

Stratemeyer Edward

The Rover Boys in Southern Waters: or, The Deserted Steam Yacht



Edward Stratemeyer

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CHAPTER I

THE ROVER BOYS AND THEIR FRIENDS

"The houseboat is gone!"

"Tom, what do you mean?"

"I mean just what I say, Sam. The houseboat is gone – vanished, missing, disappeared, drifted away, stolen!" ejaculated Tom Rover, excitedly.

"Tom, don't go on in such a crazy fashion. Do you mean to say the houseboat isn't where we left it?"

"It is not, – and it is nowhere in sight on the river," returned Tom Rover. "Come, we must tell Dick and the others about this."

"But we left the *Dora* in charge of that big planter last night," insisted the youngest of the Rover boys. "He said he would take good care of the craft."

"Well, he is gone too. I hunted high and low for the houseboat, and for that planter, but without success."

"Maybe the boat drifted away, with the planter on board, Tom. The current has been pretty strong since those heavy rains."

"She was tied up good and tight," answered Tom Rover, his usually merry face wearing a troubled look. "I can't understand it."

"I must say I didn't like that planter's manner much. He looked to be rather a sly one. Come on, let us find Dick and the others at once," went on Sam Rover. "If the houseboat has been stolen we want to know it right away, so we can get on the trail of the thief."

"True for you, Sam." Tom Rover heaved a short sigh. "My! what a lot of troubles we have had since we started on this houseboat trip!"

"Yes – but we have had lots of sport too."

The two brothers were standing near the bank of the broad Mississippi River, just below the town of Shapette, in Louisiana. The party to which they belonged had reached the town on their journey down the Father of Waters the day before, and an hour later the houseboat had been tied up at a bend in the stream and left in charge of a planter who had appeared and volunteered for the task. The planter had given his name as Gasper Pold, and had stated that his plantation lay half a mile inland, on higher ground. He had mentioned several people in Shapette as being his close friends – among others the principal storekeeper – and the boys had thought it all right to get him to look after the houseboat while they paid a visit to a sugar plantation where one of their party had a distant relative living.

To my old readers the Rover boys, Sam, Tom, and Dick, need no special introduction. Sam was the youngest, fun-loving Tom next, and cool-headed and clever Dick the oldest.

When at home the three boys lived with their father, Anderson Rover, and their uncle Randolph and aunt Martha in a pleasant portion of New York State called Valley Brook, near the village of Dexter's Corners. From that home they had gone, as already related in "The Rover Boys at School," to Putnam Hall, an ideal place of learning, where they made many friends and also some enemies.

A term at school had been followed by a brief trip on the Atlantic Ocean, and then a journey to the jungles of Africa, where the lads went in a hunt for their father, who had become lost. Then they had gone west, to establish a family claim to a valuable mine, and afterwards taken two well-deserved outings, one on the Great Lakes and the other in the mountains.

From the mountains the Rover boys had expected to go back to Putnam Hall, but a scarlet fever scare caused a temporary closing of that institution of learning and the lads took a trip to the Pacific coast and were cast away on the ocean, as told of in "The Rover Boys on Land and Sea," the seventh volume of this series. But all came back safely and returned to the Hall, there to do their duty and have considerable fun, as set forth in "The Rover Boys in Camp."

The boys' uncle, Randolph Rover, had taken an elegant houseboat for debt. This craft was located on the Ohio River, and in a volume called "The Rover Boys on the River," I related how Sam, Tom, and Dick resolved to take a trip on the craft during their summer vacation. On this outing they were accompanied by "Songbird" Powell, a school chum given to the making of doggerel which he persisted in calling poetry, Fred Garrison, who had stood by the Rovers through thick and thin, and Hans Mueller, a German youth who had not yet fully mastered the English language. To make the trip more interesting the boys invited an old friend, Mrs. Stanhope, to accompany them, and also Mrs. Laning, her sister. With Mrs. Stanhope was a daughter Dora, who Dick Rover thought was the best and sweetest girl in the whole world, and with Mrs. Laning were her daughters Grace and Nellie, warm friends of Tom and Sam.

The trip on the houseboat started well enough, but soon came trouble through the underhanded work of Dan Baxter, a big youth who had been the Rovers' bitter enemy ever since they had gone to Putnam Hall, and another boy named Lew Flapp. These young rascals ran off with the houseboat and two of the girls, and it took hard work to regain the craft and come to the girls' rescue. Lew Flapp was made a prisoner and sent east to stand trial for some of his numerous misdeeds, but Dan Baxter escaped.

"We don't want to see any more of Baxter," Sam had said, but this wish was not to be gratified. Floating down the Mississippi, the houseboat got damaged in a big storm, and had to be laid up for repairs. This being so, all on board decided to take a trip inland, and accordingly they set out, the ladies and girls by way of the railroad and the boys on horseback.

As already told in "The Rover Boys on the Plains," this trip was full of mystery and peril. Dan Baxter turned up most unexpectedly, and our friends visited a mysterious ranch only to learn that it was a rendezvous for a band of counterfeiters. Through a government detective the counterfeiters were rounded up, only one man, Sack Todd, escaping. Dan Baxter also got away, but later on he was traced to a big swamp, where his horse was found, stuck fast in the slimy ooze. It was thought by some that Baxter had lost his life trying to find his way through the swamp, but of this the Rovers were somewhat doubtful.

After the capture of the counterfeiters the boys and their chums had gone on to meet the ladies and the girls, and had spent a full week at the ranch of a friend, having the best times possible, horseback riding, hunting, and helping to round-up cattle. Then the whole party had gone back to the Mississippi, embarked on the *Dora*, as the houseboat was named, and floated down the