"

This command was evidently accompanied by a savage kick, which was immediately followed by a yell and a heavy fall as Bim's white teeth sank deep in the calf of one of Mr. Plater's legs.

The dog, tired of his long confinement in the skiff, had eagerly leaped aboard the raft, and with friendly inquisitiveness had poked his nose into the open doorway of the "shanty" just as Plater was emerging from it.

Bim's master realized in a moment what had happened, and sprang to the scene just as two other figures came running in the same direction from the forward end of the raft.

Mr. Plater, though on his back, had nearly succeeded in drawing a pistol from his hip pocket. In a few seconds more poor Bim's earthly career would have been ended, but his owner's movements were quick enough to save him, and before the pistol could be drawn, Billy Brackett had seized the dog's collar.

"Let go, sir!" he ordered, sternly, and Bim instantly obeyed the command. Then realizing that discretion is the better part of valor when the odds are three to one, the young engineer, with the dog in his arms, ran to the side of the raft, sprang into the skiff, and shoved off. He was followed by a storm of threats and angry imprecations, at which he only smiled, as he took to his oars and pulled through the friendly darkness towards the landing from which the raft had already drifted quite a distance.

Making his way to the wharf-boat, and giving the watchman a quarter to look out for his skiff until morning, Billy Brackett, weary and disheartened, sought such accommodation as the only hotel of the little town afforded. All night he tossed sleeplessly on his uncomfortable bed, striving in vain to unravel the mystery in which the fate of his nephew and of Major Caspar's raft had become enshrouded.

In the morning he strolled undecidedly down to the wharf-boat, and, missing his skiff, asked the watchman, who was just going off duty, what he had done with it.

"Why, there it is, sir, just where you left it," answered the man, in a surprised tone, pointing to a skiff that Billy Brackett was certain he had never seen before.

"That is not my boat," he said.

"It is the one you came in last night," answered the watchman. "And here is the coat you left in it. I took the liberty of bringing it in out of the dew."

The young engineer looked at the coat the man was holding towards him, and shook his head.

"That is not mine, either," he said.

"Whose is it, then?"

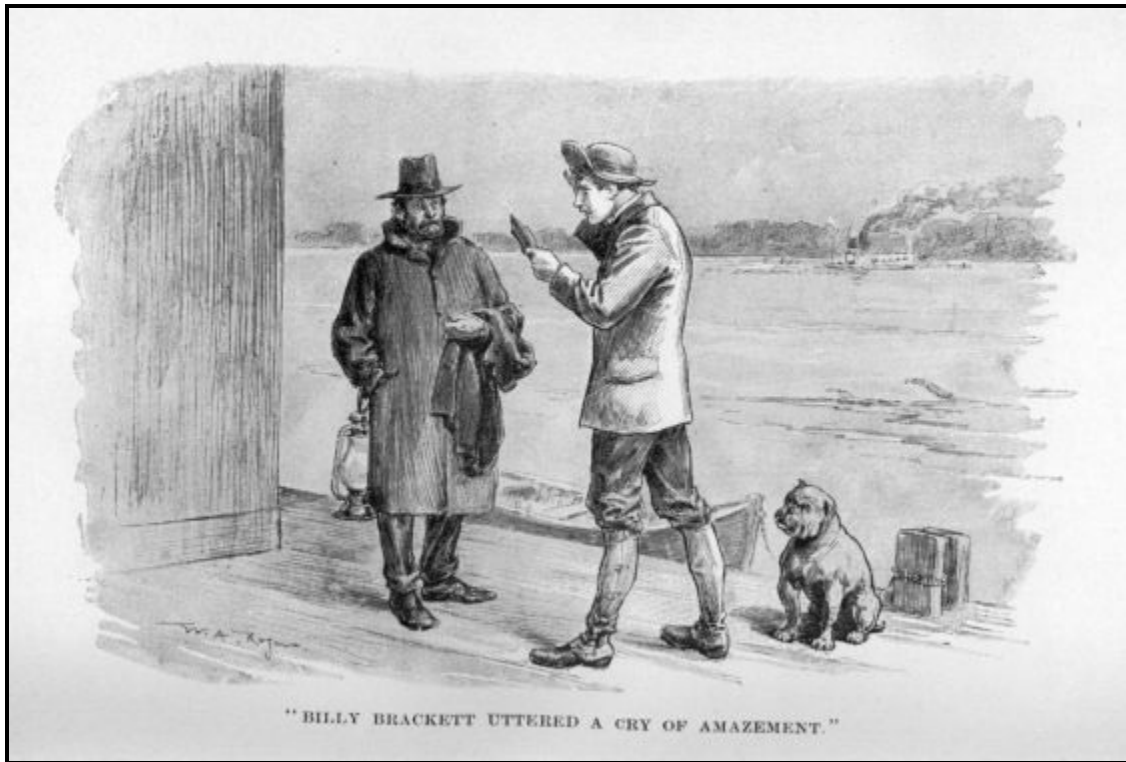
"I'm sure I don't know. You'd better look in the pockets. They may contain some clew."

Acting upon this suggestion the watchman thrust his hand into a breast-pocket of the coat and drew forth a notebook. He opened it.

"Here's something writ in it," he said; "but as I'm not quick at making out strange writing, maybe you'll read it, sir."

Taking the book from the man's hand, and glancing carelessly at its title-page, Billy Brackett uttered a cry of amazement. There, written in a clear boyish hand, was the inscription:

"Winn Caspar. His Book."



[Illustration: "Billy Brackett uttered a cry of amazement."]

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TRUTH, BUT NOT THE WHOLE TRUTH.

Winn was greatly perturbed by hearing from the *Whatnot's* engine-room the inquiries concerning Sheriff Riley's skiff, and Cap'n Cod's replies. He had not meant to steal the boat, of course, but it now seemed that he was regarded as having done so, and was being hotly pursued by some one interested in its recovery. It was not the Sheriff himself, for the voice was a strange one; so it was probably one of his men, who undoubtedly had one or more companions. Winn was too ignorant of the world to know whether escaping from a sheriff who had unjustly arrested him, and running off with his boat, would be considered a serious offence or not. He only knew that while perfectly conscious of his own innocence, he yet felt very much as though he were fleeing from justice. He had not even known until that minute that his late captor was a sheriff, nor could he imagine why he had been arrested. What he did know was that some one well acquainted with the fact that he had taken a skiff not his own was now searching for it and for him. This was sufficient to alarm him and fill his mind with visions of arrest, imprisonment, and fines which his father would be compelled to pay.

Then, too, the Captain of this strange craft on which he had just found an asylum, but from which he would already be glad to escape, had declared himself to be a friend of Sheriff Riley, and well acquainted with his boat. Of course, then, he would gladly aid his friend in recovering his property, and would not hesitate to make a prisoner of the person who had run off with it. In that case he would be taken back to Dubuque in disgrace, his father would have to be sent for--and who knew where he might be by this time?--and there would be a long delay that he would probably have to endure in prison. In the mean time what would become of the raft lost through his carelessness and self-conceit?

Decidedly all this must be prevented if possible; and though the boy would have scorned to tell a lie even to save his life, he determined to tell as little of the truth as would be necessary to answer the questions that he knew would shortly be put to him.

While Winn was puzzling over this situation, and trying to frame a plausible story that would account for his presence on the tow-head without overstepping the bounds of truth, the door of the engine-room opened, and Cap'n Cod stumped in. He brought an armful of dry clothing, and was beaming with the satisfaction that he always felt when engaged in helping any one out of trouble.

"Well, my muddy young friend," he exclaimed, good-naturedly, "how are you getting on? Has Solon taken good care of you? Here are some clothes that, I guess, you will have to make the best of until your own can be dried. They probably won't come within a mile of fitting, but clothing does not make the man, you know, and we are not very critical as to appearances aboard the *Whatnot*. By-the-way, my name is Fifield--Aleck Fifield. What did you say yours was?"

"I don't think I said," answered the boy, slipping into a woollen shirt many sizes too large for him; "but it is Winn."

"Winn, eh? Good name. Belong to the Massachusetts Winns?"

"My parents came from there, but I was born in Wisconsin."

"Yes, yes. Just so. But, there! I musn't hinder you. Supper is ready, and if you haven't any better place to go to, we should be most happy to have you join us."

"Thank you, sir," replied Winn. "I shall be only too glad to do so, for I haven't had any supper, and the raft to which I belong has probably gone off down the river without me."

"So you belong to a raft, eh? And what happened? Did you tumble overboard from it?"

"No, sir. I came to this island in the skiff, and was trying to make a line fast, when the skiff got away from me."

"And they didn't notice it through the gloom until it was too late to do anything, and so you got left! Yes, yes. I see just how it all happened! Such accidents are of common occurrence on the river, and you were very fortunate to find us here. I shall be delighted to have you for a guest tonight, and in the morning your friends will undoubtedly return to look for you."

As he thus rattled on in cheery fashion, Cap'n Cod gathered up Winn's wet clothing, preparatory to taking them to the galley to be dried. Not finding either coat or shoes in the water-soaked pile, he inquired if the boy had left the raft without them.

"No, sir," replied Winn; "but I took them off, and left them in the skiff."

"You did! That's bad; for when your friends find the skiff with your clothes in it, they will be apt to imagine you are drowned. Then they'll search the river below here for your body, instead of coming back to look for you. Never mind, though," he added quickly, mistaking the expression of relief which this suggestion brought to Winn's face for one of dismay, "we'll soon relieve their anxiety. We'll get a mule, and put him in here as quick as our show earns his price. Then we'll go humming down the river faster than any raft that ever drifted. We may be several days in overtaking them, but I shall be only too happy to have you remain with us for that length of time, and longer, too, if you will. I am greatly in need of an assistant to help me run the show. So if you are willing to take hold and work with us, the obligation will be wholly on my side."

"Of course I will, sir!" exclaimed Winn, whose spirits were rising as the difficulties of his situation began to disappear. "I will do anything I can, only I didn't know this was a show-boat, and I'm afraid I am pretty ignorant about shows anyway."

"That will be all right," replied the Captain. "My own experience in the dramatic line has been so extensive that I shall have no difficulty in posting you. I am surprised, though, that you did not recognize this boat as having been built by one of the profession, and especially adapted to its requirements. There are certain features about the *Whatnot*--which, by the way, I consider a most original and attractive name--that are intended to indicate--"

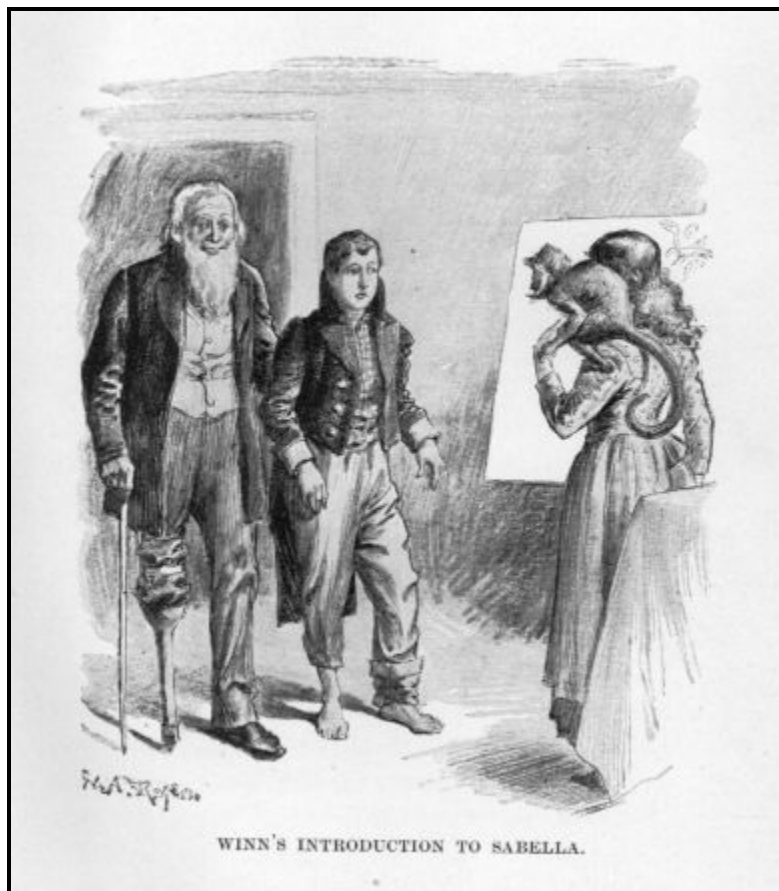
"Suppah, sah! An' Missy Sabel awaitin'," interrupted Solon, thrusting his woolly head into the doorway at that moment.

Glad as Winn was of this diversion, and though he was as thankful as only a famished boy can be that a bountiful meal awaited him, he would willingly have gone hungry a little longer rather than enter that dining-room just then. Although the engine-room did not afford a mirror, he was conscious that he must present about as absurd a figure as can well be conceived. He was bare-footed, and the left leg of his trousers was turned up to keep it from the floor, while

the right, owing to the Captain's misfortune, barely reached his ankle. A checkered woolen shirt hung about him in folds, and over it he wore a garment that Cap'n Cod was pleased to style his "professional coat." It was a blue swallow-tail, with bright brass buttons. As worn by Winn the tails hung nearly to the floor, the cuffs were turned back over his wrists, and the collar rubbed against his ears.

"A pretty costume in which to appear before a strange girl," thought poor Winn, who was noted at home for being fastidious concerning his dress and personal appearance. "I know I must look like a guy, and she can't help laughing, of course; but if she does, I'll never speak to her as long as I live, and I'll leave this craft the very first chance I get."

While these thoughts were crowding fast upon one another, the boy was being dragged into the dining-room by Cap'n Cod, and formally presented as "Mr. Winn, of Massachusetts," to "my grand-niece Sabella, sir."



[Illustration: Winn's introduction to Sabella.]

Winn will never know whether the girl laughed or not, for at that moment Don Blossom, who had been seated on the floor daintily nibbling a sweet biscuit, sprang chattering to her shoulder and buried his face in her hair, as he had done upon the boy's first appearance. This episode formed such a seasonable diversion that by the time the girl succeeded in freeing herself from the clutches of her pet, Winn was seated at the table with the most conspicuous portion of his absurd costume concealed beneath its friendly shelter.

During the meal Winn and Sabella exchanged furtive glances, which each hoped the other would not notice, and the boy, at least, blushed furiously whenever one of his was detected. Although neither of them said much, the meal was by no means a silent one; for the Captain maintained a steady and cheerful flow of conversation from its beginning to its end. He told Sabella a thrilling tale of Winn's narrow escape from drowning, and how his friends were at that moment drifting far away down the river, anxiously speculating as to his fate. Then he told Winn of the painting of the panorama, the building of the *Whatnot*, and of his plans for the future.

When the meal finally came to an end, on account of Winn's inability to eat any more, the boy was surprised to find how much at home he had been made to feel by the unaffected simplicity and unobtrusive kindness of these strangers.

While Sabella and Solon cleared the table, the Captain lighted a lantern and showed him over the boat. Thus the boy discovered that while its after-part was devoted to the engine-room and quarters for an animated, one-mule-power engine, a galley, and the general living-room, the remainder of the house was arranged as an entertainment hall, with a small curtained stage at one end, and seats for one hundred spectators. Cap'n Cod informed him that this was to be his sleeping apartment so long as he remained with them. The Captain slept in the pilot-house, while Sabella's dainty little room was in the after-house on the upper deck, and was connected with the living-room by a flight of inside stairs.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL.

The next morning, when Winn opened his eyes after the first night of undisturbed sleep he had enjoyed since leaving home, he was for a moment greatly puzzled to account for his surroundings. His bed had been made down in the exhibition hall on two benches drawn close together, and as he awoke, he found himself staring at a most marvellous painting that occupied the full height and nearly the entire width of the stage at the farther end of the hall. It was a lurid scene, but so filled with black shadows that to a vivid imagination it might represent any one of many things. While the boy was wondering if the young woman in yellow who appeared in the upper corner of the picture, with outstretched arms and dishevelled hair, was about to commit suicide by flinging herself from the second story of the factory, and only hesitated for fear of crushing the badly frightened young man in red who from the street below had evidently just discovered his peril, a door opened, and his host of the evening before tiptoed into the room.

The expression "tiptoed" is here used to indicate the extreme caution of Cap'n Cod's entrance, and his evident desire to effect it as noiselessly as possible. As he could only tiptoe on one foot, however, and had neglected to muffle the iron-shod peg that served him in place of the other, his progress was attended with more than its usual amount of noise. He appeared relieved to find Winn awake, and advancing with a cordial greeting, he laid the boy's own clothing, now cleaned and dried, within his reach. "I should have sent Solon in with these," he explained, "but for fear he might make a noise that would rouse you, and I noticed last evening that you were sadly in need of sleep. So, if you had not been awake, I should have stolen away as noiselessly as I entered, and left you to have your nap out. Now, however, I think you had better come to breakfast, for Sabella and I finished ours some time ago."

"Thank you, sir," said Winn. "I will be out in half a minute; but will you please explain that painting? I have been studying it ever since I woke."

"That," replied the Captain, with an accent of honest pride, "is what I consider one of my *chef-d'ouvres*. I term it a 'Shakespearian composite.' In order to please the tastes of certain audiences, I shall describe it as the balcony scene between Romeo and Juliet. You may note Romeo's mandolin lying at his feet, while over the whole falls the melancholy light of a full moon rising behind the palace. To suit a less-intelligent class, it would perhaps be described as the escape of a Turkish captive by leaping from the upper floor of the Sultan's seraglio into the arms of her gallant rescuer, who would be American, British, French, German, or Spanish, according to the predominating nationality of my audience. Or it might be called 'A Thrilling Incident of the Great New York Fire,' in which case Juliet's moonlight would be spoken of as 'devastating flames,' and Romeo's mandolin would figure as a fireman's helmet. It is a painting of infinite possibilities, any one of which may be impressed upon an audience by a judiciously selected title and the skilful directing of their imagination. Although I am proud of this picture, I have a number of other 'composites' that are even more startling than this in the variety of scenes that they can be made to illustrate. By studying them you will learn that the whole secret of artistic success lies in the selection of titles that appeal to and direct the imagination of the critic, the spectator, or the would-be purchaser. I would gladly exhibit and explain them to you now, but business before pleasure; so, if you are dressed, let us to breakfast."

While Winn was eating his late breakfast, Billy Brackett, only a couple of miles away, was gazing with an expression of the blankest amazement at his nephew's note-book. "How in the name of all that is mysterious and improbable did this book happen to be in that coat, that coat in that skiff, that skiff on that raft, and that raft here? It certainly seems as though I had brought the skiff from the raft--at least this man says I did. You are certain that I came in that identical boat, are you?"

"Certain, sir," replied the watchman to whom this question was addressed.

"No one else could have come in this skiff, and then gone off in mine by mistake?"

"Impossible, sir. I have been wide-awake all night, and there has not been another soul aboard this wharf-boat until just now. Besides, I took that coat from the skiff just after you left it last evening."

"Then," said Billy Brackett, "the chain of evidence seems to be unbroken, incredible as it may appear, and it stretches from here straight away down the river--book coat, coat skiff, skiff raft, raft Winn. Now, in order to bring its ends together, and recover my long-lost nephew, I must again overtake that raft. I must start as soon as possible after breakfast, too. I don't know whether the game Winn and I are playing is blind-man's-buff or hide-and-seek, but it certainly resembles both."

Musing over this new aspect of the situation, the young engineer hastened back to his hotel and breakfast. In the dining-room, a few minutes later, a waiter was leaning over him, and asking, for the third time, "Tea or coffee, sir, an' how'll you have your eggs?" when the inattentive guest suddenly caused him to jump as though galvanized, by bringing his fist down on the table with a crash, and exclaiming, "No, by the great hornspoon, it can't be that way either! What's that you say? Oh yes, of course. Coffee, soft-boiled, and as quick as you can." Having delivered this order, the young man fixed his intent gaze on a brown spot ornamenting the table-cloth, and resumed his thinking.

It had just occurred to him that, according to all accounts, the raft from which he had taken that skiff had come down the river to this point two days before. So how could Winn Caspar, who had only escaped from the island a few minutes before he and Bim made good their own retreat, have reached the same place and joined that raft without attracting attention? Both the day and night watchmen at the wharf-boat had assured him that no such boy as he described had been seen on the water-front. They also said that the raft had been there all the day before, and that when it left it held only the three men who came with it. "Of course he might have been inside the 'shanty' when I was aboard, though I can't see how he got there, nor why he should join a strange raft anyway," argued the young man. "At any rate, it's my business to find out whether or not he is aboard it now. How about using the skiff, though? If it is the one Winn ran off with, it belongs to that Sheriff fellow. Like as not, he has already sent word down the river to have it picked up. In that case, if I was picked up in it, I might be accused of stealing it, which would never do in the world. No; to be on the safe side I must leave the skiff here, and take the first down-river steamboat that stops at this landing. First, though, I'll advertise for Winn in this town, and if I don't find him on the raft, there may be news waiting for me here when I come back."

This was the plan upon which the young engineer decided to act, and immediately after breakfast he proceeded to put it into execution.

There was no paper published in the place, but it did contain a makeshift sort of a printing-office, and towards this Billy Brackett directed his steps, after learning at what hour the next down-river boat was expected. Here he spent some time in composing a small circular, of which he ordered five hundred copies to be struck off, and distributed broadcast. His boat came along and he had to leave before this was ready for press; but he had engaged the services of his new acquaintance the night-watchman, who promised to place the bills wherever they would do good.

Poor Bim, tied up on the wharf-boat, and nearly heart-broken at his master's desertion, was also left in charge of this man. Billy Brackett was desirous of establishing friendly relations with the raftsmen when he should overtake them, and feared that would be impossible in case they should recognize him. This they would certainly do if he were accompanied by the bull-dog, whom one of them at least had reason to remember so well.

At another small landing, nearly a hundred miles farther down the river, Messrs. Gilder, Grimshaw, and Plater were rendered somewhat uneasy, late on the following day, by the appearance on board their raft of a young man who asked questions. Billy Brackett had experienced considerable difficulty in finding this raft, and was greatly disappointed that his search in this direction should prove fruitless. The raftsmen had never heard of Major Caspar, nor of Winn Caspar, his son. They were lumbermen from far up on the Wisconsin River, and were taking this raft to New Orleans as a speculation. They knew nothing of Sheriff Riley or his skiff. Yes, they had picked up an empty skiff two days before, but it had been taken away and another left in its place by a young fellow with a dog, who had boarded their raft without invitation, set his dog on one of them, and then skipped. They would like to meet that party again--yes, they would--and they'd make things pretty lively for him.

Then they began asking questions in turn, and assuming such a hostile tone that Billy Brackett concluded he might as well leave then as later. So, after asking them to keep a sharp lookout for a raft with three "shanties," two of which were filled with wheat, he bade them good-evening, and started back up the river by rail.

In the mean time the *Whatnot* had reached the town to which he was returning, and was now tied up just below

the wharf-boat. It had been decided that the first exhibition of the "Floating Panoramic Show" should be given here, and Cap'n Cod went up into the town as soon as they arrived to have some bills printed. Winn, at the same time, started along the water-front to search for traces of his lost raft; and Sabella, who was very fond of dogs, went aboard the wharf-boat to make the acquaintance of a fine bull-dog she had noticed there as they passed.

At supper-time they all gathered again in the living-room of the *Whatnot*, where Sabella reported her new friend to be the most splendid bull-dog she had ever seen, and that his name was Bim.

This name at once attracted Winn's attention, and he said he had an uncle somewhere out in California who owned a dog named Bim. Then the boy reported that nothing had been seen or heard of his raft, though he did not tell them he had discovered Sheriff Riley's skiff.

Cap'n Cod remarked that if he could only claim all the rewards he had just seen offered, he could afford to run the *Whatnot* by steam. "There is one of a thousand dollars," he said, "for any information that will lead to the capture of a gang of counterfeiters, supposed to be operating in this vicinity. Then there is one of a hundred dollars for the arrest of the fellow who ran off with Sheriff Riley's skiff, and who is supposed to be a member of the same gang. There is still another, of an equal amount, for any information as to the whereabouts, if he is still living, or for the recovery of the body of a boy named Caspar, the only son of my old friend, Major John Caspar, of Caspar's Mill, in Wisconsin. He has disappeared most unaccountably, together with a raft owned by his father. By-the-way, his first name is the same as your last one, which is a little odd, for Winn is not a common name. That's what it is, though, 'Winn Caspar.'"

CHAPTER XIX.

A CURIOUS COMPLICATION.

"So that is what I was arrested for, is it?" thought Winn. "I was supposed to be one of a gang of counterfeiters, and a pretty desperate sort of a character. That will be a pretty good joke to tell father. But I wonder who is offering a reward for me as plain every-day Winn Caspar, besides the one that would be paid for the young counterfeiter who ran off with the Sheriff's boat?"

This is what Winn thought. What he said was, "My! but that is a lot of money! Wouldn't it be fine if we could earn those twelve hundred dollars?"

"Indeed it would," answered the old man. "Even one of the smaller rewards would buy us a mule."

"Who is offering them?" asked Winn.

"The Government offers the first, Sheriff Riley the second, and the third is offered by some one named Brickell. 'W. Brickell,' the bills are signed. I saw them up at the printing-office, but they are being distributed all over the place."

Sure enough, in that wretched little printing-office the compositor had made "Brickell" out of Brackett, and as he was his own proof-reader, the mistake was not discovered.

"Brickell," repeated Winn, slowly. "That is a queer name, and one that I never heard before."

"Yes, it is one that has puzzled me a good deal," said Cap'n Cod. "I'm sure I never heard Major Caspar mention any such person."

"You know this Major Caspar, then?"

"Know him! Well, I should say I did. We were in the same regiment all through the war, and a better officer never commanded men. Know him! I know him to the extent of a leg, lost when I was standing so close beside him that if I hadn't been there the ball would have taken his instead of mine. Know him! Didn't I know him for three months in the hospital, where he came to see me every day? Indeed I do know Major Caspar, and I should be mighty glad to know of any way in which I could help him out of his present trouble."

"It is strange that I never heard father speak of any Aleck Fifield," thought Winn. He was about to ask some more

questions, but was restrained by the remembrance of his present peculiar position. The same thought checked his inclination to say, "I am Winn Caspar, sir, the son of your friend Major Caspar, of Caspar's Mill." Instead of that he said to himself, "I will wait until we get away from this place; or, at any rate, until I can receive a letter from home that will prove who I am. Otherwise he might find out about the Sheriff's skiff, and think I had made up the story to escape arrest as a thief."

So Winn held his peace, and only asked his host if he would furnish him the materials for writing a letter home. Provided with these, he wrote to his mother as follows:

"MANDRAKE, IOWA.

"MY OWN DEAR MOTHER,—I write to you instead of to father, as I suppose he must be somewhere on the river hunting for me by this time, though I have not seen him yet.

"I am all right, and having a fine time, but have lost the raff. I am on board a boat called the *Whatnot*, with some very kind people—a gentleman named Fifield, a girl named Sabella, a funny old darkey named Solon, and a monkey named Don Blossom. I am bound to find the raff again if it is still afloat, and am going to keep on down the river in this boat until we catch up with it.

"I shall be here long enough for you to answer this letter; and send me some money, please, and tell me all about everybody. Give my dear love to Elta, and tell her I wish she knew Sabella and Don Blossom. She is just the kind of a girl, and he is just the kind of a monkey, a fellow likes to know.

"Now it is late, and I must turn in, for I am working my passage on this boat, and Solon and I must take the place of a mule to-morrow, and till we can earn money enough to buy one. So good-bye, from your affectionate son,----WINN."

While the boy was writing, Cap'n Cod went ashore, and when the former took his letter to the post-office, he met his host there with two letters in his hand. They followed Winn's into the box, but he did not see the address on either of them. If he had, he would have been more troubled than ever, for one was addressed to the Sheriff of Dubuque County, and the other to his own father.

The old man had seen and recognized the skiff that he had built for Sheriff Riley as it lay tied to the wharf-boat, but had thought it best to keep this discovery to himself until he could communicate with its owner. By cautious inquiries he learned that the skiff had been left there by a young man calling himself Brackett, who had gone on down the river, but was expected back in a day or two. Cap'n Cod would have telegraphed to Sheriff Riley but for the fact that the wires had not yet been extended to Mandrake. So he wrote and begged the Sheriff to hasten down the river by first boat.

He also wrote to Major Caspar, expressing his sympathy, telling him that he was now travelling down the Mississippi in his own boat, the *Whatnot*, asking for full particulars concerning the lost boy, and offering to make every effort to discover his whereabouts.

On the morning of that very day, just before his departure from Mandrake, Billy Brackett had also written and mailed a letter that read as follows:

"MY DEAR SISTER,—I am up a stump just at present, but hope to climb down very soon. In other words, your boy is smarter than I took him to be. He has not only managed to hide the raff, but himself as well, and both so completely that thus far I have had but little success in tracing them. I have reason to believe that he and I spent some time very close to each other on an island the night I left you, but before daylight he had again disappeared, leaving no trace. After that I learned nothing concerning him until reaching this place, when I again struck the trail. I am now following a warm scent, and expect to run the young fox to earth within a few hours.

"So much for the boy. As for the raff, its disappearance is even more complete and unaccountable than his. There is absolutely nothing to report concerning it. I have boarded several raffs, but none of them bears the slightest resemblance to the *Venture*, which I am certain I should recognize at a glance. However, when I find Winn he will of course be able to put me on the right track, and the subsequent recovery of the raff will prove an easy matter.

"If you have any news, send it to me at this place, where I shall remain until I hear from you.

"Love to Elta. Tell her that last evening I ran across the queerest craft I ever saw, with the queerest name I ever heard of. It is called the *Whatnot*. Of course its Captain knew nothing of Winn, and I did not expect he would; but I make it my business to inquire of every one I meet or pass.

"Hoping to be able to send you better news within a day or two, I am your loving brother,
"WILLIAM."

As this letter reached Caspar's Mill in the same mail with those from Winn and the owner of the *Whatnot*, who, in writing to the Major, had used his old army name, and signed himself "Respectfully yours, Cap'n Cod," it may easily be imagined that Billy Brackett's perplexity was as nothing compared to that of his sister. What could it all mean? Winn was alive and well; his letter brought that comfort. But what did he mean by stating that he was on board that boat with the absurd name, when both William and Captain Cod stated that he was not there. Then, too, how could it be possible for those three persons, each of whom was anxious to find one of the others, to be in a small place, such as this Mandrake must be, for several days without running across each other? Such stupidity was incredible, and could only be accounted for by the fact that all three were of the masculine sex. Well, she would soon set things to rights, and the fond mother smiled to herself to think that it was left for her, who had remained quietly at home, to discover the missing boy after all.

She had but a few minutes in which to catch the return mail; but when it left, it bore three notes in her handwriting. The one directed to Mr. Winn Caspar, Mandrake, Iowa, read as follows:

"MY DARLING BOY,—How could you leave us as you did? And why don't you come home? Don't lose a minute in hunting up your Uncle Billy, who is now in Mandrake. He will supply you with money, and tell you what to do.

"Ever lovingly, but in great haste,
"YOUR OWN MOTHER."

To the Captain of the *Whatnot* Mrs. Caspar wrote:

"Sir,—In the absence of my husband, I took the liberty of opening your note to him of the 1st inst. In it you write that you are anxious to discover our boy's whereabouts, when, by the same mail, I am advised by him that he is on board the very boat of which you claim to be Captain and owner. I of course take my boy's word in preference to that of any stranger. Having thus detected the hollowness of your sympathy, and the falseness of your pretended friendship for my husband, I must request you to refrain from further meddling in this matter. Yours etc.,---ELLEN CASPAR."

Fortunately, as this letter was addressed to Captain Cod, Esq., instead of to Mr. Aleck Fifield, the old man never received it, and in due time it was returned to the writer from the Dead-letter Office.

To Billy Brackett Mrs. Caspar wrote:

"MY DEAR GOOSE OF A BROTHER,—I have just received a letter from Winn written at Mandrake. He is on the *Mantel-piece*, and out of money. Please supply him with whatever he needs, and bring him home to me as quickly as possible. As for the raff, I am sorry, of course, that you cannot find it; but so long as Winn is safe, nothing else seems to matter.

"John writes full of enthusiasm concerning the contract, and I shall tell him nothing of your absurd doings until you and Winn are safely back here. Ever lovingly your sister,---ELLEN."

CHAPTER XX.

BIM GROWLS.

During the following day, while these letters were on their way to the little Iowa town in which the principal actors in this story were playing at such cross-purposes, active preparations were being made on board the *Whatnot* for the first exhibition of its panorama. In those days the panorama filled the place now taken by the stereopticon; and though its crude pictures lacked the photographic truth of lantern slides, they were by no means devoid of interest. In fact, their gorgeousness of color, and the vagueness of detail that allowed each to represent several scenes, according to the pleasure of the lecturer, rendered them quite as popular, if not so instructive, as their modern successors.

The success of a panorama, however, depended largely upon the person who explained its pictures. If he were witty, and knew how to tell the good story of which each one was certain to remind him, all went well, and the fame of that panorama spread far and wide. If, on the other hand, he was prosy, and offered only dry explanations of his pictures, the impatient river-town audience did not hesitate to express their dissatisfaction, and the exhibition was apt

to close with a riot.

All this was well known to Cap'n Cod; but twenty years of absence from the stage had caused him to lose sight of his first and only humiliating appearance before an audience, and had restored all his youthful confidence in his own abilities. He was therefore to be the lecturer of his own show, while Winn and Solon were to enter the treadmill, and supply, as well as they could, the place of a mule in furnishing power to move the heavy roll of paintings. Sabella was also to remain out of sight, but was to grind out music from the hand-organ whenever it might be needed. This was only a temporary position, and would be filled by either Winn or Solon after a mule had been obtained for the treadmill. Sabella's real duty was to dress Don Blossom, and see that he went on the stage at the proper time.

The hour for giving these arrangements a public test finally arrived. By eight o'clock the exhibition hall of the *Whatnot* was packed with an audience that contained a number of raftsmen and steamboat hands from the water-front. These were good-naturedly noisy, and indulged in cat-calls, stampings, and other manifestations of their impatience for the curtain to rise. An occasional lull in the tumult allowed the droning notes of the "Sweet By-and-By," then new and extremely popular, to be heard, as they were slowly ground out from the hand-organ by the invisible Sabella.

At length they ceased; the little drop-curtain was slowly rolled up so as to expose the first picture, and Cap'n Cod, pointer in hand, in all the glory of the blue swallow-tail with brass buttons, stepped on the stage. His appearance was greeted with a silence that was almost painful in its contrast with the previous tumult.

Now for the neat introductory speech that the old man had prepared so carefully and rehearsed until he knew every word by heart. He stepped forward, and gazed appealingly at the silent audience; but no word came from his dry lips. He swallowed convulsively, and appeared to be struggling with himself. A titter of laughter sounded from the back of the room. The old man's face became fiery red and then deathly pale. He looked helplessly and pitifully from side to side.

"Wind him up!" shouted a voice.

"He's stopped short, never to go again," called another.

"He's an old fraud, and his show's a fake!"

"Speech! speech!"

"No; a song! Let old dot-and-carry-one give us a song!"

"Oh, shut up! Don't you see he's a ballet-dancer?"

And so the derisive jeerings of this audience, like those of another twenty years before, hailed Cap'n Cod's second failure. His confidence in himself, his years of experience, the memory of what he ought to say, all vanished the moment he faced that mass of upturned faces, and he was once more the dumb, trembling Codrington of twenty years before. A mist swam before his eyes, he groped blindly with his hands, the derisive yells of the river-men, who were endeavoring to secure their money's worth of amusement from this pitiful spectacle, grew fainter and fainter in his ears. He tottered backward, and would have fallen, had not a young man from the audience sprang to his assistance.

Very tenderly he helped the old man from the stage and into the friendly shadows of the side scenes. In another moment he reappeared. With flashing eyes he stepped in front of the turbulent audience and held up his hand. The curiosity of the river-men was sufficient to produce an almost instant silence, which in another second might have changed into an angry roar.

Who was this young fellow? What business had he to interfere with their fun? What was he going to say? He'd better be careful! They were not in a humor to be trifled with.

For a moment he looked steadily at them.

Then he said:

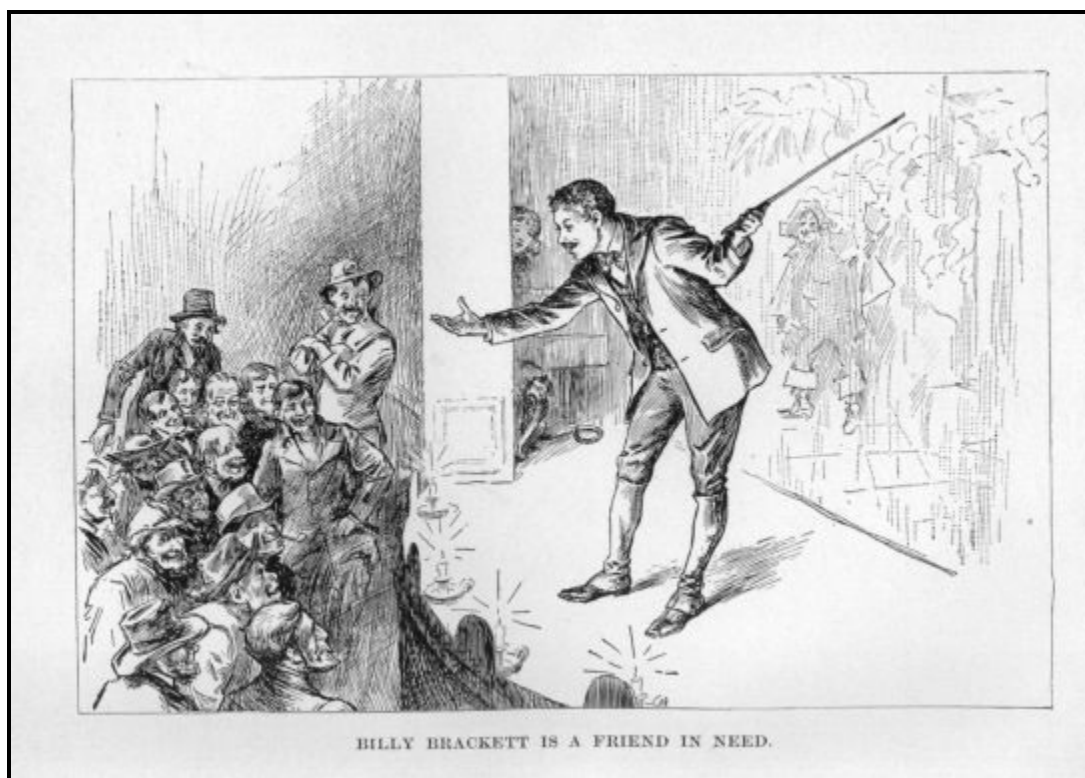
"Boys, I am surprised, and if I thought for a moment that you really meant to worry that old man, I should be ashamed of you. But I know you didn't. It was only your fun. He has been a soldier, and lost a leg fighting for you and me and to preserve the glorious Union, that you and I are prouder of than anything else in life. He has a daughter in there too--a young girl, for whom he is trying to make a living with this show. I saw her just now, and if you could have seen the look of distress and terror on her face as she sprang to the old man's side you would feel as I do about this

business. You would know, as I do, that this was no fake, but a square--A, number one--show, packed full and running over with good things, worth ten times the price of admission. You'd know that it was just the bulliest show ever seen on this little old river, and you'd turn in with a will to help me prove it. I am a stranger, just arrived in town, and never set eyes on this outfit before; but I'm willing to put up my last dollar on the fact that this show is so much better than I've said that as soon as you've seen it once, you'll want to see it right over again, you'll come to it every evening that it stays here, and then you'll follow it down the river on the chance of seeing it again. Hello, inside! Turn on your steam, and set your whirligig to moving."

By this time the good-nature of the audience was fully restored, and, amid encouraging cries of "That's the talk!" "Ring the jingle-bell and give her a full head!" "Sweep her out into the current and toot your horn, stranger!" the panorama began slowly to unroll. The young man picked up the pointer, and the moment the second picture--a lurid scene that Cap'n Cod had entitled "The Burning of Moscow"--was fully exposed to view, he began:

"There you have it, gentlemen! One of the most thrilling events of this century. The great San Francisco fire of '55. City swept clean from the face of the earth, and built up again, finer than before, inside of a month. I tell you, fellows, those Californians are rustlers! Why, I met a man out in 'Frisco last month whom I knew, two years ago, as a raftsman on this very river at twenty a month and found. To-day he is worth a cool million of dollars, and if you want to know how he made it, I'll let you into the secret."

And so the young stranger rattled on with story and joke, never pausing to study the panoramic scenes as they moved slowly along, but giving each the first title that suggested itself, and working in descriptions to fit the titles. He kept it up for more than an hour; and when Sabella, who was watching him from the side scenes with admiring wonder, called out softly that the picture he was then describing was the last, he gracefully dismissed as delighted an audience as ever attended a river show, and disappeared with them.



[Illustration: Billy Brackett is a friend in need.]

Billy Brackett had come up the Illinois side of the river by rail and stage, and had been ferried across to Mandrake just in time to be attracted by the incipient riot aboard the *Whatnot*. Led to the scene by curiosity, his generous indignation was aroused by the sight of the helpless old man and his tormentors. Now, to avoid being thanked for what he had done, he hurried away, released Bim from his confinement on the wharf-boat, to that bow-legged animal's intense joy, and went to the hotel for the night.

The next morning, when he came down into the office, the clerk handed him Mrs. Caspar's letter. He stood by the desk and read it. Then he read it again, with a frown of perplexity deepening on his forehead. "Winn here, on board the

Mantel-piece, and out of money! What can Ellen mean? She must be losing her mind."

The young man was so engrossed with this letter that he paid no attention to the other occupants of the room. Thus he did not see Cap'n Cod and his niece enter the front door, nor notice that the former was greeted by two men who had been talking earnestly together and watching him with great interest. Nor did he see Sabella stoop to pat Bim, who had gone to meet her. He did not notice the entrance a moment later of a boy with a very puzzled expression of countenance and an open letter in his hand. Neither did he see that the boy was accompanied by the printer who had furnished his reward notices, and who now pointed in his direction, saying, "That's him there. That's Mr. Brickell."

At the same moment Sabella exclaimed, "Oh, Winn, here's Bim! Isn't he a dear dog?" Then she too caught sight of Billy Brackett, and pulling Cap'n Cod by the sleeve, whispered, "There he is, uncle. That is the gentleman you have come to thank for helping us so splendidly last evening."

While she was thus whispering into one ear, the night watchman of the wharf-boat, who stood on the other side of the old man, was saying, in a low tone, "Yes, sir. As I was just telling the Sheriff, that's the man as stole his skiff, for I saw him when he landed here in it."

Sheriff Riley, who had only reached Mandrake half an hour before, was staring at Winn, and saying to himself, "There's the young rascal now. I knew it wasn't that other fellow, though somehow his face is strangely familiar too."

There was a momentary hesitation on all sides. Then, as though moved by a single impulse, Winn started towards Billy Brackett to ask him if his name was Brickell, Cap'n Cod stepped up to express his heart-felt gratitude for what he had done the evening before, and Sheriff Riley moved towards Winn with the intention of arresting him. At this Bim, recognizing the Sheriff, stationed himself in front of his preoccupied master, erected the bristles on the back of his neck, and growled.

CHAPTER XXI.

EVERY ONE EXPLAINS.

At Bim's growl, Billy Brackett said "Be quiet, sir!" and looked up. He wondered somewhat at the number of persons advancing towards him, and was also surprised to note that, with one exception, they were all people whom he knew. He recognized Sabella and her uncle, the wharf-boat man, the printer, and even the Sheriff of Dubuque County. The only one of the group whom he had not seen before was the gentlemanly and thoroughly honest-looking young fellow upon whose shoulder the Sheriff had just laid his hand, saying,

"I want you, my boy."

"I expect I want him more than you do, Sheriff," remarked Billy Brackett, quietly, stepping forward and laying a hand on Winn's other shoulder. "You take him to be a thief, while I take him to be my nephew; and, of course, if he is the one, he can't be the other. Isn't your name Winn Caspar? Answer me that, you young rascal!"

"Yes," replied Winn, slowly, "that is my name. But what a stupid I have been!"

"You mean in allowing yourself to be carried off by the raft, and then losing it, and getting arrested, and running off with the Sheriff's skiff, and letting it go adrift with your coat in it, and shipping aboard some craft that your dear mother calls the *Mantel-piece* for a cruise down the river, instead of getting along home and relieving the anxiety of your distressed parents, to say nothing of that of your aged uncle. Yes, it does seem to me that in this instance the general brilliancy of the family is somewhat clouded."

"I don't mean anything of the kind," answered Winn, stoutly. "All these things might have happened to any one, even to an uncle of your advanced years and wisdom. So I am sure I don't consider them proofs of stupidity. The only stupid thing that I am willing to acknowledge is that I didn't recognize Bim, after I'd been told there was a dog of that name here, too. That's the thing I can't get over."

"But you had never seen him!" exclaimed Billy Brackett.

"That makes no difference," was the calm reply. "I'd heard so much about him that I ought to have known him, and I can't forgive myself that I didn't."

"How about running off with my boat?" queried the Sheriff, who did not at all understand the situation.

"I didn't run off with your boat. It ran off with me first, and ran away from me afterwards. If you hadn't taken the oars out I should have rowed into Dubuque and sent some one back to the island with her. As it was, I had to go wherever she chose to take me, until she set me ashore on a tow-head, and went on down the river by herself. I'm glad of it, though, for if she hadn't, I should never have found the *Whatnot*."

"The *Whatnot*!" exclaimed Billy Brackett. "Are you living on board the *Whatnot*?"

"Yes, sir, this young gentleman is a guest on board of my boat," said Cap'n Cod, who now found his first chance to speak; "and glad as I have been to have him, it would have made me many times happier to know that he was the son of my old friend and commander. Why didn't you tell me the truth in the first place, boy?" And the veteran gazed reproachfully at Winn.

"I did tell you the truth so far as I told you anything. I didn't dare tell you any more, because I heard you say you were a friend of Sheriff Riley, and knew his skiff. So I was afraid you would have me arrested for running off with it, and in that way delay me so that I would never find the raft. Besides, I wanted to wait until I could get a letter from home to prove who I am, and I hadn't a chance to write until we got here."

"With me, the simple word of Major Caspar's son would have been stronger than all the proof in the world," said the loyal old soldier; "and though you did, as you say, tell the truth so far as you told anything, you did not tell the whole truth, as your father certainly would have done had he been in your place."

"The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," quoted the Sheriff, in his most official tone. "But look here, Cap'n Cod," he continued, "you haven't yet explained what you know of this young fellow, and his suspicious, or, to say the least, queer performances on the river."

"Cap'n Cod!" interrupted Winn. "Is your name Cap'n Cod?"

"It is a name that I have been known to answer to," replied the owner of the *Whatnot*; "and after my performance of last evening I don't suppose I shall ever be allowed to claim any other."

"If you had only told me all your names in the first place," said Winn, with a sly twinkle in his eyes, "I should probably have done the same. I have so often heard my father speak of Cap'n Cod's goodness and honesty and bravery, that I should have been perfectly willing to trust him; though I was a bit suspicious of the Sheriff's friend, Mr. Aleck Fifield."

"It's not the Sheriff's friends you need be suspicious of, my lad, but his enemies," interrupted Mr. Riley; "and I wonder if you haven't fallen in with them already. As I now understand this case, you came down the river on a raft until you reached the island near which I found you. What became of your raft at that point?"

"That is what I would like to know," replied the boy.

"What!" cried Billy Brackett. "Do you mean to say that you don't know where the raft is?"

"No more than I know how you happen to be here instead of out in California, where I supposed you were until five minutes ago. I haven't set eyes on the *Venture*, nor found a trace of her, since the first morning out from home."

"Well, if that doesn't beat everything!" said the young engineer, with a comical tone of despair. "I thought that after finding you the discovery of the raft would follow as a matter of course; but now it begins to look farther away than ever."

"But in finding me," said Winn, "you have found some one to help you find the raft."

"You?" said the other, quizzically. "Why, I was thinking of sending you home to your mother; that is, if the Sheriff here will allow you to go."

"I don't know about that," said the officer. "It seems to me that I still know very little about this young man. Who is to prove to me that he is the son of Major Caspar?"

"Oh, I can speak for that," replied Billy Brackett.

"And I suppose he is ready to vouch for you; but that won't do. You see, you are both suspicious characters, and unless some one whom I know as well as I do Cap'n Cod here can identify you, I must take you both back to Dubuque."

"Captain Cod," repeated Billy Brackett, thoughtfully. "I seem to have heard that name before. Why, yes, I have a note of introduction from Major Caspar to a Captain Cod, and I shouldn't wonder if you were the very man. Here it is now."

"I am proud to make your acquaintance, sir," said the veteran, heartily, after glancing over the note thus handed to him. "It's all right, Sheriff. This is certainly the Major's handwriting, for I know it as I do my own, and I don't want any better proof that this gentleman is the person he claims to be."

"Would you be willing to go on his bond for a thousand dollars?" asked Mr. Riley.

"I would, and for as much more as my own property, together with what I hold in trust for my niece, would bring," answered the old man, earnestly.

"And would you be willing that your money should be risked on any such a venture?" asked the Sheriff, turning to Sabella with a smile.

"Indeed I would," answered the girl, promptly. "After the splendid way Mr. Brackett helped us last evening, I know whatever he says must be so."

"That will do," said Mr. Riley. "With such sureties I am well content, and am willing to make public acknowledgment that these gentlemen are what they represent themselves to be. Now, for their future guidance, I will tell them what I have not yet hinted to a living soul. It is that their raft has probably been stolen and taken down the river by the most noted gang of counterfeiters that has ever operated in this part of the country. There are three of them, and I thought I had surely run them to earth when I traced them to the island just above Dubuque. You must have seen them there, didn't you?"

"No, sir," replied Winn, to whom this question was addressed. "I only saw one man on the island. He said he was a river-trader, and would help me float the raft. We went to look for his partners, and when I came back, it and he were both gone. After that I did not see a soul until you came along and arrested me."

"That confirms my belief that they have appropriated your raft to their own uses," said the Sheriff; "and it is a mighty good scheme on their part, too. We were watching all the steamboats, and even the trading scows, but never thought of finding them on a raft. They have probably disguised it, and themselves too, long before this, so that to trail them will be very difficult. I suppose you will try to follow them, though?"

"Certainly I shall," answered Billy Brackett, promptly. "I haven't undertaken this job only to give it up after a week's trial. As for Winn, though, I don't know but what I really ought to send him home."

"Now look here, Uncle Billy. You know you don't mean that. You know that, much as I want to see mother and Elta, I simply *must* find that raft, or, at any rate, help you do it. You couldn't send me home, either, unless you borrowed a pair of handcuffs from the Sheriff and put me in irons. Anyway, I don't believe you'd have the heart. If I thought for a moment that you had, I'd--well, I'd disappear again, that's all."

"All right," laughed Billy Brackett. "I'm willing you should go with us if Bim is. What do you say, old dog? Speak, sir!"

And Bim spoke till the echoes rang again.

CHAPTER XXII.

A "MEWEL" NAMED "REWARD."

It being thus settled that the search for the raft was to be continued, the Sheriff said: "I wish I could go with you, Mr. Brackett, and see this affair through; but those fellows are beyond my hunting-ground now, and I've got important business to attend to up the river. I'll tell you what I will do, though. I'll appoint you a deputy, and give you a bit of writing witnessed by a notary, as well as a badge. The paper will identify you, and state that you are engaged on government business, which entitles you to official aid wherever you may demand it. I will also give you samples of the bills those fellows are circulating. They are fives and tens, and by far the best specimens of that kind of work I have ever seen. Of course, if you don't catch them it will be all right; but if you do, perhaps you'll remember old friends when the reward is paid."

Billy Brackett thanked Mr. Riley, and accepted these friendly offers, though he afterwards remarked to Winn that as they were searching for a lost raft, and not for a gang of counterfeiters, he thought it unlikely that he should ever play the part of Sheriff.

"But you'd try for that reward if you had the chance, wouldn't you?" asked Winn.

"No, I would not," was the prompt reply. "Man-hunting, and especially man-hunting for money, is not in my line. It is a duty that Sheriffs are obliged to perform, but, thank goodness, I am not a Sheriff."

At the conclusion of all these explanations and arrangements, the entire party adjourned to the *Whatnot*, to which Sabella had already returned, and where they were to dine, by Cap'n Cod's invitation.

What a good dinner it was, and what a merry one! How Solon, who in a speckless white apron waited at table, grinned at the praises bestowed upon his cooking! How they all chaffed each other! Winn was ironically praised for his success in losing rafts, and the Sheriff for his in capturing counterfeiters; Cap'n Cod was gravely congratulated upon the result of his efforts to entertain the public, and even Sabella was highly praised for her skilful performance on the hand-organ. With all this banter, Cap'n Cod did not lose sight of the obligation under which Billy Brackett had placed him the evening before, and so sincerely regretted that he and Winn were not to continue their voyage down the river on the *Whatnot*, that the former finally said:

"Well, sir, if you really want us to, I don't see why we shouldn't travel with you until we overhaul our raft. I am rather taken with this show business myself, and have always had a desire to appear on the stage. As for Winn, and that other young monkey, Don Blossom--"

"All right," laughed Winn. "I'd rather take the part of monkey than of mule, any day."

"Other young monkey," continued Billy Brackett, gravely, without noticing this interruption, "we'll hitch them together and exhibit them as Siamese twins. Oh, I tell you, gentlemen, we'll give a show such as never was seen on this little old river. I don't suppose this craft is as fast as some of the larger steamboats, but she can certainly overtake a raft, and we might just as well have some fun out of the trip as not."

"But she is not a steamboat," confessed Cap'n Cod.

"Not a steamboat! What is she then, and how do you propel her?"

"She is only a mule-boat, and at present, as we have no mule, we merely drift with the current."

At this Billy Brackett became thoughtful, and asked to be shown into the engine-room. He had not appreciated Winn's reference to acting the part of a mule until now; but at sight of the treadmill, and a sudden realization of the part his nephew had taken in the performance of the preceding evening, he laughed until the tears filled his eyes, and the others laughed in sympathy.

"Oh, Winn, Winn!" he cried. "You'll be the death of me yet! I wonder if ever an uncle was blessed with such an absurd nephew before?"

"That's all right, Uncle Billy," said Winn; "but you just step in and work that treadmill for an hour. Then see if you'll laugh. Eh, Solon?"

"No, sah. Ole Solom he don' git in dere no mo'. He gwine strike, he am, agin dish yer mewel bizness."

"Look here, Winn," said Billy Brackett, when he had recovered his gravity, "didn't I offer a reward for your discovery?"

"To be sure you did; and I meant to claim it, too. That's what I got the printer to point out Mr. 'Brickell' for. So I'll take it now, if you please."

"That is one of the rewards I expected to earn," remarked Cap'n Cod. "And I wrote to your father for full particulars concerning your disappearance; but I don't suppose there is any chance for me now, so long as you have discovered yourself, unless you could make it convenient to get lost again."

"I was rather expecting to come in for that reward myself," said the Sheriff.

"While I," said Billy Brackett, "had about concluded that if any one was entitled to it, it was the young rascal's worthy uncle. But I'll tell you how we will settle these several claims. Solon here is almost the only one who has not applied for the reward, though I am convinced that he is as well entitled to it as any of us. Therefore I am going to pay it to him--"

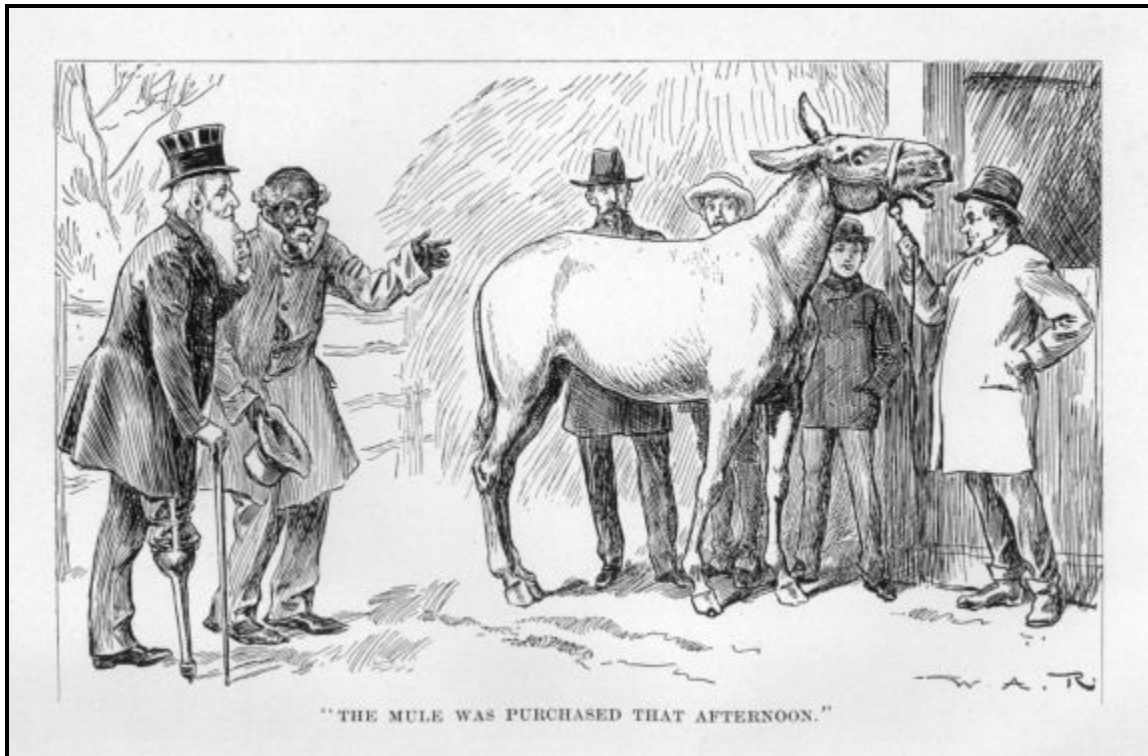
At this the old negro's eyes grew wide as saucers. He had never been possessed of a hundred dollars in his life.

"On condition," continued the young engineer, "that he immediately invests it in a mule, which he shall offer to our friend Cap'n Cod as a substitute for himself and Winn in the treadmill. I shall receive my reward by being permitted to travel on the *Whatnot* and study for the stage, while the Sheriff shall be rewarded by being allowed to name the mule."

Although they all laughed at this scheme and considered, it a good joke, Billy Brackett was deeply in earnest beneath all his assumed frivolity. He realized that finding the raft and taking possession of it were no longer one and the same thing. The fact that it was in the hands of a gang of men who were at once shrewd and desperate rendered its recovery an affair requiring all the discretion and skill that he could command. For the purpose in view, a boat like the *Whatnot*, with which he could stop when and where he pleased, as well as visit places unattainable by larger craft, was much better suited than a steamboat that would only touch at certain fixed points. Then again he and Winn would be less likely to arouse the suspicion of those whom they sought if attached to Cap'n Cod's show than if they appeared to have no definite business or object in view. He calculated that by using mule-power in the daytime and drifting with the current at night the *Whatnot* could be made to reach St. Louis as soon as the raft, and still allow time for several exhibitions of the panorama on the way. From the outset he had expected to take the raft at least as far as St. Louis, and now was perfectly willing that its present crew should have the labor of navigating it to that point. Thus the plan of travelling by the *Whatnot* commended itself strongly to his judgment, besides proving highly satisfactory to all those interested in it.

Even Bim approved of it, for in addition to showing a decided appreciation of Sabella's friendship, this intelligent animal evinced a desire to become more intimately acquainted with Don Blossom, who was the first of his race he had ever encountered.

The mule selected by Solon, and guaranteed by that expert in mules to be "a turrible wukker, 'kase I sees hit in he eye," was purchased that very afternoon, and immediately introduced to the scene of his future labors.



[Illustration: "The mule was purchased that afternoon."]

Sheriff Riley named him "Reward." Then bidding these strangely found friends good-bye, and taking his recovered property with him, he boarded an up-bound steamboat and started for home.

As there was no reason why the others should not also begin their journey at once, the *Whatnot* was got under way at the same time, and headed down the stream.

Cap'n Cod proudly occupied the pilot-house; Solon attended to the four-legged engine; Sabella was making preparations for supper; while the two who would be raftmates, provided they only had a raft, paced slowly back and forth on the upper deck, enjoying the scenery and discussing their plans.

"If we only knew how those fellows had disguised the raft, and what she looked like now!" remarked Billy Brackett.

"I'm certain that I should recognize it under any disguise," asserted Winn, positively.

"That may be, but it would simplify matters if we could have some definite description of the craft. Now we shall have to board every raft we overhaul, on some pretence or other, and make inquiries. And that reminds me that the *Whatnot* does not seem to be provided with a skiff."

"Yes, Solon said there was one on this deck, covered with canvas. That must be it there," replied Winn. As he spoke he lifted an edge of the bit of old sail that protected some bulky object from the weather, and looked beneath it. Then he uttered a cry of amazement, and tore the canvas completely off.

"It's my canoe, as sure as I'm standing here!" he shouted. "The very one that was carried off on the raft!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

REWARD RUNS AWAY WITH THE PANORAMA.

There was not the slightest doubt that the canoe, covered by a bit of canvas, which had rested all this time on the

upper deck of the *Whatnot*, was the very one whose loss had grieved Winn almost as much as that of the raft itself. If he had needed proof other than his certain knowledge of the little craft, it was at hand; for, as he pointed out to Billy Brackett, there were his initials, rudely cut with a jack-knife, just inside the gunwale. How well he remembered carving them, one sunny afternoon, when he and Elta were drifting down the creek! Yes, indeed, it was his canoe fast enough, but how came it there? There was but one way to obtain an answer, and in another minute Cap'n Cod was being plied with eager questions as to when, where, and how he came into possession of the dugout.

"That canoe?" he questioned slowly, looking from one to the other, and wondering at their eagerness. "Why, I bought it off a raft just before leaving Dubuque. You see, I didn't have any skiff, and didn't feel that I could afford to buy one. So I was calculating to build one after we'd got started. Then a raft came along, and the fellows on it must have been awfully hard up, for they offered to sell their canoe so cheap that I just had to take it. Two dollars was all I gave for it; and though it isn't exactly--"

"But what sort of a raft was it?" anxiously interrupted Winn.

"Just an ordinary timber raft with a 'shanty' and a tent on it, and--"

"You mean three 'shanties,' don't you?"

"No; one 'shanty' and a tent. I took particular notice, because as there were only three men aboard, I wondered why the 'shanty,' which looked to be real roomy, wasn't enough."

"Three men!" exclaimed Billy Brackett--"a big man, a middle-sized man, and a little man, like the bears in the story-book. Why Winn, that's our raft, and I've been aboard it twice within the last four days."

"You have! Where? How? Why didn't you tell me? Where is it now?"

"Oh, I have been aboard it here and there. Didn't mention it because I haven't been acquainted with you long enough to post you in every detail of my previous history, and now that raft is somewhere down the river, between here and St. Louis." Then changing his bantering tone, the young engineer gave a full explanation of how he happened to board the *Venture* twice, and when he finished, Winn said,

"But you haven't mentioned the wheat. Didn't you notice it?"

"Wheat! Oh yes. I do remember your father saying he had put some wheat aboard as a speculation; but I didn't see anything of any wheat, nor was there any place where it could have been concealed."

"Then they must have thrown it overboard, as I was afraid they had, and there was a thousand dollars' worth of it, too."

"Whew! Was there as much as that?" said Billy Brackett, thoughtfully. "So those rascals first stole it, and then threw it away, and now there is a thousand dollars reward offered for information that will lead to their capture. I declare, Winn, circumstances do sometimes alter cases."

"Indeed they do, and I think we ought to accept that reward, for father's sake. I know I feel as if I owed him at least a thousand dollars."

"Did you ever cook a rabbit before you caught it, Winn?"

"Of course not. How absurd! Oh, I see what you mean, but I don't think it's the same thing at all. We can't help finding the raft, now that we know where it is, and just what it looks like."

Billy Brackett only laughed at this, and then, in obedience to Sabella's call, they went down to supper. The engine was stopped that it also might be fed, and for an hour the *Whatnot* was allowed to drift with only Solon on deck. Then Reward was again set to work, and until ten o'clock the unique craft spun merrily down-stream. From that hour the engine was allowed to rest until morning; and while they drifted, the crew divided the watches of the night between them, Cap'n Cod and Winn taking one, and Billy Brackett with Solon for company the other.

At midnight Sabella had a lunch ready for the watch just coming below, as well as for the one about to turn out; and then, wrapped warmly in a blanket, she sat for an hour on the upper deck with Cap'n Cod and Winn, fascinated by the novelty of drifting down the great river at night. The lights that twinkled here and there along the shores earlier in the evening had disappeared, and the whole world seemed asleep. The brooding stillness was only broken by the

distant hooting of owls, or the musical complainings of the swift waters as they chafed impatiently against some snag, reef, or bar.

They talked in hushed voices, and Sabella related how the man from whom her uncle purchased Winn's canoe had told her that she reminded him of his own little daughter, who lived so far away that she didn't even know where her father was. "He loves her dearly, though," added Sabella. "I know from the way he talked about her; but I can't think what he meant when he said I ought to be very grateful because I didn't have any father, and that it would be much better for his little girl if she hadn't one either."

"I suppose he meant because he is such a bad man," suggested Winn.

"I don't believe he is a bad man," protested Sabella. "If he was, he just couldn't talk the way he did."

"But he stole our raft, and he is a counterfeiter, and there's a reward offered for him."

"How do you know? Only yesterday some people thought you had stolen a boat, and were a counterfeiter, and there were two rewards offered for you," laughed Sabella. "So perhaps this man isn't any worse than you were. Anyhow, I'm going to like him for his little girl's sake, until I find out that he is really a bad man."

"I wonder if it could have been Mr. Gilder?" thought Winn, as he remembered how that gentleman had won his confidence. Then he entertained Cap'n Cod and Sabella by relating the incident of his warm reception to the first and only one of the "river-traders" whom he had met.

By noon of the next day they reached the point at which Billy Brackett had last seen the raft, and they knew that here their search for it must begin in earnest. For five days more they swept on down the mighty river at the rate of nearly a hundred miles a day. They no longer ran at night, for fear of passing the raft in the darkness, but from sunrise to sunset they hurried southward with all possible speed. They made inquiries at every town and ferry landing; they scanned critically every raft they passed, and boarded several that appeared to be about the size of the *Venture*, though none of them showed a tent in addition to its "shanty." During every minute of daylight either Billy Brackett or Winn watched the river from the upper deck, but at the end of five days they had not discovered the slightest trace of the missing raft.

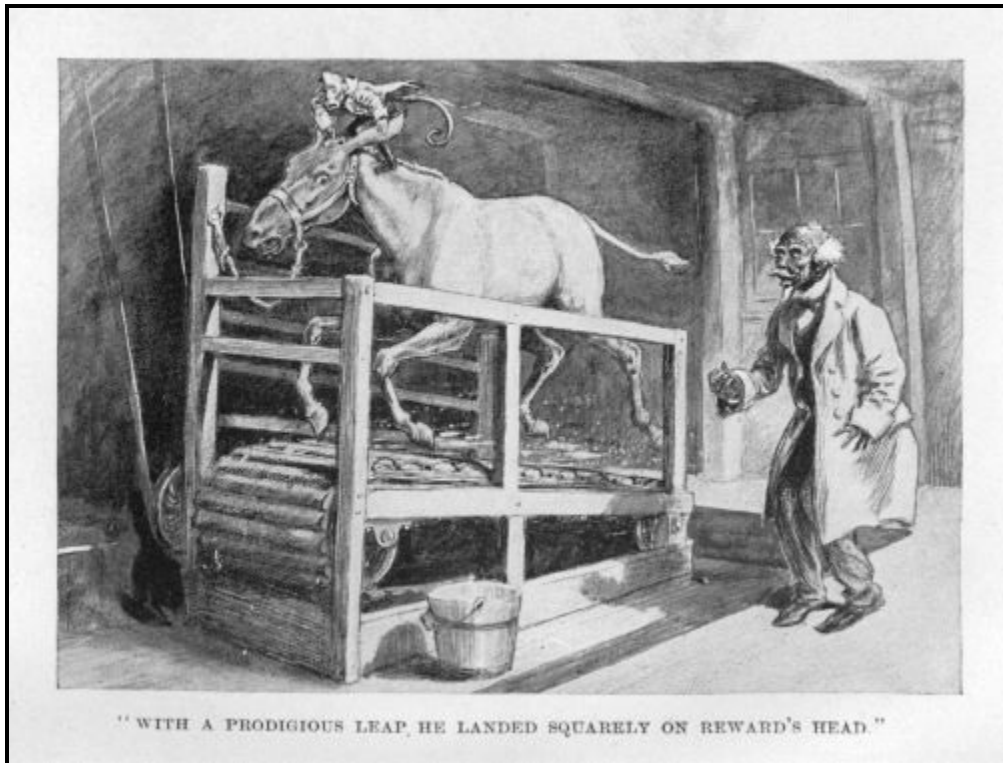
Cap'n Cod became so interested in the chase that he would willingly have kept it up by night as well as by day, without stopping to give exhibitions anywhere; but this Billy Brackett would not allow.

"We are certainly travelling faster than they," he argued, "even if they are not making any stops, which is improbable, considering the nature of their business. So we must overtake them sooner or later, and we can't afford the risk of missing them by running at night. Besides, this is a show-boat, and not a police patrol boat. Its reputation must be sustained, and though we don't take time enough at any one place to advertise, and so attract a crowd, we can at least pay expenses."

So the panorama was exhibited every evening, and Billy Brackett, acting as lecturer, pointed out the beauties of the "composite" paintings, in his own witty, happy-go-lucky way, to such audiences as could be collected.

At one of these exhibitions, given at Alton, only twenty miles from St. Louis, and just above the point where the clear waters of the Mississippi disappear in the turbid flood of the greater Missouri, an incident occurred that, while only regarded as amusing at the time, was productive of most important results to our friends. At Billy Brackett's suggestion, Don Blossom, dressed to represent the lecturer, had been trained to slip slyly on the stage after the panorama was well under way. Provided with a bit of stick, he would walk behind the lecturer, and gravely point at the picture in exact imitation of the other's movements. For a minute or so Billy Brackett would continue his remarks as though nothing unusual were happening. At length, when he had allowed sufficient time to elapse for an audience to fully appreciate the situation, he would turn as though to learn the cause of their uproarious mirth, discover the monkey, and chase him from the stage with every sign of anger.

In rehearsal, this act had been done to perfection; but the first time Don Blossom heard the storm of cheers, yells, and laughter, with which his appearance was greeted by a genuine river audience, he became so terrified, that without waiting to be driven from the stage he fled from it. Darting behind the scenes and on through the living-room, he finally took refuge in the darkest corner of the engine-room, where Reward was drowsily working his treadmill. The monkey was so frightened that a moment later, when Sabella went to find him, he sprang away from her, and with a prodigious leap landed squarely on Reward's head, where, chattering and screaming, he clung desperately to the long ears.



[Illustration: "With a prodigious leap he landed squarely on Reward's head."]

The next instant a frantic mule was performing the almost impossible feat of running away on a treadmill. At the same time, to Billy Brackett's dismay and to the astonishment of his audience, the several pictures of the panorama were flitting by in a bewildering stream of color, the effect of which was kaleidoscopic and amazing.

This was Don Blossom's first and last appearance on the stage in public, for he was so thoroughly frightened that, after being rescued from his unhappy position, nothing could induce him to enter either the exhibition hall or the engine-room again. An hour later he managed to evade the watchfulness of his young mistress, slip from the boat, and scamper away through the darkness. His absence was not discovered until the next morning, and at first it was supposed that he was in hiding somewhere on board. When a thorough search failed to produce the little rascal, all except Sabella declared he would never be found, and they must proceed down the river without him. Against this decision the little girl, who had become deeply attached to her pet, protested so earnestly that Cap'n Cod finally agreed to devote an hour to searching the town and making inquiries for the lost monkey. In order to make the search as thorough as possible, he, Billy Brackett, Winn, and Solon went ashore and started in different directions, leaving Sabella alone on the *Whatnot*.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WINN DISCOVERS HIS LONG-LOST RAFT.

The morning was gray and chill. The low-hanging clouds were charged with moisture, and a thick fog hung above the river. Sabella was so filled with anxiety concerning the fate of Don Blossom that she was unable to settle down to any of the light domestic duties with which she generally occupied her mornings. She wandered restlessly from door to window, with the vague hope that her missing pet might be somewhere in sight. If the weather had not been so unpleasant, she would have started out on a private search for him in the immediate vicinity of the landing. All at once, as she was gazing from the window of her own little room on the upper deck at the dreary-looking houses of the river-front, and as far as she could see up the one muddy street that came within her range of vision, she heard shouting and laughter, and saw a group of persons approaching the boat.

For a few minutes she could not make out who they were, or what they were doing. Then she saw that the one taller than the others was a man, and that he was surrounded by a group of boys. Several of them ran backward in front of him, and all of them seemed greatly excited over something that he bore in his arms. It was a red bundle that squirmed and struggled as though it was alive. Sabella looked for a moment longer, then she darted down the short flight of steps leading to the living-room, and flung open the outer door.

"It's Don Blossom! It's my own dear, sweet Don Blossom!" she cried, almost snatching the trembling little animal from the man's arms in her eagerness.

The man stepped inside, and closed the door to shut out the boys, who, after lingering a few minutes, gradually dispersed.

"Oh, you dear monkey! How could you run away? You naughty, naughty Don Blossom! Was he cold and wet and hungry and frightened? But he's safe now, and he shall have his breakfast directly; so he shall, the dear blessed!"

While Sabella was so much engrossed with her pet as to be unmindful of all else, the man who had restored him to her stood just within the doorway and watched her, with an amused smile.

"So he is your monkey, is he? I thought he must be when I first saw him," he said at length.

"Yes, indeed, he is; and I have been feeling so badly at losing him. But where did you find him, and how did you know he was mine?" Here the little girl looked for the first time into the stranger's face. "Why, you are the very same one--"

"Yes," he replied, quietly, "I am the very same one whom you reminded of his own little girl, and who has thought of you very often since. I didn't know that you had reached this place, or I should have come to see you before. I found this monkey a little while ago in possession of some boys who were teasing him, and thought I recognized him as soon as I saw him. I became certain he was yours when some of the boys said they had seen him on a show-boat last evening, and that, after they had had some fun with him, they were going to bring him down here and claim a reward. As I wanted the pleasure of bringing him back to you myself, I bought him of them, and here he is."

"Then you are not a bad man, as Winn said, but a very good one, as I told him, and now I can prove it!" exclaimed Sabella, with a note of joyous triumph in her voice. "I'm ever and ever so much obliged to you, and I only wish I could see your little girl to tell her what a splendid father she has."

"Who is Winn? And what makes him think I am a bad man?" inquired the stranger, curiously.

"Oh, he's a boy, a big boy, that has lost a raft that we are helping him find, and he thinks you stole it. So he says you are a bad man; but I know you are not, and you wouldn't do such a mean thing as to steal a boy's raft, would you?"

"Well, no," hesitated the stranger, greatly taken aback by this unexpected disclosure and abrupt question. "No, of course not," he added, recovering himself. "I wouldn't steal a raft, or anything else, from a boy, though I might occasionally borrow a thing that I needed very much. But where is this Winn boy now? And where is your uncle?"

"They have gone out to find Don Blossom, and Mr. Brackett and Solon have gone too, but they'll all be back directly, and then you can tell them that you only borrowed Winn's raft, and where you have left it. Oh, I am so glad it was you that found Don Blossom!"

"Who is Mr. Brackett?" inquired the stranger, glancing uneasily out of the window.

"Mr. Brackett? Why, he is Winn's uncle, though you wouldn't think he was an uncle, or any older than Winn, he is so funny, and he is helping find the raft. But you'll see him in a few minutes, for they said they'd only be gone an hour."

"I think I'll go and find them, and tell them they needn't hunt any longer for the monkey," said the stranger, hurriedly.

Then, before Sabella could remonstrate, he had bent down and kissed her, saying, "Good-bye, and God bless you, little one," opened the door, and was gone.

"Seems to me that is very foolish, when he might have seen them by just waiting a few minutes," said Sabella to herself, as she pulled off Don Blossom's gay but soaked and mud-bespattered coat. "Now perhaps he will miss them

after all."

The stranger had hardly disappeared before Solon returned to the boat, grumbling at the weather, the mud, and, above all, at the rheumatism that forbade him to remain out in the wet any longer.

"Hit hain't no use, honey," he said, as he opened the door, "dat ar Don monkey gone fur good an' all dish yer time. Yo' nebber see him no mo'. Wha--wha--whar yo fin' him? He ben yeah all de time, while ole Solon ben er traipsin' fro de mud, an' er huntin', an' er huntin'?"

"No, indeed, he hasn't!" cried Sabella, laughing merrily, as she held Don Blossom up to the astonished gaze of the old negro. "He has just come home." Then she explained at length how her pet had been brought back to her by such a good kind man.

"Well, ef dat ar ain't a beater!" ejaculated Solon. "I's mighty glad de lil rasc'l is foun', anyway, 'kase now we kin be gittin' outen dish yer rheumatizy place. I'll go an' hitch up dat mewel, so to hab him ready to start when de Cap'n come."

Upon leaving the *Whatnot*, Cap'n Cod had turned to the left, or up along the river-front of the town; Billy Brackett had plunged directly into its business portion, intending to keep on until he reached the hills beyond, on which stood the better class of residences; and Winn had turned to the right.

The young engineer, closely followed by Bim, walked for several blocks without seeing or hearing anything of the runaway monkey. Suddenly, with a low growl, Bim started across the street. His master was just in time to see a man spring into the open doorway of a store, and slam the door to as the dog leaped furiously against it.

The glimpse he caught of the man's face was like a lightning flash, but it was enough. He knew him to be the raftsmen who had kicked Bim, and whom he had rescued from the dog's teeth at Mandrake, more than a week before. "He is one of those scoundrels who stole the *Venture*, and if I can only trace him I'll find the raft," thought the young man, as he dashed across the street after Bim.

Seizing the dog's collar, and bidding him be quiet, he opened the door of the store and stepped inside. There was no one to be seen, save the proprietor and two or three startled-looking clerks.

"Where is he?" demanded Billy Brackett, hurriedly. "The man, I mean, who ran in here just now!"

"That dog ought to be killed, and if you don't take him out of here at once I'll call the police," said the proprietor of the store, indignantly. "It's an outrage to allow such brutes to run at large."

"That's the reason I'm holding him," said Billy Brackett; "but where is the man?"

"I don't know; but I hope he has gone for his gun, and will know how to use it too. If he don't, I--"

The young engineer did not wait to hear more, for at that moment he spied a back door standing partly open. That was where his man had gone, and without paying any further attention to the irate shopkeeper, he dashed out through it with Bim at his heels.

Winn searched high and low, with the utmost faithfulness, until he reached the outskirts of the town, but without finding a trace of the missing Don Blossom. There was a growth of timber lining the river-bank, just beyond the houses, and the boy ventured a little way into this, arguing that a monkey would naturally take to trees. It was so wet and dripping in the timber that he only remained there a few minutes; but as he turned to retrace his steps, his attention was diverted by a new object of interest.

He was on a bank of the river, beside which was moored a raft. It was a timber raft, with a single large "shanty," that had a strangely familiar look, standing amidship.

"It isn't the *Venture*, of course," thought Winn; "but I'll just step aboard and inquire if they have seen anything of a raft with a 'shanty' and a tent on it. It will save us some time when we get started down the river again."

So thinking, the boy stepped lightly aboard. His footfalls were deadened by the wet, so that he gained the forward end of the "shanty" without attracting attention. The door was closed, and Winn was startled to note how very familiar that gable end of the building looked. He raised his hand to knock at the door, when suddenly it was flung open, and a harsh voice asked, "What do you want? and what are you doing here, young man?"

As Winn was about to reply his glance penetrated the interior of the "shanty," and for an instant he stood speechless.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RAFT AND THE SHOW-BOAT CHANGE CREWS.

It must be remembered that while Winn would have recognized Mr. Gilder, he had not seen the other "river-traders," Plater and Grimshaw. Of these two, the former had not set eyes on the lad whose raft they had stolen; but the latter had caught a glimpse of him, and now, as he noted Winn's startled glance into the interior of the "shanty," it flashed into his mind who this intrusive boy was.

The "river-traders" had not really expected Winn to follow them. They imagined that after he escaped from the island, which they hoped he would not do for several days, he would be glad enough to make the best of his way home. Still, they had taken the precaution of disguising the *Venture* by throwing the wheat overboard, tearing down the buildings in which it had been stowed, and erecting a tent in place of one of them. As they were well provided with various changes of wigs and beards, they felt quite safe until Billy Brackett boarded the raft for the second time, and made inquiries for one having three "shanties." Then they realized that a search was being made for them, or, at least, for the craft from which they were operating.

They felt somewhat easier when one of their number, detailed to watch the movements of their unwelcome visitor, returned and reported that he had gone back up the river. Still, they thought it well to again alter the appearance of the raft by removing the tent, and so lengthening the "shanty" as to materially change its aspect. They also allowed the raft to drift night and day for nearly five hundred miles without a pause. Then, again feeling safe from pursuit, they tied up just below the City of Alton, Illinois, and prepared to resume their dishonest business.

Their plan of operations was to purchase goods wherever they stopped, but always in such small quantities that for the bills they tendered in payment they received a certain amount of good money in change. A little farther along they would offer the goods thus accumulated for sale so cheaply that they readily disposed of them. In this way they not only did a thriving business, but kept up the appearance of being what they claimed to be--"river-traders" and raftsmen.

In this wicked scheme of cheating and stealing, Plater and Grimshaw felt no scruples nor regrets; but with Mr. Gilder, especially after his meeting with Sabella, the case was different. He was a man of gentlemanly instincts, and was a skilful engraver, who had worked in the Government Printing-office at Washington for several years. There he was extravagant, got into debt, yielded to the temptation to make a fortune easily, and became a counterfeiter. The present undertaking was his first experience in that line of wickedness, and he was already heartily sick of it. While on the island, where his part of the work was engraving and printing, he had not realized the contemptible nature of his unlawful business. He had merely been filled with pride in his own skill, which feeling his associates took good care to encourage by artful praise.

When he met Sabella, it flashed across him for the first time that his own little girl, far away in an eastern city, was the daughter of a criminal, and from that moment he was a changed man. Through the long days and longer nights, as the raft drifted down the great river, these thoughts were ever with him: "What will she say when she finds it out? How will she act? Will she ever kiss me, or even speak to me again? I have made her very name a disgrace. What shall I do to wipe it out? What shall I do?"

His companions noticed his strange mood, and jeered at him, but failed to change it. Finally they became suspicious, and held secret consultations as to how they should rid themselves of him. They finally determined to accomplish this in some way at St. Louis, and so matters stood when they made their stop at Alton. Here they intended remaining until they had transacted a satisfactory amount of business. Thus, on the foggy morning following Don Blossom's escape from the *Whatnot*, Messrs Gilder and Plater had gone into the town to familiarize themselves with its localities, while Grimshaw was left to look out for the raft. Now Winn Caspar had accidentally discovered it, and recognized it as the *Venture*.

He did not know the man standing in the doorway and looking so curiously at him, nor did he suppose himself

known by the other. So, with a great effort, he strove to conceal the tumult of his feelings, and to appear natural and self-possessed. He answered the man's curt inquiry regarding his business there by saying, in as pleasant a tone as he could command, that he was searching for a lost monkey, which he thought might have taken to the timber beside which this raft was moored. "You startled me by throwing open your door so suddenly just as I was about to knock," he continued; "but you haven't seen anything of a stray monkey this morning, have you?"

"Not until this moment," answered the man, surlily, "and I don't want to see any more of him. Good-day."

With this he slammed the door in the boy's face, and then, stealing on tiptoe to a window, watched for his departure from the raft.

To say that Mr. Grimshaw was rendered uneasy and apprehensive by this sudden appearance of one whom he suppose to be hundreds of miles away, and who was also the very person he was most anxious to avoid, would by no means express his feelings. He was so terrified and unnerved that for a moment he thought of leaving the raft to its fate, and making good his own escape while he had time. Then he wondered if it would not be better to cast it loose and drift away through the fog to some new hiding-place. It would never do to go without his partners, though; for, in the first place, he could not manage the raft alone, and in the second there was no knowing what Gilder would do if he thought himself deserted and perhaps betrayed. No, he must find his associates without delay, and warn them of this unexpected danger. He wondered if the boy were alone. Perhaps he had friends in hiding near by, to whom he had gone to report. In that case his own safety demanded that he discover them before they reached the raft. The boy had already disappeared in the timber, and there was no time to be lost in following him.

Thus reasoning, Grimshaw left the "shanty," locking its door behind him as he did so, and springing ashore, hastened up the trail, along which Winn had disappeared a few seconds before. It took him about three minutes to reach the far edge of the timber and outskirts of the town. Here several streets began, and as he could not follow them all, he was brought to a halt. Which way should he go now? He had seen nothing of the boy, whom he certainly ought to have overtaken before this, nor of any other person. Could he have passed them? Where should he look for Gilder and Plater? Would it not be better, after all, to await their return on the raft? Of course it would. He had been a fool to leave it, and now his best plan was to get back to it as quickly as possible.

These thoughts occupied less than a minute, and so impatient was the man to regain the raft he had just left that inside of two minutes more he again stood on the river-bank. He had been gone barely five minutes, and in that time he had not seen a human being. Now he could not see the raft. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. He could see a few rods of water, but beyond that the fog was impenetrable. He shouted, but there was no answer. Perhaps this was not the place. He ran a little way up the shore, and then as far in the opposite direction, but without success. Then he returned to his starting-point, and found the end of a rope. It was attached to a tree, and had been cut. It was a bit of the line that had held the raft, and the raft was gone.

The blow was a heavy one, and for a few minutes Grimshaw stood like one who is stunned. The loss of that raft, under the circumstances, meant ruin. It meant the loss of everything he had or cared for in the world. At first the realization of this loss rendered him speechless. Then he began to rave and revile his own carelessness. After a few minutes devoted to this he again started up the trail. He was determined to procure some craft and start in instant pursuit of the raft. He would go in company with his partners if he ran across them, but alone if he did not. Before he reached the far edge of the timber he met Plater running and breathless.

"Get back to the raft!" shouted the new-comer. "They're after us!"

"They've got us," was the bitter answer. "At least they've got the raft, and we must hunt some boat in which to follow them at once."

A few words more explained the situation, and, angry as he was, Plater did not stop to waste time in idle reproaches just then. He only said, "It's that sneak Gilder's doings, I'll bet my pile."

Grimshaw agreed to this, and as they hurried along they both thought of their partner as floating down the river on the raft in company with their enemies and glorying over their discomfiture.

"We'll get even with him, though," growled Plater.

"Yes, we *will*," snarled Grimshaw.

And then they met the object of their anger hurrying away from the levee which they were approaching.

"Where are you fellows going?" he cried, and then, in a lower tone, he added, "We've got to get out of here in a hurry, for they are in this very town and looking for us. I've just come from their boat."

"Who have they left aboard?" asked Grimshaw.

"Only a child," was the answer.

"Let us take a look at it, then, so we will know it as well as you the next time we see it."

So Mr. Gilder went back to point out the *Whatnot* to his companions, and when they sprang aboard and began to cast off the lines that held it to the levee he followed them, with a vague idea of protecting Sabella.

The next moment, Solon, who had just finished hitching up Reward, was startled by the ringing of the engine-room bell. It was the signal to go ahead. Thinking that the others must have returned and were ready to start, he obeyed it. Thus the *Whatnot*, in full possession of the "river-traders," moved slowly out into the stream, and again started in pursuit of the raft she had followed for so long.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DISASTROUS COLLISION.

The running off with that boat from the waterfront of a city in broad daylight was a bold thing to do. But these men were accustomed to taking desperate risks, and had done many more reckless things than this in the course of their lawless careers; besides, they expected to overtake the raft within an hour or so, when they would send the boat back to its owner, or leave it where he could find it. They did not yet understand the connection between Cap'n Cod, whom they knew as the proprietor of the *Whatnot*, and those who were interested in the recovery of the raft. That made no difference, however. It was enough that this boat had been used in their pursuit, and that by taking it they might delay this pursuit until they should recover the raft and make good their escape. Besides, it happened to be the only available boat lying at the levee just then, and they would have taken it even though they had been obliged to use force to gain its possession, so eager were they to recapture the *Venture*.

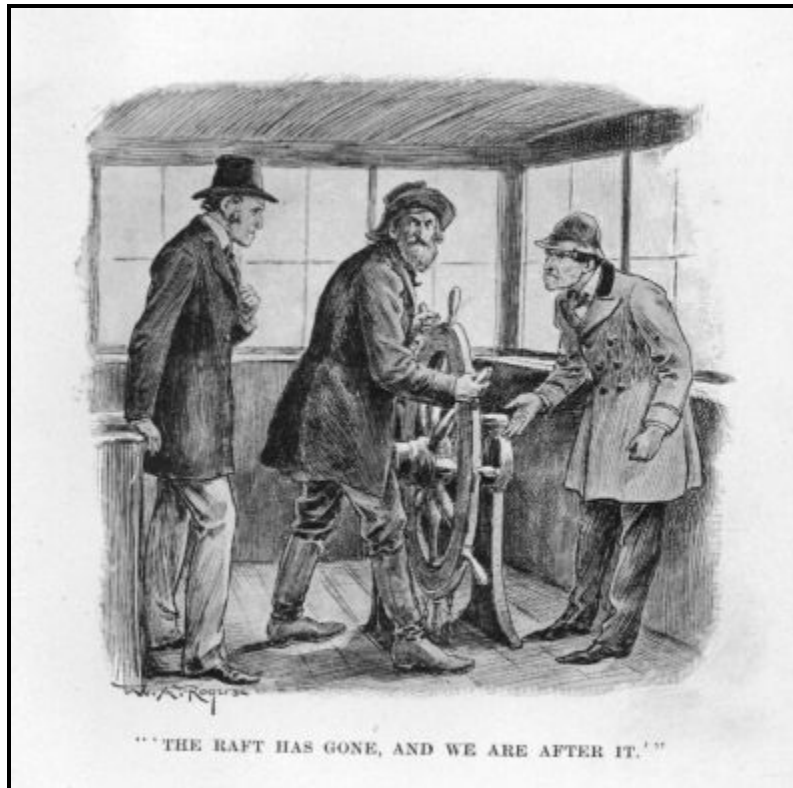
This was the reasoning of two of the "river-traders;" while the third sprang aboard because the others did, and without stopping to reason. Grimshaw made his way at once to the pilothouse, where Mr. Gilder followed him, in order to learn his plans. Plater walked aft, and through the engine-room window saw that the mule was already in his treadmill, where Solon had just completed his harnessing. Without alarming the negro by making his presence known, the big man stole away, and gaining the pilot-house, rang the engine-room bell that meant "Go ahead." To the great satisfaction of at least two of the "river-traders" this order was promptly obeyed. Within a couple of minutes the city had disappeared, and the *Whatnot* was slipping down the fog-enshrouded river.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Mr. Gilder, as he followed Grimshaw into the pilot-house. "Are you crazy that you are going off with this boat and leaving the raft behind? Or do you mean to run in to where it is, take our stuff aboard, and continue the cruise in this craft? Because if you do, you can count me out. This is too conspicuous a boat for my use. Why, man, she'll be spotted by the police inside of twenty-four hours!"

"I expect it's about time we counted you out, anyway," answered the other, gruffly. "Plater and I have about made up our minds that you are playing a double game, and had some hand in the disappearance of the raft."

"The disappearance of the raft?" exclaimed the other, blankly. "What do you mean? How did the raft disappear? And when did it disappear? And where were you, whom we left to look after it? If you have lost that raft you'll answer to me for my share in it, and I'll see that you make it good too, you sneaking--"

"Come, come, Gilder! Simmer down!" interrupted Plater, who had entered the pilot-house in time to hear these angry words. "This isn't the time nor place for us to quarrel. We've too much at stake. The raft has gone, and we are after it. That's all Grim and I know. Whatever information you can give concerning its disappearance will be gratefully received."



[Illustration: "The raft has gone, and we are after it."]

The interchange of high words that followed had almost led to blows, when Mr. Gilder suddenly became silent, and stepped quickly to the pilot-house door. He had just caught sight of Sabella holding Don Blossom in her arms, and staring through the open doorway with an expression of frightened bewilderment. She had expected to find her uncle and Billy Brackett and Winn, and had hastened to announce the joyful news of Don Blossom's safety.

Now as Mr. Gilder led her aft and down into the living-room, he strove to banish that frightened look by gentle words and reassuring promises.

"But where is my Uncle Aleck? And where are Mr. Brackett and Winn? I can't find them anywhere. Solon said they were in the pilot-house."

"They are on the raft, and we are going to find them," was the answer.

"Oh, I'm so glad they've got the raft again! And I'm glad you gave it back to them, too. Now, Winn can't say you are a bad man any longer. But you've only borrowed the *Whatnot* for a little while, haven't you?"

"Yes, only for a little while."

"I don't think those others are very nice-looking men, and I was awfully afraid until I saw you. Then I knew it must be all right."

"It is all right, little one, and there is nothing for you to be afraid of. No harm shall come to you so long as I am here, and I promise to see you safe with your friends again before leaving you. You see, I am making believe that you are my own little girl, and I want you to feel just as safe and happy as she would if she were here in your place."

"Of course I feel safe now," answered Sabella, promptly. "I have, ever since I found out it was you who had borrowed the *Whatnot*. For a minute, though, I was afraid those disagreeable--" Here the child hesitated. She did not want to hurt her new friend's feelings. "I mean," she added, hastily, "that those other gentlemen had stolen it. And I will make believe I am your own little girl, for I haven't any papa, and only one uncle in the world. I wish you would tell me your name, though. I don't think I ever knew any one so well before without knowing his name."

The man hesitated, and looked curiously at the sweet face upturned to his. Then, as though arrived at a sudden conclusion, he said,

"My name is Gresham, William Gresham, but my little girl calls me 'Papa Billy.'"

"Then we'll make a bargain!" exclaimed Sabella, joyfully. "That's the very name of Winn's uncle; and if I make believe you are my uncle, I shall have an Uncle Billy as well as he. I think that's better, too, because you know a girl couldn't have but one own papa, but she might have a hundred uncles if she wanted. So we'll make that a bargain, and I'll give you a kiss if you like, because Uncle Aleck says that's always the other part of a bargain."

With the kiss of the innocent child warm on his lips, William Gresham returned to the upper deck. His heart was very tender at that moment, and though he did not express any resolve in words, he knew that a black page of his life had just been closed, never to be reopened. He met Plater coming to find him, for he was wanted to aid in keeping the sharp lookout that the fog rendered necessary.

With all their senses alert and strained, the "river-traders" kept on for two hours without discovering a trace of the raft. Then they knew they must have passed it, and so headed the *Whatnot* up-stream again, hoping to meet it. Now they barely held their own, without making any progress, for they knew the raft would drift in the channel with the strongest current, and therefore that where the water ran swiftest they must await its coming.

Solon, fully occupied with his duties as engineer and with preparations for dinner, paid little heed to Sabella when she looked in at the galley door to inform him that her Uncle Billy said everything was all right.

"I specs so, honey, I specs so, an' of co'se hit's all right ef yo' Unc' Billy say so. Him a mighty knowin' young gen'l'man, dat ar Unc' Billy am, fo' shuah."

As the day advanced, there were occasional rifts in the fog, and in one of these Mr. Gilder, as we will still call him, caught a momentary glimpse of the raft. It was drifting at some distance to the right of them, and in a few moments would be again out of sight. His first impulse was to announce this discovery to his companions, and his second was to remain silent. He acted upon the second, and was almost doubtful if he had really seen the raft at all, so quickly did it again disappear. Suddenly there came a sound of blows, as though some one were chopping wood on board the raft.

There was an exulting shout from the pilot-house, the steering-wheel was put hard over, and the boat began to swing slowly at right angles to the current. She was headed in the direction of the raft, and Mr. Gilder knew that, owing to those ill-timed blows, it had been discovered. Yes. Now he could see it again. There it was, not a hundred yards away, and the *Whatnot* was headed so as to intercept it as it came down. What should he do? It would be foolish to struggle for possession of the wheel against the two desperate men in the pilot-house. He could stop the machinery though, or, better still, reverse it, and so give the raft a chance to drift past and again disappear in the mist. For Sabella's sake he would make the attempt.

He had already started for the lower deck, when his steps were arrested by a second shout from the pilot-house, and another sound that smote on his ear like a death-knell. It was the hoarse note of a deep-toned whistle apparently at his side. There was a jangling of bells, a wild yelling, the roar of escaping steam, and then the dim form of a great up-river packet loomed above the little craft on which he stood like some awful fog monster intent upon its destruction.

The man stood at the head of the steps leading down into the living-room, where Sabella, unconscious of the impending peril, was singing a quaint old hymn as she set the table for dinner. He had heard his mother sing that hymn when he was a boy at home. So long ago, and so far away. A second more and this sweet young life would be blotted out, and the little body, crushed beyond recognition, would be buried deep beneath the waters of the great river, while he would be safe on the lower deck of that steamboat. He could easily spring to it from the upper deck of the *Whatnot*, as he saw Plater and Grimshaw were about to do.

"I promise to see you safe with your friends again." That was what he had said, and it was to that child he had said it. In another instant the man had entered the living-room, seized Sabella in his powerful arms, and had gained the outer door on the side farthest from the steamboat.

Then came the shock. There was a moment of horrible grinding, crashing, and splintering, a mad surging of brown waters, and then the little showboat passed beneath the monster that had crushed out its life. It was gone as utterly as the flame of a candle is extinguished by a puff of wind, and the great river was its grave, as it has been of thousands of other craft, and will be of thousands yet unbuilt.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IS THIS OUR RAFT OR NOT?

So anxious was Winn Caspar for the recovery of the raft lost through his carelessness and over-confidence in his own ability that, having found it again, he could not bear to lose sight of it, even though he had no idea of how he might regain its possession. Therefore, as he stepped ashore after his rebuff by Grimshaw, he only went so far up the trail through the timber as to be concealed from the man's view. Then he darted into the undergrowth and crept back to the river-bank. He reached it just in time to see Grimshaw lock the door of the "shanty," leave the raft, and start up the trail that he himself had taken but a minute before.

How long would the man be gone? Was there any one left on the raft? These were the questions that came into the boy's mind. There was no sign of life on the *Venture*, and by running a short distance up the trail Winn became convinced that the man had gone at least as far as the edge of the timber. Would he ever again have so good a chance of recovering his father's property? Besides, what a fine thing it would be for him to recapture the raft alone, without the aid of Billy Bracket! or any one else. This latter thought decided the boy, and caused him to hastily retrace his steps.

Never had Winn been so excited! As he sprang aboard the raft and tried to cast off its fastenings he momentarily expected to hear a shout from the bank or a gruff demand from the interior of the "shanty" as to what he was about. Perhaps the summons would take the form of a pistol-shot, for men who would steal a raft and destroy a thousand dollars' worth of wheat would not be likely to hesitate at anything. At this last thought Winn seemed to feel the deadly sting of a bullet, and in his nervousness only made more intricate the knot he was trying to untie. At length he whipped out his jack-knife and cut the rope.

Now to head the raft out into the stream. He picked up a long set-pole, thrust one end into the bank, braced himself, and began to push. Oh, how he strained and panted! How the veins stood out on his forehead! Still the great mass of timber seemed immovable. Again and again he tried, and at length felt a slight yield. A more desperate effort than before, and he could take a step; then another, and another, until he had walked half the length of the pole. The head of the raft was swinging off, at first so slowly that the motion was almost imperceptible, then faster, until finally it felt the full force of the current. Now for one more effort! If he could only work her out from the bank and into the friendly shelter of the fog without discovery, he would feel safe even from pistol-shots. For two minutes Winn labored as never before in all his life. But the minutes seemed hours, and he felt that he might as well attempt to push away the bank itself as the mass of timber on which he stood. Suddenly he heard that which he expected and dreaded, a shout, so loud that it seemed to be uttered on the raft. The set-pole fell from his nerveless grasp as he looked up, fully expecting to gaze into the black muzzle of a pistol.

At first he saw--nothing. He must be turned around. No; the view of the opposite direction was equally blank. Then, for an instant, he caught a glimpse of shadowy tree-tops just dissolving into formless mist. The blessed fog had folded its protecting arms about him, and he was safe.

Hurrah! he was once more in undisputed possession of the raft, and once more floating on it down the great river.

Wildly happy, the exhausted boy flung himself down on the wet planks, and yielded to pleasant reflections. It was only twenty miles to St. Louis. The current was carrying him at the rate of five miles an hour, so that he ought to reach the city soon after noon. There he would hail some steamboat or tug, and get it to tow his raft to a safe mooring-place. Then he would telegraph to both his father and his Uncle Billy. After that he would engage some stout man to help guard the raft until his friends arrived. Or perhaps he would buy a revolver and guard it himself, and when his father and Uncle Billy came along, he would challenge them before allowing them to step on board. Yes, that would be the scheme, and the boy became very proud of himself as he thought of the praises in store for him.

At length Winn rose from his moist resting-place, and began to examine his surroundings. How strange the raft did look, to be sure. He wouldn't have believed its appearance could have been so altered, and now wondered that he had ever recognized it. In fact, the only feature that seemed at all familiar, as he studied it, was the forward gable end of the "shanty." But somehow the building itself appeared much longer than when he last saw it. Still, there was that interior. He had seen the partition, with its door leading into his own little room, and he never heard of a raft "shanty" with a partition in it until this one was built. He must have another look at that interior.

The locked door baffled him. It was of such solid construction, and its lock was so well made, that it resisted all his efforts to force it. The windows were provided with heavy wooden shutters that were fastened on the inside. For an

hour Winn busied himself with vain efforts to effect an entrance. At the end of that time he was discouraged. He was also uneasy. He had heard steamboats pass him, but could see nothing of them on account of the fog. The last one passed very close. The next might run him down. How he wished the raft were safely tied to some bank or levee. It was awful to be thus blindly drifting, right in the track of steamboats. The fog hung so low over the water that their pilots were lifted well above it, and could see the landmarks by which they were guided. They could also see other steamboats; but such things as scows and rafts had no business to be moving at such a time. They were supposed to be snugly tied up, and consequently no pilot would be on the lookout for them. Winn knew this as well as any one, and the knowledge did not tend to reassure him.

If he only had some one with him to help work the heavy sweeps by which the raft's course might be directed, or even to advise him what to do. It was dreadful to be alone. What a foolish thing he had done, after all, in attempting to manage this affair by himself. If he had only gone back for Billy Brackett. But his boyish pride in his own ability had again overcome his judgment, and now he must abide by the consequences.

"I only hope, if I do get run down and killed, they will find out who I am," thought the poor boy. "It would be horrid to disappear and have folks say I was a coward, who had run away for fear father would be angry with me for losing his raft. As if *my* father would ever do anything to make me afraid of him! And mother! How badly she would feel if I should disappear without ever giving her the comfort of knowing I was dead. There is Elta, too, and the very last time I saw her I was ugly to her. Oh dear! I wish--well, I wish, for one thing, that I could get inside that 'shanty,' and out of this miserable drizzle. I wonder if I can't pick the lock?"

Full of this new idea, Winn obtained a bit of stiff wire from the handle of a lantern that stood outside the "shanty." This he bent as well as he could into the rude form of a key, and thus equipped, he worked patiently at the lock for another hour. At length he threw away the useless implement in disgust.

"I was never cut out for a burglar, that's certain!" he exclaimed. "There's one thing I can do, though, and I will, too. I can smash down the door, and get inside that way."

An axe lay beside a pile of wood near the forward end of the raft; and armed with this, the boy began to rain vigorous blows upon the stout door. Before these it quickly yielded, and he thus gained the interior.

Once inside, he gazed about him blankly. Nothing looked familiar; nothing was as he had expected to find it. There was the partition, with a door in it, to be sure, and there was the small room beyond the main one; but there was also another partition, and another door beyond this. There had been but two rooms in the *Venture's* "shanty," while here were three. Then again the "shanty" that he had helped to build was only boarded up on the outside, while the interior had been left unceiled, with the frame exposed. The interior on which he now gazed was wholly ceiled, so as to make the walls of double thickness, and conceal every bit of the framing.

The perplexed boy noticed these details at a glance; and as he stood staring blankly about him, the uncomfortable suspicion began to force itself into his mind that perhaps this was not the *Venture* after all.

"If I have run off with some one else's raft, I declare I shall just want to disappear!" he exclaimed to himself. "I do believe I shall be too ashamed ever to go home again. Oh dear! There is another steamboat."

The notes of a deep-voiced whistle, evidently near at hand, caused the boy to hasten outside. He could see a huge confused mass dimly looming out of the fog ahead, and a little to one side of him. At the same moment he heard the wild jangling of bells, the terrified shoutings, and then the awful crash that denoted a collision. A big up-bound steamboat had run down and sunk a smaller boat of some kind. That much he could see, and he was filled with horror at the nearness and magnitude of the disaster.

He had heard agonized screams, and knew that lives had been sacrificed. One shrill cry that came to his ears with startling distinctness sounded as though uttered by a woman or a girl, and Winn shuddered at the thought of her fate.

The raft was drifting rapidly away from the scene of the catastrophe, and the dimly discerned steamboat was just disappearing from his view, when the boy thought he heard a gurgling cry from the water. Could some bold swimmer have escaped? He bent his head to the water's edge and listened. Again he heard the cry. And this time it seemed nearer. Some human being was struggling in the river. Now, if ever, was the time for his promptest action, and with Winn thought and action went hand in hand.

In another moment he was in the skiff belonging to the raft, and pulling with all the strength of his stout young arms in the direction of the cries.

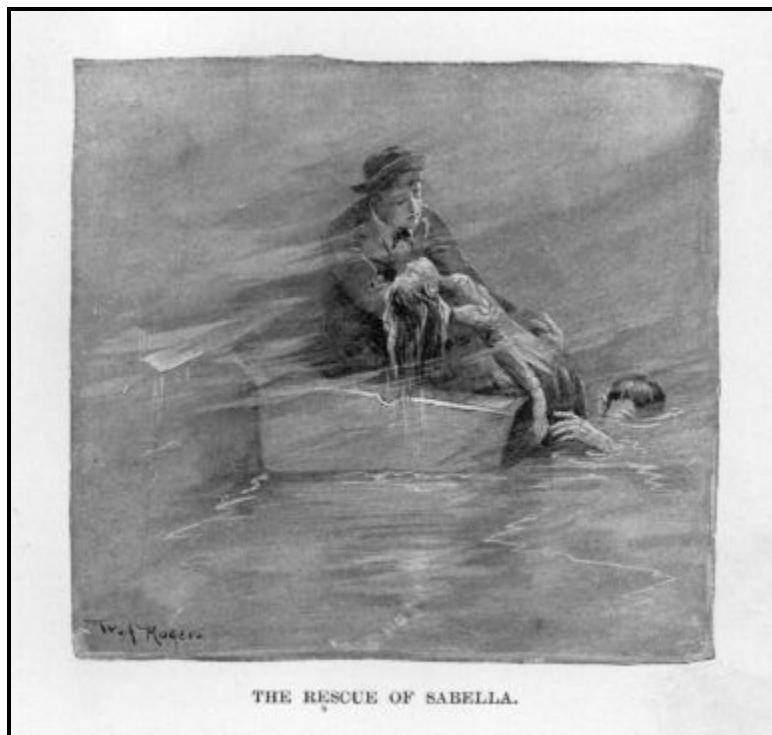
CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE RESCUE OF SABELLA.

Strongly as Winn pulled, the cries grew very faint and almost inaudible during the few seconds that elapsed before he discovered the struggling forms from which they proceeded. A glance over his shoulder showed him a man swimming with one arm, while the other supported a child--apparently a girl.

With a final powerful stroke the skiff shot alongside the drowning figures, the oars were jerked in, and Winn, leaning over the side, seized the girl's arm. At the same moment the man grasped the gunwale of the skiff. It was no slight task for Winn to get the girl into the boat, for she was unconscious, and formed a dead weight, that was made heavier by her soaked clothing. He finally succeeded; and as he laid the limp form in the bottom of the skiff and took his first good look at her face, he uttered a cry of amazement, and doubted the evidence of his senses. How was it possible that Sabella could be there, and in such a predicament? Could the boat that had just been run into be the *Whatnot*? If so, who was this man? He turned to look, and to help him into the skiff; but, to his horror, the man had disappeared.

William Gresham had redeemed his promise with his life. From a cruel wound, made by a splintered timber, he had bled so freely that his fast-failing strength was barely able to hold Sabella's head above the surface until Winn came to her rescue. He recognized the boy, and as the little girl was lifted from his arms, he closed his eyes with the peaceful expression of one who is weary and would sleep. Then his grasp of the skiff relaxed, and without a struggle he slipped across the invisible line dividing time from eternity. The hurrying waters closed about him as gently as a mother's arms, and who shall say that in his death the man had not atoned for his life, or that in the tawny flood of the great river his sin was not washed away as though it had never been?



[Illustration: The rescue of Sabella.]

As for Winn, he was overwhelmed and stunned. It was so sudden, so terrible, and so pitiful. At one moment the man was there, and in the next he was gone without a word. In vain did the boy look over both sides of the skiff and over its stern in the hope that the man might still be clinging to it. Only the swift-flowing waters met his gaze, and seemed to mock at his efforts to wrest their secret.

The man was gone; there was no doubt of that; and now came the harrowing question, who was he? Winn had not seen his face. It could not have been the owner of the *Whatnot*, because, with his wooden leg, he could not swim. It was not Solon, for the head had been that of a white man. Could it have been his mother's only brother, his Uncle Billy, the brave, merry young fellow who was to have been his raftmate? Winn had already learned to love as well as to admire Billy Brackett, though how much he had not known, until now that he believed him to be gone out of his life forever.

He tried to believe that it was some one else, but in vain. The girl whom he had just rescued was certainly Sabella, so of course the boat that he had seen crushed like an egg-shell must have been the *Whatnot*. Oh, if he had only been a little closer, or if the fog had not been so thick! The boat was almost certain to have been the *Whatnot* though, and in that case the brave swimmer, who had missed safety by a hair's-breadth must have been--

Here a moan diverted Winn's attention from his own unhappiness, and caused him to spring to the side of the little girl. She opened her eyes and looked at him. "Oh, Sabella!" he cried, "tell me who saved you? Was it Mr. Brackett--my Uncle Billy, you know?"

"My Uncle Billy," she murmured faintly; then she again closed her eyes wearily, and seemed to sleep.

"It was he, then; it was he!" And Winn, breaking down, sobbed aloud. "And all my fault that he came on this trip! My fault, my fault!" he repeated over and over again.

At length he became conscious of the selfishness of thus giving way to his feelings while Sabella was still in such urgent need of his aid.

"I must get her to the raft at once!" he exclaimed, starting up and looking about him. But there was no raft, nor was there any steamboat. There was nothing but the skiff with themselves in it, a small circle of brown water, and the fog. He had no idea of direction, not even whether his skiff was heading up-stream or down, or drifting broadside to the current. If the fog would only lift! It had been so kind to him, but now was so dreadful.

The boy took off his coat, folded it, and put it under Sabella's head. Then he sat beside her and rubbed her cold hands. He knew of nothing else that he could do for her, and so he waited--waited for the fog to lift or for help to come.

At length he began to hear sounds from every direction, the sound of whistles, bells, and hundreds of other noises. He must have reached St. Louis, and it would never do to drift past it. Besides, the danger of being run down was now greater than ever. So the boy took to his oars, and began to pull in the direction from which the loudest sound of whistles appeared to come.

Suddenly he was hailed. "Look out dar, boss!"

"Hold on!" shouted Winn. "I am in trouble, and will give you a dollar to pilot me ashore."

A skiff came alongside. It contained but a single occupant, a negro, who appeared nearly as old as Solon. He listened with open-mouthed wonder to the boy's hurriedly told story, and not only expressed a ready sympathy, but promised to have "de young gen'lman an' der lilly lady lamb on de sho' in free minutes. Ole Clod, him know de way. De frog can't fool him on desh yer ribber."

With renewed hope Winn followed closely behind his dusky pilot, and in another minute caught sight of the welcome land. It was East St. Louis, on the Illinois side of the river, at that time a great railroad terminus, and Clod's little cabin stood at the edge of high-water-mark; for he was a boatman, and gained his living from the river.

"Now, young marse, you mus' come up to my house, whar my ole 'oman fixin' de lilly gal all right in no time." So saying, the negro lifted Sabella in his strong arms and started towards his cabin, to which Winn was only too glad to follow him. The boy had never felt so utterly helpless and forlorn.

He no longer thought of taking matters into his own hands, but was thankful to accept even the humble guidance of this negro. Under the circumstances he could not have fallen into better hands. Not only was Clod strong, willing, and possessed of a shrewd knowledge gained by rough experience, but his "ole 'oman," Aunt Viney, a motherly soul of ample proportions, was accounted the best all-round nurse of the neighborhood. She was never happier than when bustling about in a service like the present; and within five minutes Sabella was nestled in the snowy centre of a huge bed, with Aunt Viney crooning over her like a brooding tenderness, and rapidly restoring the color to the child's pallid cheeks.

At the same time Winn was sitting by the kitchen stove in a cloud of steam from his own wet clothing, absorbing warmth and comfort, and relating his adventures at length to the sympathetic old man.

Clod's interest and wonder at the boy's story were shown by uplifted hands, rolling eyes, and such ejaculations as "How yo' talk, chile!" "Well, I nebber!" "Dat's so, bress de Lawd!" "Ef dat ar ain't de beatenest!"

At length Aunt Viney tiptoed heavily into the kitchen with the joyful announcement that Sabella, fully restored to consciousness, was sleeping naturally and quietly.

"When she wakin she be all right an' hongry, de honey lamb! An' I reckon dis young gen'lman hongry now, an' ef he ain't he orter be, for eatin' am de bestes t'ing in de worl' when yo' is in trouble," she added, as she bustled softly about, making preparations for a simple meal.

Winn did not think he could eat a mouthful, so full was he of grief and trouble; but on making the attempt, merely to gratify the kindly soul, found that he not only could but did dispose of as hearty a meal of bread and milk, coffee, bacon, and sweet-potatoes, as any he had ever eaten in his life. Not only that, but as his faintness from hunger disappeared his hopefulness returned, and by the time he had finished eating fully half of his troubles had vanished. He was still overwhelmed with grief at the supposed loss of his brave young uncle, but he had already resolved upon a plan of action, and felt better for having done so. He would send a telegram to his father hinting at the great sorrow that had overtaken them, and asking him to come on at once. Then he would notify the police of the collision, with its probable loss of at least three lives, and ask them to keep a watch for the bodies. He would also tell them of the lost raft.

After great searching, Clod finally produced an old pen, some very thick ink, and a few sheets of paper quite yellow with age. Then he watched with respectful admiration the writing of the telegram, for penmanship was an art he had never acquired. He offered to take the message to the telegraph office while Winn was preparing a statement for the police, and as he was evidently anxious to be of service, the boy allowed him to do so.

The nearest telegraph office was in the railway station, and as Clod approached it he found himself involved in the crowd of passengers just brought in by a newly-arrived train from the North. He dodged here and there among them, but finally, in escaping a truck-load of baggage, he stumbled over the chain by which a gentleman was leading a dog, and plumped full into the arms of a white-headed negro who was close behind it.

"Scuse me, sah!" began poor Clod, most politely. Then he stared, stammered, tried to speak, but only choked in the effort, and threw his arms about the neck of the old negro, laughing and sobbing in the same breath.

"Doesn't yo' know me, Solon?" he gasped. "Doesn't yo' know yer own br'er Clod? Doesn't yo' 'member de ole plantashun 'way down in Lou'siana, befo' de wah, an' Clod?--yo' own br'er Clod?"

Then Solon recognized his only brother, long mourned as dead, and the two old men embraced, and wept, and held each other off at arm's-length to get a better look at the other's changed but still familiar face. The hurrying passengers smiled at this spectacle at once so ridiculous and so pathetic, but good-naturedly made way for the old men, while Bim, sharing the general excitement, barked and danced about, until his chain was entangled with the legs of at least half a dozen persons at once.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BIM BRINGS ABOUT A JOYFUL MEETING.

Even with Bim's aid, Billy Brackett failed to find the man who had escaped him in Alton by running through the store and out of its back door. The young engineer was convinced that he was one of those who had stolen the raft, and it was certainly very trying to recover the trail, as he had just done, only to lose it again immediately. So loath was he to abandon the search that it was very nearly noon before he did so, and retraced his steps to the river. As he approached the place where the *Whatnot* had been moored, he was surprised not to see the boat, and turned towards a group of men, all of whom seemed to be talking at once, to make inquiries. At that moment the group opened, and from it Cap'n Cod, red-faced and anxious, came hastily stumping in his direction.

"Where is the *Whatnot*?" asked Billy Brackett.

"That's what I want to know," replied the other, excitedly. "And where have you been all this time? I have been here, and in a state of mind, for more than an hour, not knowing what to do. Some of these men say they saw three fellows go off with the boat soon after we left here, and of course I thought they must be you, Winn, and Solon; but I couldn't understand it at all. Now that you are here, I understand it still less. Where is Winn?" Here the old man paused, quite out of breath, but still questioning his companion with anxious eyes.

"I haven't seen anything of Winn since we all left the boat," replied Billy Brackett, who could hardly comprehend the startling information just given him. "Do you mean to say that the *Whatnot* has been stolen? Great Scott! I wonder if those fellows can have had a hand in it?"

"What fellows?"

Then Billy Brackett told of his fleeting glimpse of Plater, and of his consequent belief that the raft and all three of the "river-traders" must be in that vicinity.

"There's a raft, with three men aboard it, who call themselves 'river-traders,' moored at the edge of that timber, just below the city," volunteered one of the by-standers, who had overheard the young man's remarks.

"Will you go with me and point it out?" asked Billy Brackett, eagerly.

"Yes, I don't mind, seeing that this weather makes a bit of slack time," replied the man.

So requesting Cap'n Cod to wait there until his return, and promising to be back as quickly as possible, the young engineer and his guide, followed by several curiosity-seekers, started in search of the raft. It is needless to say that they failed to find it, though another hour elapsed before Billy Brackett returned. He was disappointed, but was possessed of a theory.

"I believe Winn has found that raft," he said to Cap'n Cod, as they sat together in the small hotel to which they had repaired for a consultation and dinner. "But he probably discovered it just as those fellows, alarmed at meeting me, were putting off for another run down the river. Then he hurried back here, and not finding us, took the responsibility of starting after them in the *Whatnot*, hoping in that way to keep them in sight. It was a crazy performance, though just such a one as that boy would undertake. He is a splendid fellow, with the one conspicuous failing of believing that he knows what to do under any circumstances just a little better than any one else. So he has persuaded Solon that it is their duty to keep that raft in sight until it is tied up again, and then he'll telegraph to us. It is more than likely that the raft will stop at St. Louis, in which case they must be nearly there by this time, and we ought to hear from Winn very soon. That is my theory, and now I'll run up to the telegraph office and see if a despatch has come."

There was no message for any one named Brackett, and so, after leaving word to have anything that came for him sent to the hotel, the young man hastened back. An up-river steamboat had just made fast to the levee, and the two anxious men went down to see if her pilot had seen anything of the *Whatnot*. As they approached they saw by her splintered bows that she had been in a collision. Others had noticed this also, and already a crowd of people was gathered about her gang-plank to learn the news. Forcing a way through for himself and Cap'n Cod, Billy Brackett boarded the boat, and went directly to the Captain's room.

The Captain was inclined to be ugly and uncommunicative; but, with a happy thought, Billy Brackett displayed the badge with which Sheriff Riley had provided him. At sight of it the man at once expressed his readiness to impart all the information they might require.

Yes, he had been in collision with a trading-scow, but there were no lives lost, and the damage had already been satisfactorily settled. It happened a couple of miles above St. Louis, and the fog was so thick that she was not seen until they were right on her. She was crossing the channel, and they struck her amidship, sinking her almost instantly.

Her name? Why, according to this paper, it was the *Whatnot*. Queer sort of a name, and she looked to be a queer sort of craft.

At this Billy Brackett's face grew very pale, while poor Cap'n Cod sank into a chair and groaned.

"No lives lost, you say? What then became of the people who were on board that trading-scow?"

"There were only three," answered the Captain; "her owner, a Mr. Caspar, a deck hand, and the cook, a black

fellow. The first two saved themselves by leaping aboard this boat just as she struck, and we picked the nigger up in the skiff that we immediately lowered to look for survivors."

"You say the owner was a Mr. Caspar?"

"Yes, here is the name signed to this paper. You see, though we were in no way to blame, they might have sued for heavy damages and bothered us considerably. So when her owner offered to compromise and waive all claims for three hundred dollars, I thought it was the cheapest way out of the scrape, and took him up. I had this paper prepared by a lawyer who is on board, and witnessed before a notary, so that it is all square and ship-shape. See, here is Mr. Caspar's signature."

Sure enough, there at the bottom of the paper exhibited by the Captain was the name "Winn Caspar," written clearly and boldly. It certainly looked like Winn's signature.

Billy Brackett was staggered. What could it all mean? Something was evidently wrong; but what it was he could not determine.

"Where is this Mr. Caspar now?" he asked.

"Went ashore the moment we touched here," was the reply. "Said he must hurry back to St. Louis. Took his man with him."

"Was he a young fellow; a mere boy, in fact?"

"Oh, bless you, no! He was past middle-age. Small, thin man, with a smooth face; and the other was a big man with a beard."

"And what became of the cook, the negro, whom you rescued?"

"He's down below somewhere, getting dry. I told the mate to look after him."

"But where is my niece Sabella? The little girl that was on board the *Whatnot*," asked Cap'n Cod, with a pitiful quaver in his voice.

"Little girl?" repeated the steamboat Captain, in surprise. "There wasn't any girl on board. This is the first mention I have heard of any such person, and Mr. Caspar would surely have spoken of her if she had existed. What are you men driving at, anyway?"

With a forced calmness, and ignoring this question, Billy Brackett asked if they might see the rescued negro.

"Certainly, I've no objections. Only you'll have to be sly about it, for I'm going to pull out of here inside of a couple of minutes. I only stopped to land Mr. Caspar."

They found Solon just getting into his dried clothing, and the faithful fellow's face lighted as he saw them. There was, however, a reproachful tone in his voice as he exclaimed, "T'ank de Lawd, yo' is safe, Marse Cap'n, an' Marse Brack. Ole Solon feelin' mighty bad when yo' ain't comin' to see him, an' Marse Winn too. But dese yeah folk ain't tellin' me nuffin of Missy Sabel. She gettin' saved same as de res' of us, ain't she? Say de good word, Marse Cap'n, an' don't tell de ole man dat honey lamb done got drowned. Don't tell him dat ar?"

There was no time for explanations then, so they hurried Solon ashore and up to the hotel. There his replies to their questions, and his questions in turn, only served to deepen the mystery in which the fate of the *Whatnot's* passengers had become involved. He could not be persuaded that they had not been on board at the time of the accident. Sabella had boon talking to him of what her "Uncle Billy" had just told her only a few minutes before it occurred. He was also positive that Winn had been on board the ill-fated craft. He was certain that Reward died at his post of duty, though of Don Blossom's fate he knew nothing. How he himself had escaped he could not explain, for he remembered nothing after the shock of the collision.

"It is evident," said Billy Brackett, at length, "that we must get to St. Louis as quickly as possible, and strive to unravel this mystery there."

Cap'n Cod agreed that this seemed the best thing to be done, and as there was a train about to leave for the South, they hurried to the station.

As Bim was forced to ride in the baggage-car, and his master declined to leave him, both Cap'n Cod and Solon rode there as well. All three spent the hour's run to East St. Louis in discussing the strange occurrences of the day, and trying to discover some ground for belief that either Winn or Sabella, or both, might still be alive. In this effort they met with so little success that, by the time they reached their destination, they had wellnigh abandoned all hope of ever again seeing either the boy or girl who were so dearly loved.

Poor Cap'n Cod was broken-hearted, while Billy Brackett resolutely refused to think of the sad telegram he must send back to Caspar's Mill.

If it had not been that Bim compelled them to ride in the baggage-car, they might have discovered the two "river-traders," Grimshaw and Plater, who were also on the train. Bim did discover them on the platform at East St. Louis, and he was in the act of springing towards Mr. Plater, when the old negro Clod stumbled over his chain and into Solon's arms.

In his joyful excitement at this wonderful meeting with the brother whom he had never expected to see again, Clod allowed a slip of paper to fall unheeded to the ground, and Billy Brackett picked it up. He glanced carelessly at it, and then his shout of amazement as he saw written on it the name "Winn Caspar" startled not only his companions, but every one on the station platform.

Two minutes later four excited men, accompanied by a white bull-dog straining at his chain and barking as joyfully as though he understood the whole situation, were hurrying with all speed in the direction of Clod's cabin on the river-bank.

CHAPTER XXX.

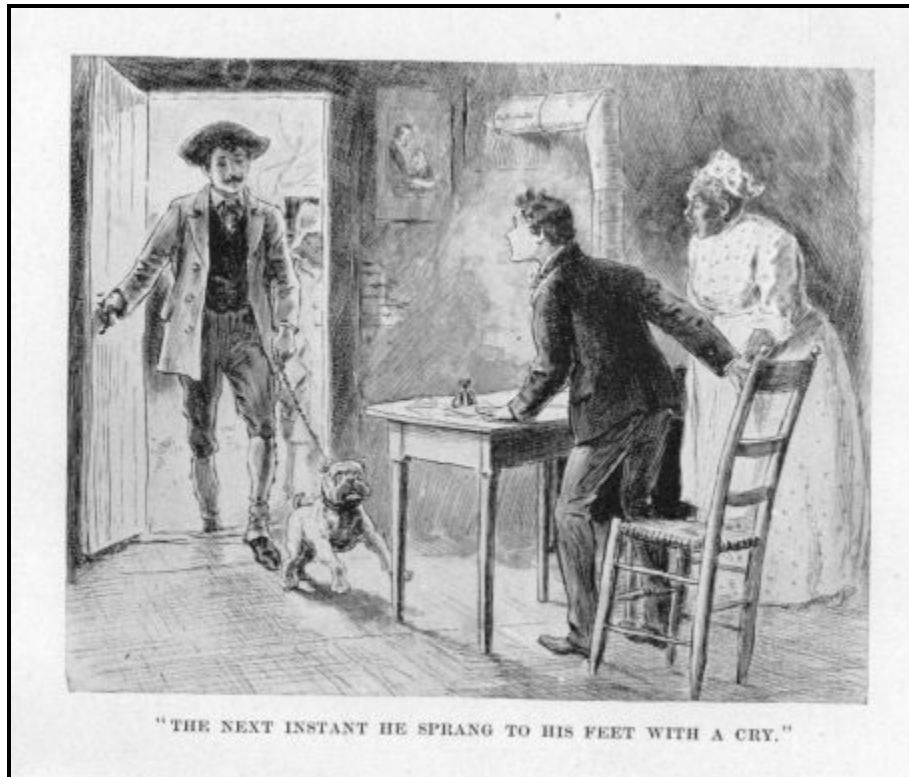
IN CLOD'S CABIN.

Aunt Viney heard Bim's joyful voice, and glancing anxiously towards the door of the room in which Sabella lay, she muttered, "Drat dat ar dorg! He sholy wake up missy wif he barkin'."

The barking did waken Sabella, and as she lifted her head to listen, she whispered wonderingly to herself, "It's Bim! It's dear old Bim. I know his voice."

Winn, bending wearily over the statement he was preparing for the police, heard the barking, and looked up with a startled expression on his troubled face. "If I didn't know that it couldn't be, I should say that was Bim's bark. Poor old dog!" he thought.

The next instant he sprang to his feet with a cry. Could the dead come to life? Could the drowned be resurrected? Could the handsome, smiling, eager figure in the doorway be that of the young uncle whose untimely death he had so truly mourned? A quick step, a joyful shout, and the two were face to face, with hand clasped in hand.



[Illustration: "The next instant he sprang to his feet with a cry."]

"It has been a terrible lesson, Uncle Billy, but I think I have learned it," said Winn.

"Thank God, my dear boy, that the experience has been gained so cheaply; for I feared it had cost you your life."

"But where is my little one, my Sabella?" asked Cap'n Cod, anxiously. "They told me she was here."

"Here I am, Uncle Aleck," came the dear voice from the inner room. Then there was another glad reunion of those who had thought never again to meet in this life; while the old man counted as nothing the loss of all he had possessed, so long as this child was left to him.

When Aunt Viney was told who Solon was, she made him a deep courtesy, and then, with tears streaming down her cheeks, she began to sing:

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him all creatures here below.
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

Before she finished the first line they were all singing with her, and never did this grand old hymn of thanksgiving find a more fervent utterance.

As for Bim, there never was a happier bull-dog in this world. He barked as long as his voice held out, and jumped up on every one, and tore wildly about the room until his chain fastened itself to a table leg. Then, with a spoke-like revolutions, he became completely wound up, and lay panting on the floor, only waiting to be released that he might again go through with the entire performance.

After comparative quiet had been restored, though every one was still talking at once, the questions arose, "Who saved Sabella? Was any one drowned? If so, who was it? Did Winn bring the *Whatnot* down the river? If not, how did he reach the scene of the catastrophe? How did the boy's signature happen to be attached to the paper in possession of the steamboat Captain?" These and a dozen other questions were asked in a breath, and then all began to answer them at once. Finally, Billy Brackett called the meeting to order, and asked each one to tell his story in turn, beginning with Cap'n Cod.

The most interesting stories, and those throwing the most light on the situation, were Winn's and Sabella's. At

first they were all puzzled to know who Mr. Gresham could have been. Then Sabella said, "Why, don't you know, Uncle Aleck? He was the one who sold you the canoe, and the one Winn said was a bad man. He brought Don Blossom back, and I told him all about Mr. Brackett and Winn and the raft and everything, and he was so glad he started right off to find them. Then he came back with two other men, and said you were all on the raft, and they borrowed the *Whatnot* to go and find you with. He was one of the very nicest and kindest and best men I ever knew, and was going to be my 'Uncle Billy,' so I could have one as well as Winn, and now he's drowned, and--"

Here the little girl began to sob bitterly, while Billy Brackett and Winn and Cap'n Cod looked at each other, and almost simultaneously pronounced the name "Gilder."

They did not speak it very loud, for the last splendid act of the man's life had won for him the right to an unstained name. Hereafter they would only remember him as William Gresham the hero.

Thus was cleared up most of the mystery that, like the fog, had enveloped the proceedings of that memorable day.

Now what was to be done next? Where was the raft, and was it the *Venture* or not? At one moment Winn was certain that it was, while the next found him again doubtful.

At length it was decided that Solon should remain with his brother for the present, while the others should go to a hotel in the city across the river. From there Billy Brackett would telegraph to the authorities of towns farther down, asking them to watch for an abandoned raft, and if they found it to hold it until he could go on and prove ownership. The raft being described as belonging to a Major Caspar, Winn's name was signed to all these despatches, in order to prevent confusion.

From the hotel Billy Brackett also thought it best to telegraph Major Caspar of their safe arrival in St. Louis, though, as they had not yet recovered the raft, it would be unnecessary for him to come on, and a promise to write full particulars at once. In the Major's absence from home this despatch was opened by Mrs. Caspar, who had been growing very anxious of late concerning the voyagers on the great river. The moment she read it she sat down and wrote another despatch to her husband, who was in Chicago. It was:

"Raftmates in St. Louis. Southern Hotel. Please join them immediately."

"Just ten words," she said to herself, with a complacent sigh, as she handed this to the waiting messenger. "Now if John acts promptly, he may catch those crazy boys before they have the chance to start off on any other absurd expedition. I only hope to goodness that he'll have the sense to bring them home, and let that wretched raft drift where it likes."

Major Caspar could not start for St. Louis the next day, but he did so on the following morning, and late that same evening he walked into the office of the Southern Hotel. He was beginning to make inquiries at the desk, when his hand was seized and violently shaken. Turning quickly, he at once recognized his faithful old army friend Cap'n Cod, and gave him a cordial greeting.

"But where are the others?" he inquired at length.

"Gone down the river an hour ago, by the Short Line," was the unexpected reply. "You see, we only got word this evening that an abandoned raft, answering our description, had just been picked up near Cairo, and Mr. Brackett thought it best that he and Winn should go on at once to identify it. It was also decided that Sabella and I should remain here until we heard from them, because it might not be the *Venture*, you know, and then I'm not sure that we want to go any farther down the river, anyway. You see, since losing the *Whatnot*, I've rather lost interest--"

"Losing the *Whatnot*!" interrupted the Major. "What do you mean?"

"Why, haven't you heard?" Then they sat down, and the old man related all that had happened to the *Whatnot* and her passengers since leaving Dubuque.

When the recital was ended, the Major drew a long breath, and exclaimed, "Well, for mysterious happenings, incidents, and rapid changes of scene, that beats anything in the line of Mississippi rafting that ever I heard of. So now they are off again, and goodness knows what scrapes they will get into next; while here I am, as helpless to prevent them as an old hen with a brood of ducklings. There is one thing I can do, though. I must return to Caspar's Mill at once, and I want you and your niece to go with me. With my recently increased business, I need just such a man as

you to look after my home interests, while my daughter Elta, needs just such a girl as your Sabella is described to be for a companion."

Tears stood in the old soldier's eyes as he realized all that this offer meant to him and to the girl who was so dear to him; and, in accepting it, he blessed the kindly heart by which it had been prompted.

The Major sent a despatch to the address in Cairo left by Billy Brackett, directing that young man to dispose of the raft as he thought best, to take care of Winn, come home as soon as they could, and telling of his plans for Cap'n Cod and Sabella. He also telegraphed to Mrs. Caspar that he should be at home the next day but one, bringing strangers with him.

She, of course, thought he meant the "raftmates," as she had called Winn and Billy Brackett from the first, and was amazed to see an old man and a young girl seated in the carriage with her husband as it drove up to the house. At first she was greatly disappointed, but within a few days she became reconciled to the new arrangement, for she could not help loving the gentle old man who was so fond of her boy, nor rejoicing in the warm friendship that almost immediately sprang up between Elta and Sabella.

In the mean time Billy Brackett and Winn reached Cairo early in the morning, and after breakfast at a hotel, they called on the City Marshal, who had sent the despatch relating to the raft. To their surprise, he received them coldly, and informed them that Mr. Caspar had already been there, had expressed his willingness to pay a hundred dollars reward for the recovery of his raft, and had just gone down to take possession of it.

This was an astounding bit of information, and Winn was about to let his rapidly rising indignation break forth, when Billy Brackett restrained him, and asked, mildly, if the Marshal had any objections to their looking at the raft in question simply to gratify their curiosity.

"Oh no. You can look at her as much as you like, and you will find her just around the point there, in possession of the two young men who picked her up--that is, if they haven't already turned her over to her rightful owner."

Again Winn would have exploded, but again his companion restrained him, at the same time leading him from the office.

They found the raft without much difficulty, and walked on board. Just then the broken door of the "shanty" opened, and two young fellows, hardly older than Winn, stepped out. As they did so one of them turned and said, politely, "Well, good-bye, and a pleasant voyage to you, Mr. Caspar." Then they both faced the new-comers.

Such an expression of blank amazement as flashed over their faces Winn thought he had never seen. For an instant they stood spellbound. Then there was a yell of recognition, or rather a chorus of yells from both sides.

"Billy Brackett, as I'm a sinner! Whoop! Hooray for the Baldheads and the Second Division!"

"Billy Brackett, or his ghost!"

"Glen Eddy! Grip, old man! How? When? Where? Why?"

"Oh, gimminy crack, come hold me tight.
It makes me laugh and shout.
It fills my heart with gay delight
When--"

CHAPTER XXXI.

CAMPMATES TURN RAFTMATES.

"Wow wow w-o-w-w!" howled Bim, with his ridiculous nose uplifted and a most melancholy expression of countenance. He felt in duty bound to accompany his master's singing, but on this occasion, at least, he brought it to a sudden conclusion, for no one could possibly sing in face of the uproarious laughter that greeted his outburst.

"That's always the way," remarked Billy Brackett, with a comical expression. "I never am allowed to prove what I

am really capable of in the vocal line. But what are you boys doing here? Where did you come from, where are you going, and how in the name of all that is obscure and remarkable do you happen to be on board our raft?"

"Your raft?" echoed Glen Elting. "What do you mean by your raft? We called it our raft until a few minutes ago, and now we call it Mr. Caspar's raft."

"Yes, I know. Major Caspar's raft. But it's all the same as ours, for I am his brother-in-law, and have his written authority to dispose of it as I see fit. Besides, this is his son, and we have been hunting this raft for the best part of a month. By-the-way, Winn, these are two old, or rather two young, campmates of mine, Mr. Glen Eddy--I mean Matherson; no, I beg pardon--Elting is the name at present, I believe."

"Do you know him intimately?" interrupted Winn, slyly.

Billy Brackett made a dive at the boy, but as the latter leaped nimbly aside, he continued: "And Mr. Binney Gibbs, popularly known as 'Grip.' Gentlemen, this impudent young vil-ly-an is my nephew, Mr. Winn Caspar."

Instead of acknowledging this introduction, Glen and Binney looked curiously at each other. Then the former said, "There seems to be something wrong here, Billy, for we have just turned this raft over to its owner, Mr. Winn Caspar, and he is in the house here at this moment."

"That's all right," replied Billy Brackett. "I rather expected to find that gentleman here, and now we will go inside for an interview with him." So saying, he tried to open the door, but found it fastened. In spite of its splintered condition, it was secured so firmly that it took them several minutes to force it open. When this was accomplished, and an entrance was effected, the four gazed blankly about them and at each other. The large room was empty. So were the two smaller ones beyond, while an open window in the last showed the manner in which Messrs. Plater and Grimshaw had effected their escape.

"It's too bad," said Billy Brackett; "for having had several interesting interviews with those gentlemen, I should have been glad of another. I think Winn would have been pleased to meet his namesake too."

"Indeed I should," replied the boy. "I'd like to collect rent for the use of my signature, and find out where he learned to copy it so perfectly."

"But I don't understand all this at all," said Glen Elting. "If this raft isn't theirs, why did they want it badly enough to pay three hundred dollars reward for its recovery?"

"Whom did they pay it to?" asked Billy Brackett.

"A hundred to the City Marshal, and a hundred each to Binney and me. We didn't want to take it, but they insisted, and said they should feel hurt if we refused. So, of course, rather than hurt their feelings-- But really, Billy, they are most gentlemanly fellows, and I think behaved very handsomely."

"Will you let me see the hundred dollars they gave you?" asked the young engineer.

"Certainly," replied Glen, with an air of surprise, and adding, rather stiffly, "though I didn't think, Billy, that *you* would require proof of my truthfulness."

"I don't, my dear boy, I don't!" exclaimed Billy Brackett. "I would believe your unsupported word quicker than the sworn statement of most men. I want to look at that money for a very different purpose."

So a roll of brand-new bills was handed to him, and he examined them one by one with the utmost care.

"There are two hundred dollars here," he said at length. "Is this Binney's share of the reward as well as your own?"

"No. I had a hundred-dollar bill, and Mr. Caspar seeing it, asked if I would mind taking small bills for it, as he wanted one of that amount to send off by mail; so, of course, I let him have it."

"Oh, my children! my children!" murmured Billy Brackett, "why will you persist in attempting to travel through this wicked world without a guardian? Of all the scrapes from which I have been called to rescue you, this might have proved the most serious."

"I don't see how," said both Glen and Binney.

Winn knew, and he smiled a little self-complacent smile as he reflected, "This is a little worse than any mess I ever got into."

"You would have seen quickly enough if you had tried to spend this money," said Billy Brackett, "for you would undoubtedly have been arrested on the charge of counterfeiting. Those same fellows put Winn here in that fix a short time since, besides getting away with a thousand dollars' worth of wheat that he had in charge, and now they have come very near serving you the same trick."

Here Winn's smile faded away rather suddenly, while Glen exclaimed,

"Do you mean to say that these bills are counterfeit?"

"I do," replied Billy Brackett; "and if you doubt it, take them to the first bank you come across and ask the cashier."

"But the City Marshal took some just like them," argued Glen, catching at the only straw of hope in sight.

"So much the worse for the City Marshal, and I for one shall let him suffer the consequences. He had no business to accept a reward for performing a simple act of duty, in the first place; and in the second, the readiness with which he delivered this raft to the first claimants who came along makes it look very much as though he could be bribed."

"Well," said Glen, in a despairing tone, "if what you say is true, and I know it must be, we are in a fix. That hundred dollars was to pay our expenses to New Orleans; now I don't know how we shall get there."

"New Orleans! Are you bound for New Orleans?"

"Yes, and that's how we happened to be here, and to find this raft. You see, my father, General Elting, you know, is going to Central America to make a survey for the Nicaragua Canal, and Binney and I are to go with him. The party is to sail from New Orleans some time in January, but he had to go to New York first. As there were a lot of instruments and heavy things to be sent to New Orleans, he thought it best to ship them by boat; and as we wanted to take the river trip, he let us come in charge of them. We knew we should have to transfer from the Ohio River boat at this point, but we didn't know until we got here that we must wait three days for the New Orleans packet. As there wasn't anything else to do, we have put in the time hunting and fishing, and last evening we ran across this abandoned raft about a mile up the Mississippi. We had a time getting it in here, I can tell you. When we did, and reported it to the City Marshal, he showed us a telegram from a Mr. Winn Caspar, asking him to look out for just such a raft. We knew this must be the one, for we had found this book lying on the table, with the name 'Winn Caspar' written all over the fly-leaf, as though some one had been practising the signature. Sure enough, a man who said his name was 'Winn Caspar' turned up this morning, bringing a friend with him. They told a straight enough story of how their raft had been stolen near St. Louis, and described it perfectly. They even described the interior of this 'shanty' and everything in it, including this identical book, as though they had lived here all their lives. So, of course, both the Marshal and we thought it was all right; and I don't see even now, if this is your raft, how those fellows knew all about it as they did. The only thing they slipped up on was the broken door, and they owned they couldn't account for that. It seems as if some one must have boarded the raft before we did and broken into the 'shanty.' The men said there wasn't anything missing, though. Perhaps you can tell us what has been stolen."

"No," replied Billy Brackett, "I can't tell that, but I can tell who broke in that door. I can also relate a tale of adventure and misadventure in connection with this raft that would excite the envy of any member of the Second Division, including even the Baldheads, and you, who were the most reckless young scapegrace of the lot."

Whereupon the young engineer told these interested listeners the whole history of the *Venture* from the time the raft was put together down to the present moment. In it he included the *Whatnot*, Cap'n Cod, Sabella, Solon, Reward, and Don Blossom, Sheriff Riley, the "river-traders," Clod, Aunt Viney, and, above all, Bim, who barked loudly, and rushed wildly about the room at this honorable mention of his name.

When the story was finished, Glen Elting heaved a deep sigh, and said to Winn, "Well, you have had a good time. I thought we had about the best times any fellows could have when we crossed the plains with Billy Brackett last year, but it seems to me that you are having just about as much fun right here on this muddy old river as we had out there. I only wish we had a raft." Then turning to Billy Brackett, he asked, "What are you going to do next?"

"I don't know," was the reply. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Then lend me your ears. You want to get to New Orleans, and so do we."

"Do we?" interrupted Winn, in surprise, looking up from the book of travels on the title-page of which his name was written so many times, and which was the very one he had been reading the last evening he had spent on this raft.

"You do!" exclaimed both Glen and Binney.

"Certainly," was the calm reply. "It is the only market for timber rafts that I know of south of St. Louis, and as we can't go back, we are bound to go ahead. So, as I was saying when rudely interrupted, both you and we want to go to New Orleans. You have no money--real money, I mean--with which to get there, and we need at least two extra pair of hands to help us get this raft there. So why not ship your stuff on board here, and help us navigate this craft to our common destination?"

"Do you truly mean it, Billy Brackett?"

"I truly mean it. And if you are willing to go as raftmates with us--"

"Are we willing? Well, I should smile! Are we willing? Why, Billy Brackett, we'd rather go to New Orleans as raftmates with you and Winn Caspar than to do anything else in the whole world just at present. Eh, 'Grip'?"

"Well, rather!" answered Binney Gibbs.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE "RIVER-TRADERS" ATTEMPT TO REGAIN POSSESSION.

So it was settled that the three who had been campmates together on the plains should now, with Winn Caspar to complete the quartet, become raftmates on a voyage of nearly a thousand miles down the great river. It is hard to say which of the four was happiest during the busy day that followed the making of this arrangement. Winn was overjoyed at recovering the raft lost through his over-confidence in his own wisdom, and at the prospect of taking a trip so much longer than he had anticipated at the outset. He had also conceived a great fancy for the two manly young fellows whose fortunes had become so strangely connected with those of the *Venture*, and was glad they were to be his companions on the voyage.

Billy Brackett was not only rejoiced that he had at length been successful in finding both Winn and the raft, but was delighted to meet again those with whom he had already shared so much of peril and pleasure. That they had again become his mates in such a peculiar manner, and amid such different scenes, was proof, as he quaintly expressed it, that "Truth can give the most expert fiction points, and still beat it at its own game."

Glen and Binney were raised from a depth of dismay, caused by the loss of their money and the resulting predicament into which they were thrown, to a height of felicity at the prospect of a raft voyage down the Mississippi, under the leadership of their beloved campmate, Billy Brackett. They also liked Winn; and, judging from what had already happened to him, regarded him as a boy in whose company a variety of adventures might reasonably be hoped for.

Owing to their past experience with the "river-traders," Billy Brackett and Winn were somewhat uneasy at the presence of Grimshaw and Plater in town, and their manifest desire to regain possession of the raft. They were puzzled by this, and wondered what reason the men could still have for wanting the raft. Certainly their connection with it was now too well known for them to hope to make any further use of it in pursuing their unlawful business. Nor did it seem likely that they would choose it merely as a conveyance down the river. No; it must be that they had hoped to sell the *Venture*, and realize a considerable sum by the transaction. This was the conclusion finally reached by our raftmates, though it was not one with which they were entirely satisfied.

Still, they felt that, as they were now four to two, they might reasonably hope to be left in undisturbed possession of the raft for the future, and so did not allow thought of the "river-traders" to trouble them to any great extent. They decided that two of them should stay constantly on board the raft, at least so long as they remained in that locality, and that Bim should also be added to the protective force.

To begin with, Binney and Winn remained on guard while Billy Brackett and Glen went into the town to telegraph for Solon, send down the instruments, and make other arrangements for the voyage. It had been decided that as their crew was incomplete without a cook, Solon should be sent for, and that they could not make a start until he arrived, which would probably be early the next morning.

Winn and Binney found plenty to occupy them during the absence of the others in becoming acquainted, learning each other's history, and arranging the interior of the "shanty." From Binney, Winn learned what a splendid fellow his young uncle was, and how much he was respected as well as admired by all who were so fortunate as to be counted among his friends. "He is a fellow," concluded Binney, "who couldn't do a mean thing if he tried. One thing I like especially about him is that he is just as careful in his attention to trifles, if they come in the line of his duty, as he is to big things, and Billy has already had some pretty important positions too, I can tell you. He is full of fun, and was the life and soul of the Second Division all the time they were crossing the plains. Glen knows him better than I do, though, because they were 'bunkies' together, and from what he has told me I regard myself as mighty lucky to have the chance of taking a trip in his company."

"He has told me a good deal about you and Glen on that trip," said Winn, "but I don't remember hearing anything about his own adventures."

"That's just what makes fellows like him. He is always ready to listen to what they have to say, or to tell of anything they have done, if it is worth telling; but he never puts himself forward as one who knows it all or has done it all and can't be taught anything."

This conversation set Winn to thinking, with the result that in one instance, at least, he had been too hasty in his conclusions. He had been somewhat ashamed that his uncle should act the part of showman with a river panorama, and had supposed that it was done from a desire to display his own accomplishments. Now he wondered if, after all, this was not the one delicate and unobtrusive way in which Cap'n Cod's poor little undertaking could have been saved from a ridiculous and mortifying failure. He had been inclined to regard his young relative as rather frivolous; but perhaps there were depths to Billy Brackett's character that he was not yet wise enough to fathom. He would study it more carefully hereafter, and how doubly thankful he now was that his chance to do so had not been lost with the wreck of the *Whatnot*.

Although the interior of the *Venture's* "shanty" still seemed unfamiliar to Winn, he could no longer doubt that the raft was his father's. In the small room that he was to have occupied he now found most of his own possessions just where he had left them. Among the things that he was particularly glad thus to find were several changes of clothing, of which he stood greatly in need.

The "shanty" was in great disorder; but the two boys worked so faithfully at sweeping, cleaning, and putting things to rights, that by the time the others returned with a dray-load of freight the interior was thoroughly clean and inviting. The afternoon was spent in laying in a store of provisions for the voyage, repairing the splintered door, and mending one of the sweeps, which was on the point of breaking.

By sunset everything was in readiness for a start, and all hands were gathered about the galley stove, each superintending the cooking of his specialty for supper. Billy Brackett could make griddle-cakes, or "nip-naps," as he called them. He fried them in an iron spider, and the deftness with which he turned them, by tossing them in the air, so excited the admiration of his raftmates that they immediately wished to engage him as regular cook for the trip.

"This isn't a circumstance to what I can do in the culinary line," remarked Billy Brackett, modestly. "To know me at my best, you ought to be around when I make biscuit. My heavy biscuit are simply monuments of the baker's art. They are warranted to withstand any climate, and defy the ravaging tooth of time. They can turn the edge of sarcasm, and have that quality of mercy which endureth forever. A quartz-crusher turns pale at sight of them, and they supply a permanent filling for aching voids or long-felt wants. In fact, gentlemen, it is universally acknowledged that my biscuit can't be beat."

"Neither can a bad egg," said Glen, who was trying to make an omelet.

"Let us defer the biscuit for this time, and have a smoking dish of corn-meal mush instead," suggested Winn. "It is

one of the hardest things in the world to cook, but I know the trick to perfection."

"Mush, mush, mush, tooral-i-addy," sang Binney. At that moment Bim began to growl, and to sniff at the bottom of the door. They opened it and looked out. No one was there, nor did they hear a sound. Darkness had already set in, and they could see nothing. Bim ran to the edge of the raft, barked once or twice, and then returned to his place near the stove.

"It must have been your singing that excited him, Grip," remarked Billy Brackett. "He generally acts that way when a person sings, and I have heretofore attributed it to envy, though I don't see how it could have been in this case."

After supper Billy Brackett went into town to call on the telegraph operator, with whom he had established friendly relations, and to receive some despatches that he was expecting. He had not been gone long before Bim, who had been left behind, again began to show signs of uneasiness, and intimate a desire to be let out.

Again the door was opened for him, and again he rushed out into the darkness. This time retreating footsteps and the rustling of bushes on the bank were distinctly heard. With a low growl Bim sprang ashore and disappeared. The next instant the boys saw a flash of lantern-light a few rods below the raft, heard a smothered yelp, the sounds of a confused struggle, and a moment later a loud splash in the water. Then all was again buried in darkness and silence.

"Something has happened to Bim!" exclaimed Winn, in a low but excited tone, "and I am going to find out what it is." With this the boy leaped ashore, and hurried in the direction from which the sounds had come.

"It's a mighty foolish thing to do, but you sha'n't go alone," said Glen Elting, quietly, as he started after Winn, adding, as he left the raft, "You stay behind and stand guard, Binney."

The boy, thus suddenly left alone, stood guard for about fifteen seconds, when all at once two dark figures sprang aboard the raft from the bank, and he had barely time to utter a single cry of warning before he was engaged in a furious struggle with one of them, who had seized him from behind.

"Drop him overboard!"

Although the command was given in a low tone, Binney heard and understood it. Then the strong arms in which he was struggling lifted him as they would a child, and bore him towards the edge of the raft.



[Illustration: "The strong arms lifted him as they would a child."]

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHERE IS BIM?

Billy Brackett was in a particularly contented frame of mind, and whistled softly to himself as he tramped through the muddy streets of one of the muddiest cities in the United States, towards the telegraph office. He was well satisfied with the results of his expedition thus far, and with its prospects of a successful termination. He did not notice the curious looks with which several persons regarded him as the bright light from a store window fell on his face, nor would he have cared if he had. His conscience was clear, and he had nothing to fear from observation, curious or otherwise.

As he entered the telegraph office, the operator glanced up with a nod of recognition. A few seconds later, having finished sending the despatch with which he had been busy, he turned his key over to an assistant and said,

"Will you step this way a moment, sir? I wish to speak to you in private." With this he led the way into a room behind the office, where, after the other had entered, he closed the door.

"What's up?" asked the young engineer, wondering at these proceedings.

"Have you or any of your companions any counterfeit money in your possession?" asked the operator, abruptly.

"No--that is, yes. One of my friends has quite a lot of it that was passed on him for genuine this morning, and I

have a few samples for purposes of comparison."

"But you haven't passed, or tried to pass, any of it in this place?"

"Certainly not! Why do you ask such a question?"

"Because I have taken a liking to you. Have not you in your possession a note of identification from a certain Iowa Sheriff?"

"Yes; I have such a note from a Sheriff named Riley, of Dubuque; but how did you know anything about it?" asked Billy Brackett, greatly surprised.

"In a very simple way. Sheriff Riley happens to be my brother, and he wrote to me all about your little affair up the river. So I know you to be an honest man, and want to give you a warning. You may be very sure, however, that I should not do so were I not confident of your innocence."

"Innocence of what?"

"Passing counterfeit money. A good bit of it has suddenly appeared in circulation here, and your raft has been identified by some men from up-river as one on which suspicion has already fallen in connection with a similar state of affairs elsewhere. You have made a good many purchases to-day, and at least one bad bill has been traced directly to you. Of course you may have received it in change, and passed it again unknowingly. I believe that is how it happened. If I did not, I should hold my tongue and let you suffer the consequences. In addition to this, all sorts of queer stories regarding you have been circulated about town to-day, and such a feeling has been aroused against you that a number of the worst characters in the place have determined to pay your raft a visit to-night. I don't know what they intend doing, nor do I think they know themselves, but I am certain if they find you the result will be most unpleasant. They are to be led by a couple of strangers, who have been secretly watching you all day. These men claim to be 'river-traders,' who have suffered serious losses through you, including that of the raft now in your possession, which, they say, was stolen from them. I can't tell you how I gained all this information, but it is at your disposal. If I were in your place, I would take advantage of the darkness to drop down the river, and I wouldn't lose any time about it either."

"You advise me to run away like a coward, instead of remaining to defend myself against these abominable and absolutely unfounded charges!" exclaimed Billy Brackett, indignantly. "I shall do nothing of the kind."

"Not 'run away;' simply continue your voyage before it is unpleasantly interrupted," returned the other, with a smile. "If you remain until morning, your raft, with its contents, will certainly be destroyed by an unreasoning mob, at whose hands you and your companions may suffer bodily injury. In this case action would come first and inquiry afterwards. I am convinced you could easily prove your innocence, but doubt if you could obtain any redress for the losses you would have suffered in the mean time. Now I must get back to my desk. You will of course act as you think best, but I sincerely hope that you will accept my advice, and decide that an honorable retreat is better than a lost battle."

"But there is Solon, the man whom I telegraphed to join us here. I don't expect him before morning."

"Why, he is here already! Haven't you met him! He arrived on the evening train, and came in here to inquire where you could be found. I gave him directions, and started him off not fifteen minutes ago."

"I don't see how he managed it," said Billy Brackett, who had been thinking rapidly while the other spoke; "but if he is already on board there is no reason why our departure should be delayed. Therefore I am almost inclined to accept your advice, for which, as well as for your timely warning, I am sincerely grateful. I will, at any rate, get back to the raft at once."

With this the young man shook hands with the operator, and left the office.

"There!" exclaimed the other, looking after him with a relieved sigh; "I believe I have done that young fellow a good turn. At the same time I have given myself a chance to capture the thousand-dollar reward that Ned wrote about, and which I was afraid this chap was after for himself."

As for Billy Brackett, the more he reflected upon the situation, as he hastened towards the place where the raft was moored, the more puzzled he became as to what course he ought to pursue. He now had not only Winn, the raft, and himself to consider, but Glen and Binney, and the valuable instruments belonging to General Elting. Certainly it would not do to allow these to fall into the hands of an excited and irresponsible mob. Still, the thought of running

away was hateful.

As he neared the raft an undefined apprehension caused him to quicken his steps; and at the sound of Binney Gibbs's shout of warning, he broke into a run. Then he heard another shout of "Hol' on, Marse Winn! I comin'!" and the noise of a struggle, in another moment he was in the thick of it.

Solon had reached the raft just in time to save Binney, who he thought was Winn, from being dropped overboard by Plater, the "river-trader." The old negro attacked the big man so furiously with tooth and nail that the latter gave the lad in his arms a fling to one side, sending him crashing with stunning force against the "shanty," and devoted his entire attention to this new assailant. He had just stretched Solon on the deck with a vicious blow of his powerful fist, when Billy Brackett appeared and sprang eagerly into the fray. Even Plater's brute strength was no match for the young engineer's science, and the latter would have gained a speedy victory, had not Grimshaw, who had been engaged in casting off the lines that held the raft to the bank, come to his partner's assistance.

Now, with such odds against him, Billy Brackett was slowly but surely forced backward towards the edge of the raft. In another moment he would have been in the river, when all at once two dripping figures emerged from it, scrambled aboard, and with a yell like a war-whoop, ranged themselves on the weaker side. A few well-planted blows, a determined rush, and the struggle for the possession of the raft was ended. The fighting ardor of Messrs. Plater and Grimshaw was being rapidly cooled in the icy waters through which they found themselves swimming towards the shore. At the same time the *Venture* was gaining speed with each moment, as, borne on by the resistless current, it drifted out over the mingling floods of the Ohio and Mississippi. Billy Brackett, still panting from his exertions, was bending over Binney Gibbs, who was struggling back to consciousness. Solon was sitting up, tenderly feeling of his swollen features, and declaring, "Dat ar man hab a fis' lak de hin laig ob a mewel."

Glen and Winn had manned one of the sweeps, and were trying to get the raft properly headed with the current. Thus the voyage was really begun, and the young engineer, who hated to run away, was spared the necessity of making a decision. It was a start, too, with all hands on board. To be sure, two of them were battered and bruised, while two more were soaked to the skin; but all were there, and none was greatly the worse for the recent exciting experience.

Suddenly Billy Brackett spoke up and asked:

"But where is Bim? Is it possible that we have left him behind?"

For a moment no one answered. Then Winn said: "That's what Glen and I were ashore for. We are afraid he is lost."

"Lost! Bim wouldn't get lost! He has too much sense."

"I expect he is this time, though," said Glen, "and we don't believe he will ever be found again, either." Then he told of Bim's rushing ashore, the smothered yelp, the loud splash that followed, and of their unsuccessful search for him in the darkness. "So it looks as though the poor dog were done for," concluded Glen, "and I expect it was by a trick of those same fellows who tried to capture the raft."

Billy Brackett listened closely, without a word, and when he had heard all there was to tell, he turned abruptly away and walked into the "shanty," muttering through his clinched teeth, "The scoundrels."

It certainly would have gone hard with the "river-traders" could the stalwart young engineer have laid hands on them at that moment.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A BLAZE ON THE RIVER.

As Messrs. Plater and Grimshaw will not appear again in this story, it may be as well to dismiss them at once. The well-conceived and desperate effort to gain possession of the raft just described was their last attempt in that direction. They had watched Billy Brackett leave it, had enticed the ever-faithful Bim from it, and when, from a place of concealment, they heard two of its remaining defenders go ashore in search of the brave dog, their satisfaction was complete. Now they were sure of the prize for which they were willing to risk so much. Stealing silently to the raft

without attracting Binny Gibbs's attention, they leaped aboard, proceeded to dispose of him, and at the same time to set the *Venture* adrift. Had not Binney's shout guided Solon to the scene, success would have crowned their efforts.

The old negro was not a fighter by nature, but in defence of those he loved he could be bold as a lion. Consequently he rushed to the rescue of the boy whom he supposed was Winn Caspar without hesitation, and careless of the odds against him. His coming, followed so quickly by that of Billy Brackett and the arrival of the two boys, turned the tide of battle. Glen and Winn were compelled to plunge overboard and swim for the raft, as it was already a rod or so from shore when they regained the place where it had been tied.

The "river-traders" were unwillingly compelled to take the same plunge a moment later, and as they swam towards the shore, which, fortunately for them, was still near at hand, their hearts were filled with bitterness at their defeat, while plans for future vengeance were already forming in their minds. But these were never carried out, for the reason that, as they were making their dripping way into town, they came across the mob bent on a deed of destruction that they themselves had instigated. With it was Joe Riley, the operator, and as these were the very men he was most desirous of meeting just then, he persuaded his associates to devote a few minutes of attention to them.

As a result of this interview with one who knew so much about them and their business, their career as "river-traders" ended then and there. A few days later they left Cairo in company with Sheriff Riley, of Dubuque, who had come down the river on purpose to escort them north. Why they had been so anxious to recover possession of the *Venture* was for a long time an unsolved puzzle to the crew of that interesting raft. That the reason was finally explained will be made as clear to us as it was to our raft mates before the end of this story of their unique voyage down the great river. When it is, we shall probably wonder, as they did, that so simple a solution of the mystery had not occurred to us before.

In the mean time the raft, once more in full possession of its rightful crew, is gliding swiftly with the mighty current through the starlit darkness. Billy Brackett, with a heart full of sorrow over the loss of his four-footed but dearly loved companion, is on watch. The lantern, lighted and run to the top of the flag-staff, sends forth a clear beam of warning to all steamboats. In the "shanty," which looks very bright and cosy in comparison with the outside darkness, Binney Gibbs is lying comfortably in one of the bunks, Solon is making himself acquainted with the arrangements of his new galley, and the other two are changing their wet clothing, while carrying on an animated conversation regarding the stirring events just recorded.

"How jolly this would all be if it wasn't for poor Billy's melancholy over the loss of his dog," remarked Glen Elting, as he turned the steaming garments hanging in front of the galley stove. "It was a splendid start, wasn't it, Grip?"

"Yes, I suppose so," answered Binney, a little doubtfully; "though I don't believe it would seem quite so fine to you if you ached all over as I do."

"Perhaps not, old man. But you'll be all right again to-morrow, after a good night in 'dream-bags;' and anyway, you must admit that this beats steamboating all to nothing. Just think, if we hadn't been lucky enough to fall in with this blessed raft, and Billy and Winn, and all the rest, we should at this very moment be just ordinary ten-o'clock-at-night passengers, shivering on the Cairo wharf-boat, and waiting for the New Orleans packet to come along. She's due there some time this evening, yon know."

"Yes; and instead of that, here I am--"

"Here you are," interrupted Glen, seeing that his friend was about to utter a complaint; "and thankful you ought to be to find yourself here, too. Why, we'll be as merry as this muddy old river is long, as soon as Billy ceases to mourn for his dog. I'm a little surprised that he should take it so much to heart, though. It isn't like Billy B. to be cast down over trifles."

"Trifles!" cried Winn. "When you call dear old Bim a 'trifle,' you are making one of the big mistakes of your life, and you wouldn't do it either if you had known him as well as I did. There never was another dog like him for wisdom and gentleness and pluck and--well, and everything that makes a dog lovely. Why, that Bim would reason his way out of scrapes that would stump a man, and the word 'fear' was never printed in his dictionary. Somehow I can't help thinking that he'll turn up all right, bright and smiling, yet."

"I don't see how," said Glen.

"Neither can I, and I don't suppose I could if I were in his place; but unless Bim is uncommonly dead, I'll guarantee that he'll come to life again somehow and somewhere. In fact, I shouldn't be one bit surprised to see him aboard this

very raft again before our voyage is ended."

"I must confess that I should," said Glen.

"That's because you don't know him," responded Winn. "Isn't it, Solon?"

"I 'spec's hit must be, Marse Winn," answered the old negro.

"And wasn't he the very wisest dog you ever knew?"

"Yes, sah, he suttinly was, all 'ceptin' one, an' hit war a yallar 'coon dawg wha' I uster own down in ole Lou'siana. I 'spec's he war jes a teenty mite more knowin' dan eben Marse Brack's Bim dawg. He name war Bijah."

"How did he ever prove his wisdom?" asked Winn, incredulously.

"How him provin' it!" exclaimed the old negro, warming to his subject. "Why, sah, him provin' it ebbery day ob he life more ways 'n one."

"Well, give us an example, if you can remember one."

"Yes, sah, I kin. An' I tell you--all one ob de berry simples' t'ings what dat ar Bijah ebber done. He war jest a ornery, stumpy-tail, 'coon dawg, Bijah war, an' him know he warn't nuffin else. Dat's why he won't go fer nuffin 'ceptin' 'coons--no rabbits, ner 'possum, ner fox, ner b'ar, ner nuffin--jes 'coons. But 'coons! Don' talk, gen'l'men! I reckon dat ar Bijah done know ebbery 'coon in twenty mile ob de Moss Back plantashun. An' he knowed some fer 'coons wha' didn' 'low dey war 'coons no way."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Winn.

"Dat's wha' I comin' to, Marse Winn, but yo' mus'n hurry de ole man. One day I takin' de ole kyart inter town wif a load er wood, an' Bijah he gwine erlong. When we comin' to der place whar de wood kyarts stops, I onyoked, an' Bijah he lyin', sleepylike, ondur de kyart. I passin' de time er day 'long some udder cullud fellers, an' tellin' wha' kind ob a 'coon dawg Bijah war, an' how he ain't know nuffin no way 'ceptin' 'coons. Suddint I see dat ar dawg kin' er wink he eye, an' raise up an' sniff de yair, an' den lite out licketty cut down erlong. Dey ain't nuffin on de road 'ceptin' jes a cullud gal, an' she a-turmin' inter de sto'.

"Dem fellers laff fit to bus' deirselves, an' say, 'Hi dar! wha' dat fine 'coon dawg gwine fer now?'"

"I say, 'Him gwine fer a 'coon, gen'l'men, he suttinly am.' Yo' see, I jes nacherly 'bleeged ter say so. Same time, I kin' er jubious.

"Afo' we comin' ter de sto', I heah ole Bijah gibbin tongue lak mad, an' I say, 'Him treed um' gen'l'men! him treed um fer sho'. But when we comin' dar, an' look in der do', I feelin' mighty sick. Dat ar cullud gill she up in er cheer er-shyin' she umbrel at Bijah, an' him jes a dancin' 'roun', an' er-yelpin'.

"Well, ef dem fellers ain't laff! Dey jes roll deirselves in de dus'.

"Whar yo' 'coon dawg now? Whar yo' 'coon dawg?' dey axin; but I kep' on sayin' nuffin. I know dat gal, an' when I hit Bijah er clip to stop he noise, I say, berry polite, 'Mawnin', Lize. Yo' got any 'coon 'bout yo' pusson?'"

"Den she say, snappylike, 'How I gwine get 'coon, yo' fool nigger! No, sah, I ain't got no 'coon 'ceptin' my ole man wha' I marry yistiddy he name *Coon*.'"

The shout of laughter that greeted this story was interrupted by the appearance of Billy Brackett at the door.

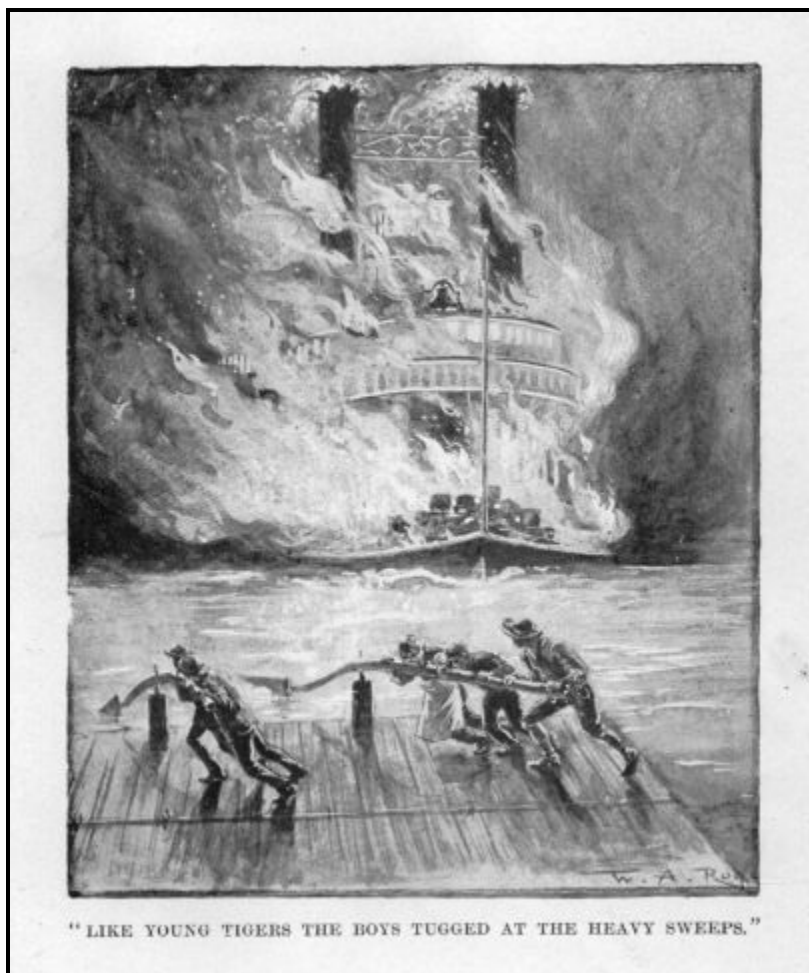
"Come out here, boys!" he cried. "There's a steamboat on fire and coming down the river!"

This startling announcement emptied the "shanty" in a hurry. Even Binney Gibbs forgot his aches and joined his mates outside.

There was no doubt as to the meaning of the column of flame that turned the darkness into day behind them. It was so near that they could hear its ominous roar, while the black forest walls on either side of the river were bathed in a crimson glow from its baleful light. A vast cloud of smoke, through which shot millions of sparks, trailed and eddied above it, while, with the hoarse voice of escaping steam, the blazing craft sounded its own death-note.

As the monster came tearing down the channel of crimson and gold that opened and ever widened before it, our raftmates were fascinated by the sight of its sublime but awful approach. They stood motionless and speechless until roused to a sudden activity by Billy Brackett's shout of "Man the sweeps, fellows! She is unmanageable, and headed for us as straight as an arrow. If we can't get out of the way she'll be on top of us inside of two minutes more!"

Like young tigers the boys tugged at the heavy sweeps; but they might as well have tried to extinguish the floating volcano that threatened them with destruction as to remove that mass of timber beyond reach of danger within the time allowed them. The task was an impossible one; and as they realized this fact, the crew of the *Venture* prepared to launch their skiff, abandon the raft, and row for their lives.



[Illustration: "Like young tigers the boys tugged at the heavy sweeps."]

CHAPTER XXXV.

BIM'S HEROISM.

As the burning steamboat swept down towards the low-lying raft the destruction of the latter appeared so certain that its crew abandoned all hope of saving it; and, taking to their skiff, sought by its means to escape the threatened danger. It was a forlorn hope, and promised but little. Even with Billy Brackett's strong arms tugging at its oars, the heavily laden skiff seemed to move so slowly, that but for the ever-widening space between them and the raft they would have deemed it at a stand-still. They gazed in silence and with fascinated eyes at the on-coming terror. At length, with a sigh of thankfulness, they saw that they were beyond its track, and Billy Brackett's labors were somewhat relaxed.

Suddenly, as though endowed with a fiendish intelligence, the blazing fabric took a sheer to port, and headed for the skiff. A hoarse cry broke from the old negro, whose face was ashen gray with fright. It was echoed by Binney Gibbs. The others kept silence, but their faces were bloodless.

By a mighty effort Billy Brackett spun the skiff around, and with the energy of despair pulled back towards the raft. The stout oars bent like whips. If one of them had given way nothing could have saved our raftmates from destruction. Had the tough blades been of other than home make, and fashioned from the best product of the Caspar Mill, they must have yielded. With each stroke Billy Brackett rose slightly from his seat. Arms, body, and legs made splendid response to the demands of the invincible will. Years of careful training and right living were concentrated into that supreme moment. Another might have sought personal safety by plunging overboard and diving deep into the river. Glen and Winn might have followed such an example. Binney and Solon, being unable to swim, could not. But Billy Brackett was too true an American to consider such a thing for an instant. Generations of Yankee ancestors had taught him never to desert a friend nor yield to a foe; never to court a danger nor to fear one; to fight in a righteous cause with his latest breath; to snatch victory from defeat.

As the skiff dashed alongside the *Venture* the vast, glowing, seething mass of flame, smoke, and crashing timbers swept by so close that the raftmates were obliged to seek a shelter in the cool waters from its deadly heat. Clinging to the edge of the raft, with their bodies entirely submerged, they gazed breathlessly and with blinded eyes at the grandest and most awful sight to be seen on the Mississippi. It was a huge lower-river packet, and was completely enveloped in roaring flames that poured from every opening, and streamed furiously from the tall chimneys the trailing banners of the fire-fiend. The boat was under a full head of steam, her machinery was still intact, and the great wheels, churning the glowing waters into a crimson foam, forced her ahead with the speed of a locomotive. The back draught thus caused kept the forward end of her lower deck free from flame. Here, as she rushed past, the boys caught a glimpse of the only sign of life they could discover aboard the ill-fated packet. It was a dog leaping from side to side, and barking furiously.

They had hardly noted his presence when a curious thing happened. There came an explosion of steam, a crash, and the starboard wheel dropped from its shaft. Thus crippled, the blazing craft made a grand sweep of half a circle in front of the raft. Then, as the other wheel also became disabled and ceased its mad chummings, the boat lay with her head up-stream, drifting helplessly with the current. The packet was not more than a couple of hundred feet from the raft when its wild progress was thus checked, and now the barkings of the dog, that had already attracted the boy's attention, were heard more plainly than before.

All at once Billy Brackett, who had regained the wave-washed deck of the raft, called out, "It's Bim! I know his voice!"

With this he again sprang into the skiff, with the evident intention of attempting to rescue his four-footed comrade. Winn Caspar was just in time to scramble in over the stern as the skiff shot away. "I may be of some help," he said.

As they neared the burning boat, they saw that the dog was indeed Bim. He answered their calls with frantic barks of joy, but refused to leap into the skiff or into the water, as they urged him to.

He would run back out of their sight instead, and then reappear, barking frantically all the while. Once he seemed to be dragging something, and trying to hold it up for their inspection.

"The dear old dog has some good reason for acting in that way," said Billy Brackett, "and I must go to him."

Winn had not the heart to remonstrate against an attempt to aid Bim, even though its extreme danger was obvious. The blazing hull, from which most of the upper works were now burned away, was liable to plunge to the bottom at any moment, and the boy shuddered at the thought of being engulfed in the seething whirlpool which would thus be created. He involuntarily cringed, too, at the thought of the red-hot boilers ready to burst and deluge all surrounding objects with scalding steam and hissing water. Still, he would not have spoken a single word to deter Billy Brackett from his daring project even had he known it would be heeded.

While these thoughts flashed through Winn's mind, his companion was clambering up over the low guards, and Bim's joyful welcome of his master was pitiful in its extravagance. The dog seemed to say, "I knew you would come if I only waited patiently and barked loud enough. Now you see why I couldn't leave."

The object to which Bim thus directed attention, as plainly as though possessed of speech, was a little curly-haired puppy, a Gordon setter, so young that its eyes were not yet opened.

Billy Brackett picked it up and dropped it over the side into Winn's arms. Then he tried to do the same by Bim; but, with a loud bark, the nimble dog eluded his grasp, and dashed away into the thick of the smoke. Tongues of flame were licking their cruel way through it, and as Bim emerged, his hair was scorched in yellow patches. He dragged out a dead puppy, laid it at his master's feet, and before he could be restrained had once more dashed back into the stifling smoke. Again he appeared, this time weak and staggering, every trace of his white coat gone. He was singed and blackened beyond recognition; but he was a four-footed hero, who had nobly performed a self-imposed duty. As he feebly dragged another little dead puppy to his master's feet, Billy Brackett seized the brave dog in his arms, and sprang over the side of the doomed steamboat into the waiting skiff. Tears stood in the young man's eyes as the suffering creature licked his face, and he exclaimed, "I tell you what, Winn Caspar, if this blessed dog isn't possessed of a soul, then I'm not, that's all!"

Meanwhile Winn was pulling the skiff swiftly beyond reach of danger. It was none too soon; for before they reached the raft, the glowing mass behind them reared itself on end as though making a frantic effort to escape its fate. Then, with a hissing plunge, it disappeared beneath the turbid flood of the great river. A second later there came a muffled explosion, and a column of water, capped by a cloud of steam, shot upward. At the same time the scene was shrouded in a darkness made absolute by the sudden extinguishing of the fierce light, while the silence that immediately succeeded the recent uproar seemed unbroken.

Then the momentary hush was invaded by the sound of many voices, some of which were uttering groans and cries of pain. A score of fortunates from the burned packet, who had been driven by the flames to the extreme after-end of the boat, where they were hidden from the view of those on the raft, had leaped into the water as they were swept past, and managed to reach it while Billy Brackett and Winn were away.

Now, by means of the skiff, others whose cries for help located them in the darkness were picked up. Many persons had escaped soon after the breaking out of the fire by means of the small boats and life-raft carried by the packet; while still others, comprising nearly half the ship's company, were lost. It was one the most terrible of the many similar disasters recorded in the history of steamboating on the Mississippi; and to this day the burning of the *Lytle* is a favorite theme of conversation among old river men.

When Glen Elting learned the name of the ill-fated craft, he started and turned pale. "The very packet for which we were waiting!" he cried, with bated breath. "Oh, Binney, how many things we have to be thankful for!"

"Indeed we have," answered the boy; "and not the least of them is that we are in a position to help these poor people, who have been overtaken by the misfortune that was reaching out for us."

These two were tearing sheets into bandage strips, and dressing wounds with the salve and ointments found in Major Caspar's medicine chest. Solon was providing a plentiful supply of hot-water over a roaring fire in the galley stove, and bustling about among the forlorn assembly, that, drenched and shivering, had been so suddenly intrusted to his kindly care. Billy Brackett and Winn rowed in every direction about the raft so long as there was the slightest hope of picking up a struggling swimmer.

Their last rescue was that of a man clinging to a state-room door, and so benumbed with the chill of the water that in a few moments more his hold must have relaxed. Beside him swam a dog, also nearly exhausted.

When the man was carried into the "shanty," the dog followed him, and was there seen to be of the same markings and breed as the puppy saved by Bim. Noting this, Winn hunted it up and brought it to her. It was hers, and no human mother could have shown more extravagant joy than did this dog mother at so unexpectedly finding one of her lost babies. She actually cried with happiness, and fondled her little one until it protested with all the strength of its feeble voice. Then she lay down with the puppy cuddled close to her, and one paw thrown protectingly across it, the picture of perfect content.

Bim had been almost as excited as she, and in spite of his burns, had circled about the two, and barked until the puppy persuaded its mother to be quiet. Then Bim and she lay down, nose to nose, and while the former told his friend how he had found her deserted babies on the boat and had determined to save them, and how his own dear master had come in answer to his barks for assistance, she told him how she had been in the after-part of the boat getting her supper when the flames broke out, and had gone nearly crazy at finding herself separated from her little ones. She assured him she would have gone through fire and water to reach them had not her master thrown her overboard, and immediately afterwards jumped into the river himself. Then she believed that all was lost, for in her distress of mind she had entirely forgotten her brave friend Bim. If she had only remembered him, she would have been quite at ease, knowing, of course, that he would find some way of saving at least one of her puppies, which, under the

circumstances, was all that could be expected.

At which Bim jumped up and barked for pure happiness, until his master said, "That will do, Bim, for the present."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MASTER OF MOSS BANK.

The Gordon setter's name was Nanita, while that of her master was Mr. Guy Manton, of New York. Within a short time after the final plunge of the burned packet, several steamboats, attracted by the blaze, reached the raft, and offered to carry the survivors of the disaster to the nearest town. This offer was accepted by all except Mr. Manton, who asked, as a favor, that he and his dogs might be allowed to remain on board the *Venture*, at least until morning. Of course the raftmates willingly consented to this, for Mr. Manton was so grateful to them, besides proving such an agreeable companion, that they could not help but like him.

From him they learned how Bim happened to be on board the ill-fated steamboat, a situation over which they had all puzzled, but concerning which they had heretofore found no opportunity of inquiring. According to Mr. Manton's story, he was on his way to a plantation on the Mississippi, in Louisiana, which he had recently purchased, but had not yet seen.

Wishing to learn something of the great river on a bank of which his property lay, he had come by way of St. Louis, and there boarded the fine New Orleans packet *Lyle*. He had brought with him a supply of machinery, provisions, and tools for the plantation, all of which were now either consumed by fire or lay at the bottom of the river. He had also brought his favorite setter Nanita and her litter of three young puppies, which he had proposed to establish at his new winter home.

During the stop of the packet at Cairo he had taken Nanita ashore for a run. On their way back to the boat he discovered that she was not following him, and anxiously retracing his steps a short distance, found her in company with a white bulldog, to whom she was evidently communicating some matter of great interest.

Mr. Manton saw that the strange dog was a valuable one, and when it showed an inclination to follow them, tried to persuade it to return to its home, which he supposed was somewhere in the town. As the dog disappeared, he thought he had succeeded, and was afterwards surprised to find it on the boat, in company with Nanita and her little ones. Believing, of course, that the bull-dog's owner was also on board, he gave the matter but little thought, and soon after called Nanita aft to be fed.

While he was attending to her wants, the cry of "fire" was raised. The flames burst out somewhere near the centre of the boat, in the vicinity of the engine-room, and had already gained such headway as to interpose an effectual barrier between him and the forward deck. He supposed that the boat would at once be headed for the nearest bank, but found to his dismay that almost with the first outbreak of flame the steering-gear had been rendered useless. At the same time the engineers had been driven from their post of duty, and thus the splendid packet, freighted with death and destruction, continued to rush headlong down the river, without guidance or check.

Amid the terrible scenes that ensued, Mr. Manton, followed by his faithful dog, was barely able to reach his own stateroom, secure his money and some important papers, wrench the door from its hinges, throw it and Nanita overboard, and then leap for his own life into the dark waters.

At this point the grateful man again tried to express his sense of obligation to his rescuers, but was interrupted by Billy Brackett, who could not bear to be thanked for performing so obvious and simple an act of duty. To change the subject the young engineer told of Bim's act of real heroism in saving one and attempting to save the other members of the little family, which he evidently considered had been left in his charge.

To this story Mr. Manton listened with the deepest interest; and when it was concluded, he said, "He is a dear dog, and most certainly a hero, if there ever was one. I shall always love him for this night's work."

Then Bim, who was now covered with healing ointment and swathed in bandages, was petted and praised until even Nanita grew jealous, and insisted on receiving a share of her master's attention.

All the while the brave bull-dog looked into the faces of those gathered about him with such a pleading air of intelligence and such meaning barks that his longing to tell of what had happened to him after he started from the raft in pursuit of the odious "river-trader" who had once kicked him was evident to them all. If he only could have spoken, he would have told of the cruel blow by which he was momentarily stunned, of finding himself in a bag in the river, of how he had succeeded by a desperate struggle in escaping from it and finally reaching the shore, of his distress at not finding the raft, and the sad search for his master through the town, of his meeting with Nanita, and of his decision to accept her advice and take passage with her down the river, in which direction he was certain his floating home had gone. All this Bim would have communicated to his friends if he could; but as they were too dull of comprehension to understand him, they have remained in ignorance to this day of that thrilling chapter of his adventures.

Besides telling the raftmates of his cruel experience, Mr. Manton related some of the incidents of a canoe voyage even then being made down the river by his only son Worth and the boy's most intimate friend, Sumner Rankin. These two had made a canoe cruise together through the Everglades of Florida the winter before, and had enjoyed it so much, that when Mr. Manton proposed that they should accompany him to Louisiana, they had begged to be allowed to make the trip in their canoes.

"They started from Memphis," continued Mr. Manton, "and have had some fine duck and turkey shooting among the Coahoma sloughs and cane-brakes. With them is a colored man named Quorum, who crossed the Everglades with them, and who now accompanies them, in a skiff that they purchased in Memphis, as cook and general adviser. I have heard from them several times by letter, and so know of their progress. It has been so good that unless I make haste they will reach Moss Bank before me. That is the name of our new home," he added, by way of explanation.

"Wha' dat yo' say, sah?" exclaimed Solon, who had been an interested listener. "Yo' callin' dat ar plantashun Moss Back?"

**[Illustration: "'Yo' callin' dat ar plantashun Moss Back?'
exclaimed Solon" (missing from book)]**

"Yes, 'Moss Bank' is the name it has always borne, I believe," replied Mr. Manton. "But why do you ask? Do you know the place?"

"Does I know um! Does I know de place I war borned an' brung up in? Why, sah, dat ar' my onlies home befo' de wah. Ole Marse Rankin own um, an' me an' he boy, de young marse, hab de same mammy. So him my froster-brudder. He gwine away fer a sailor ossifer, an' den de wah comin' on, an' ebberty'ing gwine ter smash. He name 'Summer.' Yo' know dat young gen'lman?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Manton, "I knew him intimately. He has been dead for several years; but I am well acquainted with his family, and it is his son who is now travelling down the river in company with my boy. In fact, it was through him that I came to purchase this old plantation, with a view to making it our winter home."

"Praise de Lawd, I gwine ter see a Rankin once mo'!" exclaimed the old negro. "Yo' is gwine stop at de ole Moss Back place, Marse Winn? Yo' sholy is?"

"Why, yes; if Mr. Manton would like to have us, I think we should be very happy to stop there when we reach it," said Winn.

"Stop! Of course you will," exclaimed Nanita's master. "I have already planned for that, and should feel terribly disappointed if you did not. I want to see more of you, and I want you to meet and know my boys. Besides, I was going to ask you to allow Nanita and her pup to complete their journey down the river on this raft in company with Bim, who will, I know, take good care of them. If you should consent to this plan, of course you will be obliged to stop at Moss Bank to land them.

"We shall be delighted to have them," said Billy Brackett; "and, on behalf of Bim, I hereby extend a formal invitation to them to become his raftmates for the remainder of the cruise. At the same time, I am certain that my companions, as well as myself, will be most happy to visit you in your new home, and there make the acquaintance of your boys."

By the time this arrangement was concluded it was daylight, and Mr. Manton insisted on the raftmates turning in for a nap, while he and Solon kept watch. He remained on board the *Venture* all that day, and by sunset the current had borne the raft forward so rapidly that they were able to tie up near Columbus, Kentucky. At this point the owner of Moss Bank bade his new-made friends *au revoir*, and started by rail for his Louisiana home.

After his departure, and during the month of drifting that followed, the raftmates talked so much of Moss Bank, and listened to so many stories concerning it from Solon, that to their minds it grew to be the objective point of their trip, and seemed as though it must be the one place towards which their whole voyage was tending. Much as they anticipated the reaching of this far-southern plantation, however, they would have been greatly surprised and decidedly incredulous had any one told them that it was indeed to mark the limit of their voyage, and that there the good raft *Venture*, from Wisconsin for New Orleans, was destined to vanish, and become but a fading memory. But so it was, as they found out, and as we shall see.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BIM'S 'COON.

Through the last week of November and the first three of December our raftmates drifted steadily southward down the great river. Although it was the most unpleasant season of the year, and they encountered both cold rains and bitter winds that chilled them to the marrow, the boys thoroughly enjoyed their experience. They could always retreat to the "shanty," which Solon kept well filled with warmth and comfort, and they had the satisfaction of an uninterrupted progress. The management of the raft called for a vast amount of hard and monotonous work; but it gave them splendid muscles and tremendous appetites. They were obliged to maintain a constant lookout for bars, reefs, snags, and up-bound river craft, and by means of the long sweeps at either end of the raft head in this way or that to avoid these obstacles and keep the channel. They were always on the move from sunrise to sunset, and generally travelled on moonlit nights as well. If the night promised to be dark or stormy they tied up at the nearest bank.

At such times the outside blackness, the howling wind, driving rain-squalls, and dashing waves only heightened the interior cosiness, the light, warmth, and general comfort of their floating home. In it they played games, sang songs to the accompaniment of Solon's banjo, told stories, taught the dogs tricks; or, under Billy Brackett's direction, pegged away at engineering problems, such as are constantly arising in the course of railway construction. Even Winn tried his hand at these; for under the stimulus of his companions' enthusiasm he was beginning to regard the career of an engineer as one of the most desirable and manly in which a young fellow could embark.

This voyage into the world, with such guides and associates as Billy Brackett, Glen Elting, and Binney Gibbs, was proving of inestimable value to this boy. Not only were his ideas of life broadened and his stock of general information increased by it, but he was rapidly learning to appreciate the beauty of modest pretensions, and a self-reliance based upon knowledge and strength, as compared with the boastfulness and self-conceit of ignorance.

Sometimes the *Venture* was tied up for the night near other rafts, and its crew exchanged visits with theirs. The regular river raftsmen were generally powerful young giants, rough and unlettered, but a good-natured, happy-go-lucky lot, full of tales of adventure in the woods or on the river, to which the boys listened with a never-failing delight. Nor were the raftmates at all behindhand in this interchange of good stories; for they could tell of life on the Plains or in California, of Indians, buffalo, mountains, deserts, and gold-mines, to which their auditors listened with wide-open eyes and gaping mouths. During the pauses Solon was always ready with some account of the wonderful performances of his long-ago 'coon dog Bijah.

So wise did our raftmates become concerning 'coons and their habits, from Solon's teachings, that finally nothing would satisfy them but a 'coon hunt of their own. Billy Brackett was certain that Bim, who by this time had fully recovered from the effects of his burns, would prove as good at finding 'coons as he had at everything else in which he had been given a chance. Solon was doubtful, because of Bim's color and the length of his tail.

"I hain't nebber see no fust-class 'coon dawg wha' warn't yallar an' stumpy tail lak my Bijah war," he would remark, gazing reflectively at Bim, and shaking his head. "Of cose dish yer Bim dawg uncommon knowin', an' maybe him tree a 'coon 'mos' ez good ez Bijah; but hit's a gif, an' a mighty skurce gif 'mong dawgs."

"Oh, come off, Solon!" Billy Brackett would answer. "You just wait till you see Bim tree a 'coon. He'll do it so quick, after we once get into a 'coon neighborhood, that your Bijah would be left a thousand miles behind, and you won't ever want to mention his name again."

So one night when the *Venture* was well down towards the lower end of the State of Arkansas a grand 'coon hunt

was arranged. They drew lots to decide who should be left behind in charge of the raft, and, much to his disgust, the unwelcome task fell to Glen. So he remained on board with Nanita and Cherub, as the pup had been named in honor of Bim, though it was generally called "Cheer-up," and the others sallied forth into the woods.

They were well provided with fat pine torches and armed with axes. Bim was full of eager excitement, and dashed away into the darkness the moment they set foot on shore. His incessant barking showed him to be first on this side and then on that, while once in a while they caught a glimpse of his white form glancing across the outer rim of their circle of torchlight.

"Isn't he hunting splendidly?" cried Billy Brackett, with enthusiasm.

"Yes, sah," replied Solon; "but him huntin' too loud. We ain't gettin' to de place yet, an' ef he don' quit he barkin', himskeer off all de 'coon in de State."

So Bim was called in, and restrained with a bit of rope until a corn-field was reached that Solon pronounced the right kind of a place from which to make a start. Then the eager dog was again set free, and in less than a minute was heard giving utterance to the peculiar yelping note that announced his game as "treed."

"What did I tell you?" shouted Billy Brackett, triumphantly, as he started on a run for the point from which the sounds proceeded. "How's that for--" but at that instant the speaker tripped over a root, and measured his length on the ground with a crash that knocked both breath and powers of speech from his body. The others were so close behind that they fell on top of him like a row of bricks, and in the resulting confusion their torch was extinguished.

Hastily picking themselves up, and without pausing to relight the pine splinters, they rushed pell-mell towards the sound of barking, bumping into trees, stumbling over logs, scratching their faces and tearing their clothes on thorny vines. But no one minded. Bim had treed a 'coon in the shortest time on record, and now if they could only get it, the triumph would be ample reward for all their trials.

Finally, bruised, battered, and ragged, they reached the tree which Bim, with wild leapings, was endeavoring to climb. Their first move was to illumine the scene with a huge bonfire. By its light they proceeded to a closer examination of the situation. The tree was a huge moss-hung water-oak, evidently too large to be chopped down, as all the 'coon trees of Solon's stories had been. So Winn offered to climb it and shake out the 'coon. As yet they had not discovered the animal, but Bim was so confident of its presence that they took his word for it.

Solon had raised a false alarm as the first gleam of firelight penetrated the dark mass of foliage above them by exclaiming:

"Dar he! Me see um! Lookee, Marse Brack, in dat ar crutch!"

But what the old negro saw proved to be a bunch of mistletoe, and when Winn began his climb the 'coon's place of concealment was still unknown. Up went the boy higher and higher, carefully examining each limb as he passed it, until he was among the very topmost branches of the tree. The others stood on opposite sides of the trunk, with axes or clubs uplifted, and gazed anxiously upward until their necks ached.

At length Winn became aware that from the outermost end of a slender branch just above his head a pair of green eyes were glaring at him. The glare was accompanied by an angry spitting sound. "I've found him, fellows! Look out below!" he shouted, and began a vigorous shaking of the branch. All at once the animal uttered a sound that caused a sudden cessation of his efforts. It also caused Winn to produce a match from his pocket, light it, and hold the tiny flame high above his head. Then, without a word, he began to descend the tree.

As he dropped to the ground the others exclaimed in amazement, "What's the matter, Winn? Where's the 'coon? Why didn't you shake him down?"

"He's up there," replied Winn, "but I don't want him. If any of you do, you'd better go up and shake him down. I'd advise you to take a torch along, though."

Not another word of explanation would he give them, and finally Binney Gibbs, greatly provoked at the other's stubbornness, declared he would go up and shake that 'coon down--in a hurry, too. He so far accepted Winn's advice as to provide himself with a blazing knot, and then up he started. In a few minutes he too returned to the ground, saying that he guessed Winn was about right, and they didn't want that 'coon after all.

"What in the name of all foolishness do you mean?" cried Billy Brackett, impatiently. "Speak out, man, and tell us,

can't you?"

But Binney acted precisely as Winn had done, and advised any one who wanted that 'coon to go and get it.

"Well, I will!" exclaimed the young engineer, almost angrily; "and I only hope I can manage to drop him on top of one of your heads."

With this he started up the tree, and disappeared among its thick branches. He quickly made his way to the top. Then the rustling of leaves ceased, there was a moment of silence, followed by a muttered exclamation, and Billy Brackett came hastily down to where the others were expectantly awaiting him.

"Let's go home, boys," he said, as he picked up his axe and started in the direction of the river. "Come, Bim; your reputation as a 'coon dog is so well established that there is no need to test it any further."

Poor Solon, who was too old and stiff to climb the tree, was completely mystified by these strange proceedings; but his expostulation of,

"Wha--wha's de meanin' ob dish yer--!" was cut short by the departure of his companions, and he was obliged to hasten after them.

A few minutes after the 'coon hunters had gone a big boy, and a little girl with a tear-stained face, who had come from a house just beyond the corn-field, reached the spot, to which they had been attracted by the firelight. As they did so, the child uttered a cry of joy, sprang to the water-oak, and caught up a frightened-looking little black and white kitten that was cautiously descending the big trunk backward.

To this day the outcome of that 'coon hunt remains a sealed mystery to poor Solon, while Bim has never been invited to go on another.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE GREAT RIVER AND ITS MISCHIEF.

The scenery amid which the good raft *Venture* performed its long and eventful voyage changed almost with the rapidity of a kaleidoscope, but was ever fascinating and full of pleasant surprises. The flaming autumnal foliage of the forest-lined banks through which the first hundred miles or so were made, gave way to masses of sombre browns or rich purples, and these in turn to the flecked white of cotton-fields, the dark green of live-oaks, and the silver gray of Spanish moss. The picturesque cliffs of the upper river, rising in places to almost mountainous heights, were merged into the lowlands of canebrakes and swamps, broken by ranges of bluffs along the eastern bank after the Ohio was passed. On these bluffs were perched many cities and towns that were full of interest to our raftmates; among them, Memphis, Vicksburg, Natchez, and Baton Rouge. Every here and there in the low bottom lands of the "Delta" below Memphis they saw the rounded tops of great mounds, raised by prehistoric dwellers in that region as places of refuge during seasons of flood. They passed from the great northern wheat region into that of corn, then into the broad cotton belt, and finally to the land of sugar-cane and rice, orange-trees, glossy-leaved magnolias, and gaunt moss-hung cypresses.

Of more immediate interest even than these ever-changing features of the land was the varied and teeming life of the mighty river itself. The boys were never tired of watching the streams of strange craft constantly passing up or down. Here a splendid packet in all the glory of fresh paint, gleaming brass, gay bunting, and crowds of passengers rushed swiftly southward with the current in mid-channel; or, up-bound, ploughed a mighty furrow against it, while the hoarse coughings of its high-pressure engines echoed along many a mile of forest wall.

Smaller up-bound boats hugged the banks in search of slack water. Most of the main-stream packets were side-wheelers; but those of lighter draught, bound far up the Red, the Arkansas, the Yazoo, the Sunflower, or other tributary rivers, were provided with great stern wheels that made them look like exaggerated wheelbarrows. Then there were the tow-boats, pushing dozens of sooty coal-barges from the Ohio; freight-boats so piled with cotton-bales that only their pilot-houses and chimneys were visible; trading-scows and "Jo-boats;" floating dance-houses and theatres; ferryboats driven by steam, or propelled by mule-power, like the *Whatnot*; some large enough to carry a whole train of cars from

shore to shore, and others with a capacity of but a single team. There were skiffs, canoes, pirogues, and rafts of all sizes and description.

Most interesting of all, however, were the Government snag-boats, which constantly patrolled the river, on the lookout for obstructions that they might remove. These boats were doubled-hulled; and when one of them straddled a snag, no matter if it was the largest tree that ever grew, it was bound to disappear. With great steam-driven saws it would be cut into sections, that were lifted and swung aside by powerful derricks planted near the bows. These useful snag-boats also gave relief to distressed craft of all kinds; blew up or removed dangerous wrecks; dislodged rafts of drift that threatened to form inconvenient bars; and in a thousand ways acted the part of an ever-vigilant police for this grandest of American highways.

And the great restless river needed watching. It was as full of mischievous pranks as a youthful giant experimenting with his new-found strength. It thought nothing of biting out a few hundred acres of land from one bank and depositing them miles below on the other. If these acres were occupied by houses or cultivated fields, so much the more fun for the river. For years it would flow peacefully in a well-known channel around some great bend, then decide to make a change, and in a single night cut a new channel straight across the loop of land. By such a prank not only were all the river pilots thoroughly bewildered, but a large slice of one State, with its inhabitants and buildings, would be transferred to another. If at the same time an important river-town could be stranded and left far inland, the happiness of the mischief-making giant was complete; and for many miles it would swirl and eddy and boil and ripple with exuberant glee over the success of its efforts.

Above all it delighted in secretly gathering to itself from tributary streams their vast accumulations of protracted rains or melting snows, until it was swollen to twice its ordinary size, and endowed with a strength that nothing could withstand. Then with mighty leaps it would overflow its banks, cover whole counties with its tawny floods, burst through levees, and riot over thousands of cultivated fields, sweep away houses, uproot trees, and drown every unfortunate creature on which it could lay its clutching fingers. Whenever its fleeing victims managed to reach some little mound or bit of high land that it could not climb, then it found equal pleasure in surrounding them and mocking them with its plashing chuckles, while they suffered the pangs of slow starvation.

At these times of overflow not only the snag-boats but such other craft as could be pressed into the service were despatched in every direction to the relief of the river giant's victims. While on this duty they carried provisions, clothing, and other necessaries of life into the most remote districts; effected rescues from floating houses, or those whose roofs alone rose above the flood and afforded uncertain refuge for their inmates; removed human beings and live-stock from little muddy islands miles away from the main channel of the river, carried them miles farther before reaching places of safety, and in every way strove with all their might to mitigate the calamity of unfettered waters.

Our raftmates had witnessed the effect of all these freaks and caprices, except that of a widespread and devastating flood, during their voyage, and as they drew near its end they became aware that an acquaintance with this most terrible of all the river's efforts at destruction was to be added to their experience. The drought of summer had been followed by an almost unprecedented rainfall during the autumn. The earth in every direction was like an oversoaked sponge, and the surplus water was pouring in turbid torrents into the rivers. From every quarter of the vast Mississippi Valley these watery legions were hurried forward to join the all-conquering forces of the great river.

It had been high-water in the Ohio when the *Venture* lay at Cairo. When it passed the mouth of the Arkansas its crew were amazed at the mighty volume of its muddy flood. From this on they floated in company with ever-increasing masses of drift--trees, fences, farming implements, straw-stacks, cotton-bales, out-buildings, and every now and then a house, lifted bodily from its foundations, and borne away in the resistless arms of the ever-swelling tide. Most of the houses were empty, but from several of them the ready skiff of the *Venture* effected rescues, now of a solitary individual driven to the verge of despair by the lonely terrors of his situation, and then of whole wretched families who had lost everything in the world except their lives. A cow, several pigs, and dozens of barn-yard fowls also found an asylum on the friendly raft, until, as Billy Brackett said, it reminded one of the original and only Noah's ark menagerie.

Besides supplying the raft with passengers, the river helped to feed them. Floating straw-stacks and shocks of corn were always in sight, while fresh milk and eggs, pork and chickens, drifted with the current on all sides. In vain were these passengers landed at the nearest accessible points. A new lot was always found to take the place of those who had left, and for ten days the raft resembled a combination of floating hotel, nursery, hospital, and farm-yard. The resources of our raftmates were taxed to their utmost during this time to provide for the manifold wants of their welcome but uninvited guests, while Solon declared, "I hain't nebber done sich a sight er cooken durin' all de days ob my life."

By the time the mouth of the Red River was reached, half of Concordia Parish was flooded, and but for the forest trees rising from the water, the boys would have thought themselves afloat on a vast inland sea. The low bluffs on which the capital of Louisiana is seated, and beyond which the cane lands extend in almost a dead level to the Gulf, were occupied by the tents and rude shelters of hundreds of refugees from the drowned districts. Here our raftmates began to entertain fears for the safety of their friends at the Moss Bank plantation, which lay but a day's journey farther down the river.

At Baton Rouge they cleared the raft of its living encumbrances, and then pushed ahead. From this point to the Gulf the great river is enclosed between massive levees, or embankments of earth, behind which the level of the far-reaching cane-fields is much lower than the surface of high-water. Thus the raft was borne swiftly along at such an elevation that its crew could look over the top of the eastern levee and down over a vast area of plantation lands. These were dotted with dark clumps of live-oaks or magnolias, and at wide intervals with little settlements of whitewashed negro quarters, grouped behind the broad-verandaed dwellings of the planters. Near each was the mill in which the cane from the broad fields was crushed and its sweet juices converted into sugar. These mills were surmounted by tall iron smoke-stacks, and near each stood the square, tower-like bagasse (refuse) burner, built of stone, and looking like the keep of some ancient castle.

All along the levee they saw gangs of men at work strengthening the embankments and raising them still higher. They were often hailed and asked to lend assistance, but they felt that their own friends might be in need of them, and so passed on without answer. So changed was the aspect of the country since Solon had last seen it, and so excited did the old man become as he neared the scenes of former years, that it was evident he could not be depended upon to recognize Moss Bank when they should reach it.

The day was nearly spent before they arrived at what they felt sure must be its immediate vicinity. They had decided to tie up at the first good place, and there wait for morning, when Winn called out:

"What is that just ahead? I thought it was a log; but it seems to be moving towards us, and I believe it is some sort of a small boat with a man in it."

The object to which their attention was thus directed proved to be a decked canoe, the very daintiest craft any of them had ever seen, bearing the name *Psyche* in gold letters on either bow. In it sat a boy of about Winn's age, urging it forward with vigorous strokes of a double-bladed paddle.

The raft was close to the levee as he shot alongside.

"Hello!" he shouted; "is this the raft *Venture*?"

"Yes. Are you Worth Manton?"

"No; but I am Sumner Rankin. Worth is down there with his father and all the hands we could raise, working on the levee; but we are afraid it can't stand much longer. I have been out here hailing every raft that passed, and watching for you for the last three days. I'm awfully glad you've come, for our men are discouraged, and about ready to give up. Now, perhaps you will help us."

"Of course we will! Come right aboard and show us where to tie up," answered Billy Brackett, heartily.

By the time the raft was made fast near the scene of greatest danger, and Mr. Manton, with Worth, had come aboard, the night was as dark as pitch. The lanterns of the working gang glancing here and there like so many fire-flies were feebly reflected in the angry waters that slid stealthily by with uncanny gurglings and muttered growls.



[Illustration: "The lanterns of the working gang glancing here and there like fire-flies."]

"If the bank will only hold until morning!" said Mr. Manton, about midnight, as he and Billy Brackett entered the *Venture's* cosy "shanty" for a brief rest. All but these two and Solon were asleep, laying in a stock of strength for the labors of the next day.

Suddenly there came a frightened shouting from the bank. Then all other sounds were drowned in the furious roar of rushing waters, while the raft seemed to be lifted bodily and hurled into space.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HURLED THROUGH THE CREVASSE AND WRECKED.

During the earlier hours of that eventful night Billy Brackett had brought all his engineering skill to bear upon the problem of how to save the Moss Bank levee. His cheery presence, and the evident knowledge that he displayed, inspired all hands with confidence and a new energy. Under his direction the raftmates worked like beavers, and Mr. Manton was more hopeful that the levee could be made to withstand the terrible pressure of swollen waters than he had been from the beginning. But it was very old and had been neglected for years. By daylight the young engineer might have noted its weak spots, and strengthened them. He would have seen the thin streams that silently, but steadily and in ever-increasing volume, were working their way through the embankment near its base. In the inky blackness of the night they were unheeded; and while spade and pick were plied with unflagging zeal to strengthen the higher portions, these insidious foes were equally busy undermining its foundations.

Shortly before midnight everything seemed so secure that the boys were sent to the *Venture's* "shanty" to get a few hours of sleep. Then Billy Brackett and Mr. Manton came in for the hot coffee Solon was preparing for them. They had hardly seated themselves at the table when the catastrophe occurred. Without warning, a quarter of a mile of the water-soaked levee sank out of sight, and dissolved like so much wet sugar. Into the huge gap thus opened the exulting waters leaped with the rush and roar of a cataract. On the foaming crest of this tawny flood the stout timber

raft was borne and whirled like an autumn leaf. A few of the working gang managed to reach it and save themselves, but others were swept away like thistle-down.

The boys thus rudely awakened from a sound sleep sprang up with frightened questionings, while Solon sank to his knees, paralyzed with terror. Nanita stood guard over her puppy, while Bim, with a single bark of defiance, leaped to his master's side and looked into his face for orders.

"Steady, boys! Steady!" shouted Billy Brackett, as coolly as though nothing unusual were happening. "No, not outside. Keep that door closed. It is safer in here. We can do nothing but wait patiently until the raft fetches up against something solid or grounds. Hear the waves boiling over the deck? There's a big chance of being swept off and dashed to bits out there."

For five minutes the raft was hurled forward and tossed with sickening plunges, as though in a heavy seaway, until its occupants were nearly prostrated with nausea. Then came a crash and a shock that piled them in headlong confusion on one side of the room. There was a grinding and groaning of timbers. One side of the raft was lifted, and the other forced down, until the floor of the "shanty" sloped steeply. With a single impulse all hands rushed to the door and into the open air.

The raft seemed to be stranded at the base of a rocky cliff that towered directly above it to an unknown height. Against it the mad waters were dashing savagely. Beneath their feet the stout timbers quivered with such uneasy movements that it seemed as though the end of the *Venture* had come, and that a few more seconds or minutes must witness its total destruction. Still they clung to it and to each other, for they had no other refuge, and in the absolute darkness surrounding them it would have been worse than folly to seek one.

After a while the first rush of waters passed, and they settled into a strong smooth flow like that of the great river from which they came. The uneasy movements of the raft ceased, and its shivering occupants again began to breathe freely.

"I guess it is all right, boys!" called out Billy Brackett. "I believe we are stranded at the foot of the bagasse-burner; but the old craft has evidently made up its mind to hold together for a while longer, at any rate. So I move that we crawl into the 'shanty' again. It's a good deal warmer and more comfortable in there than it is out here."

So, very cautiously, to prevent themselves from slipping off the steeply-sloping deck, our raftmates worked their way back into the little house that had for so long been their home. They found the lower side of the floor about two feet under water.

All hands were greatly depressed by the calamity that had overtaken them. Mr. Manton, Worth, Sumner, and old Solon grieved over the ruin of Moss Bank. Glen and Binney feared for the safety of General Elting's valuable instruments. Billy Brackett wondered if Major Caspar, or any one else, would ever again have confidence in him as the leader of an expedition, while Winn, who had never ceased to reproach himself for the manner in which the voyage of the *Venture* had been begun, was now filled with dismay at its disastrous termination.

He, as well as the others, realized that the raft was a fixture in its present position, that it would never again float on the bosom of the great river, and that all dreams of selling it in New Orleans must now be abandoned. He knew how greatly his father was in need of the money he had hoped to receive from it. He knew what a blow the loss of the wheat had been. Now the raft was lost as well. As the unhappy boy's thoughts travelled back over the incidents of the trip, and he remembered that but for him the wheat would not have been lost, and but for him the raft would probably have been sold in St. Louis, his self-accusations found their way to his eyes, and trickled slowly down his cheeks in the shape of hot tears. The others could not see them in the darkness, and he would not have cared much if they could.

But Billy Brackett was not giving way to his grief. There was too much to be done for that. He was trying to set up the overturned stove, and make things more comfortable. At the same time his cheery tones were raising the low spirits of his companions, and causing them to take a brighter view of the situation.

The young engineer, with Glen and Solon to aid him, worked in darkness, for the lamp had rolled from the table when the raft struck the stone tower, and been extinguished in the water that flooded part of the "shanty." In spite of this drawback, they finally succeeded in getting the stove into position. Then they began to feel for fuel with which to make a fire. Everything was wet. Some one proposed breaking up a chair, but Billy Brackett exclaimed,

"Hold on! I have thought of something better."

With this he caught hold of one of the thin boards used by the "river-traders" to ceil the room, and, with a powerful wrench, tore it off. This particular board happened to be near where Winn was sitting on the floor, so filled with his own sad thoughts that he paid but slight attention to what was going on about him. As the board was torn from its place several soft objects fell near him, and one of them struck his hand. It seemed to be paper, and when Billy Brackett sung out for some paper with which to start the fire, Winn said, "Here's a wad that's dry," and tossed the package in the direction of the stove. The young engineer slipped it under the wood, struck a match, and lighted it. The next instant he uttered a startled exclamation, snatched the package from the stove, and beat out the flame that was rapidly eating into it.

"What is the matter?" asked Winn.

"Matter?" returned Billy Brackett. "Oh, nothing at all; only I can't quite afford to warm myself at fires fed with bank-bills. Not just yet. I wouldn't hesitate to dissolve all my spare pearls in vinegar, if I felt an inclination for that kind of a drink, but I must draw a line at greenback fuel. Where did you get them? Whose are they? And why in the name of poverty do you want them burned up? Has your wealth become a burden to you?"

"Are they really bills?" asked Winn, incredulously.

For answer Billy Brackett struck another match, and all saw that he indeed held a package of bank-notes with charred ends. The same light showed Winn to be surrounded by a number of similar packages.

The expression of complete bewilderment that appeared on the boy's face as he saw these was so ludicrous that, as the match went out, a shout of laughter rang through the "shanty."

"As long as they are so plenty, I guess we might as well burn them, after all," said Billy Brackett, quietly. With this he struck another match, relighted the little bundle of bills in his hand, and again thrust it into the stove.

For a moment the others believed him to have lost his senses. Winn made a wild dash at the stove door, but Billy Brackett caught his arm.

"It's all right, and I'm not half so big a fool as I may appear," he said, laughing. "Do you remember our late friends the 'river-traders'? And that they were counterfeiters? And that they occupied this very 'shanty' for several weeks? And that, after losing it, they made desperate attempts to regain its possession? And that we wondered why they had ceiled this room; also, what had become of their stock in trade?"

To each of these questions Winn gave an affirmative answer.

"Well," continued Billy Brackett, "the mystery is a mystery no longer. They ceiled this room to provide a safe and very ingenious hiding-place for their goods; they wished to regain possession of the raft, that they might recover them. They failed, and so lost them. Now, by the merest accident, we have found them."

"Do you mean--" began Winn, slowly.

"I mean," said Billy Brackett, "that while we are apparently possessed of abundant wealth, it is but the shadow of the substance. In other words, every one of those bills is a counterfeit, and the sooner they are destroyed the better."

In spite of this disappointing announcement, the desire of the raftmates to discover the full extent of the "river-traders'" secret hoard was so great that, having found a candle, they proceeded by its light to tear off the whole of the interior sheathing of the room. They found a quantity of the counterfeit money, which Billy Brackett, sustained by Mr. Manton, insisted upon burning then and there. They also found, carefully hidden by itself, a package containing exactly one hundred genuine one-hundred-dollar bills.

"Enough," said Billy Brackett, quietly, "to refund the hundred they got from Glen and Binney, to repay Major Caspar for the wheat they dumped overboard, and to make good the loss of the *Whatnot*, which so nearly broke the heart of our brave old friend Cap'n Cod."

The justice of this disposition of the money was so evident that not a single dissenting voice was raised among those who had found it, for they all knew that an effort to trace it to its rightful owners would not only be fruitless, but would cost more than the entire amount.

The knowledge that his father was thus to be recompensed for the loss of which he had been the direct cause so raised Winn Caspar's spirits that when daylight came, although their situation remained unchanged, he felt himself to

be one of the very happiest boys in all Louisiana.

The coming of daylight, while gladly hailed by the occupants of the wrecked raft, also disclosed the extent of the devastation caused by the flood. As they had surmised, the *Venture* was stranded at the foot of the huge stone bagasse-burner. The mill near by was partly demolished. The great house, standing amid its clumps of shrubbery and stately trees, a quarter of a mile away, was surrounded by water that rose nearly to the top of the stone piers by which it was supported. The quarters and other out-buildings had disappeared. Even at that distance they could see a throng of refugees on the verandas and at the windows of the great house.

"Unless speedy relief comes they will starve," said Mr. Manton, anxiously, "for our provisions had nearly run out yesterday."

"We are in about the same fix," said Billy Brackett, who had been in earnest consultation with Solon. "I didn't realize until this minute that we had given away nearly the whole of our own supply. Now I find that the few things we had left are under water, and most of them are spoiled."

At this announcement every one suddenly discovered that he was intensely hungry; while Bim, seated on his haunches and waving his fore-paws, began to "speak" vigorously for his breakfast.

CHAPTER XL.

A MEETING OF MATES.

With starvation staring our raftmates in the face, the problem of how they were to escape from their present predicament became a most important one. The first suggestion was that they construct a small and easily managed raft from a portion of the material contained in the *Venture*. They foresaw that it would be impossible for them to propel even this against the swift current and reach the river, where they might procure relief from some passing boat. Still, even to drift with the current, or at the best to work their way diagonally across it, with the hope of reaching some source of food supply, seemed better than to remain where they were, and accordingly they began to collect material for a raft.

They had hardly started at this when Worth called out that he saw a canoe lodged in a clump of shrubbery.

They all looked where he pointed, and all saw it. Although it was not more than a hundred yards from them, the full force of the current must be encountered for the entire distance before one could reach it.

All were agreed that they must obtain it, if possible, and that their very lives might depend upon getting that canoe. First Billy Brackett threw off his clothing, and plunging into the chill waters, attempted to swim to it. He had not covered half the distance before he was compelled to turn back utterly exhausted. Then Glen Elting and Sumner undertook the task together, but splendid swimmers as they were, they could no more stem that resistless flood than they could have flown to the canoe.

As they were dejectedly resuming their clothing in the "shanty" they were startled by a shout from outside. Winn Caspar had solved the problem. While the others were watching the fruitless struggles of Glen and Sumner from one side of the raft he had slipped overboard from the other, and swam diagonally across the current to a hedge of oleanders, the tops of which were still above water. This hedge extended to the river, and passed within fifty yards of the shrubbery in which the canoe was caught.

When Winn reached the oleanders he was considerably below the raft, and of course nearly twice as far from the canoe as when he started. He had anticipated this, however, and now began to work his way back against the current by pulling himself from one bush to another. When he reached a point abreast the raft the others saw him and shouted. He only waved his hand in reply and kept on, while they watched him with eager interest. As he gained a position opposite the canoe they shouted again, but still he kept on, until he was nearly a hundred yards above it.

Then, after a long rest, he left the friendly oleanders, and struck out with brave strokes for the coveted object. He was now again swimming diagonally across the current, and knew that even should he miss the canoe, he would be borne down to the raft. But he did not miss it. He had calculated too well for that; and when he again reached the raft,

he brought the *Psyche* with him.

He was chilled to the bone, numb, and sick with exhaustion; but for such a royal cheer as greeted him, and the praises that his companions showered upon him, he would have dared and suffered twice as much. At the same moment, as if to encourage such brave deeds, the sun shone out warm and bright, transforming the whole character of the scene with its cheery warmth.

Sumner Rankin was ready, and with a light heart he stepped into his beloved craft. Then, with vigorous strokes of his double-bladed paddle, he shot away towards the river, where he was to remain until he could persuade a boat of some kind to come to the relief of his fellow-sufferers.

In spite of the sunlight and their hopes of rescue, the long hours passed slowly aboard the *Venture*. There was little to do, and nothing to eat, though Solon did succeed in making a pot of coffee, which they drank without sugar or milk. In one respect, however, it was the most successful day of the *Venture's* entire cruise; for during those tedious hours Billy Brackett and Winn accomplished the object for which it had been undertaken. They sold the raft. In gazing over his flooded plantation and planning for its future, Mr. Manton realized that with the subsidence of the waters he would have immediate use for a large quantity of lumber.

"Why not buy ours?" suggested Winn.

"Why not?" answered Mr. Manton.

Five minutes later the bargain was completed that transferred the ownership of the *Venture*, and crowned Major Caspar's undertaking with success. It was such a satisfactory arrangement that they only wondered they had not thought of it before.

"Here the lumber is, just where I want it, and not a cent of freight to pay," said Mr. Manton.

"Now you and I can get back to Caspar's Mill, and help your father out with that contract; and it is high time we were there too," said Billy Brackett to Winn. "Hello! What's this? The *Psyche* coming back again? If it is, young Rankin must be having a fit, for he's black in the face."

"It's Quorum!" shouted Worth. "In the *Cupid*, too! Of all things, that is the very last I should ever have expected to see!"

Sure enough, it was the faithful negro progressing slowly and with such awkwardness that the anxious spectators expected to see him upset at each moment. Nevertheless, he finally succeeded in reaching the raft; and as they hauled him aboard he gasped, with thankfulness,

"Dat de seckon time dish yer nigger ebber bin in one ob dem ar cooners, an' him hope he be good an' daid befo' him ebber sperimentin' wif um agen!"

Quorum had come from the great house, where the *Cupid* was the sole craft to be had. It was only after hours of persuasion and semi-starvation that he had been induced by the other refugees to make the trip to the raft, which they had discovered soon after daylight. He described a pitiful state of affairs as existing among the hungry throng he had just left, and declared that another day without food would witness great suffering in the crowded house.

Even as he related his story, those gathered about him were startled by the shrill note of a steam-whistle coming from the direction of the river. Sumner had found relief, and was bringing it to them.

During the hours that passed so slowly on the raft, the brave little *Psyche* had cruised here and there over the broad Mississippi sea, now hailing some boat that refused to stop, and then chasing another that it failed to overtake. Finally, late in the afternoon, Sumner discovered a trail of black smoke coming up-stream and towards him. As he anxiously watched it, trying to decide which way he should go to head it off, he discovered a white banner with a scarlet cross flying out cheerily just beneath the trail of smoke. Then he knew that help was at hand, and no matter what other boats might do, that one would stop at his signal.

As it drew near, he was amazed to see that instead of a river steamer, such as he had expected, the red-cross boat was a fine sea-going yacht; and as she came dashing towards him, her sharp stem cleaving the brown waters like a knife, her shining black hull, varnished houses, polished metal, and plate-glass flashing in the light of the setting sun, this sailor son of a sailor father thought her the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. She slowed down at his signal, and in another minute he was alongside.

A line was flung to him, and making it fast to the *Psyche's* painter, he clambered up a ladder that had been dropped from the gangway. As he reached the deck, a fine-looking young fellow, apparently but little older than himself, and wearing a natty yachting uniform, stepped forward to meet him.

Sumner briefly explained his errand, and pointing to the red-cross flag at the foremast-head, added that he believed aid might be expected from those who sailed under it.

"Indeed it may," responded the other, heartily; "and our present business is to discover just such cases as you describe. Although the *Merab* is, as you see, a private yacht, in which we happened to put into New Orleans during a winter cruise to the southward, she is at present in the service of the Red Cross Society, of which I am a member, and devoted to the relief of sufferers by this awful flood. May I ask your name? Mine is Coffin--Tristram Coffin; though I am better known as Breeze McCloud, and that of my friend (here he turned to another young man, also in navy blue) is Mr. Wolfe Brady."

Half an hour later the beautiful *Merab* lay at anchor as near the stranded raft as it was safe to venture, and its occupants were being transferred to her hospitable deck by one of her boats. Another boat, laden with provisions, was on its way to the starving refugees in the great house.

The young owner of the *Merab* insisted that all those who came from the raft should be his guests, at least for that night.

The invitation was accepted as promptly and heartily as it had been given, and soon afterwards two very hungry but very merry parties sat down to bountiful dinners in two entirely distinct parts of the yacht.

Along the mess-table of the galley--or the "camboose," as the yacht's cook insisted upon calling it--were ranged three gentlemen of color, each of whom treated his companions with the greatest deference, though at the same time believing himself to be just a little better posted in culinary matters than either of the others.

"Dish yer wha' I calls a mighty scrumptious repas'," exclaimed Solon, after a long silence devoted to appeasing the pangs of his hunger. "But fo' de true ole-time cookin' gib me de Moss Back kitchin befo' de wah."

"I specs dat ar' berry good in hits way," remarked Quorum; "same time I hain't nebber eat nuffin kin compare wif de cookin' er dem Seminyole Injuns what libs in de Ebberglades. Dat's whar I takin my lesson."

"Sho, gen'l'muns! 'pears to me lak you don't nebber go on er deep-sea v'yge whar you gets de genuwine joe-flogger, an' de plum-duff, an' sich like," said Nimbus, the yacht's cook. "Ef you had, you wouldn' talk."

In the luminous after-saloon the other party was seated at a table white with snowy damask, and gleaming with silver, which was at once the pride and care of old Mateo, the Portuguese steward.

It was a party so overflowing with merriment and laughter, jokes and stories, that from one end of the table the young owner of the yacht was moved to call to his friend at the other,

"I say, Wolfe, this reminds me of the mess aboard the old *Fish Hawk*, when we were 'Dorymates' together off Iceland."

"It reminds me," said Glen Elting, "of the jolly mess of the Second Division, when Billy Brackett and Binney and I were 'Campmates' together in New Mexico."

Said Sumner Rankin, "It reminds me of the cabin mess of the *Transit*, when we went 'Canoemates' together, through the Everglades. Eh, Worth?"

"While I," chimed in Winn Caspar, "am reminded of the happy mess-table of the good ship *Venture*, on which we 'Raftmates' have just floated for more than a thousand miles down the great river."



[Illustration: A reunion of "mates."]

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Manton, rising, and holding high a glass filled with amber-colored river-water, "as I seem to have become a shipmate of Dorymates, Campmates, Canoemates, and Raftmates, I am moved to propose a toast. It is, 'Long life and prosperity, health and happiness, now and forever, to all true mates.'"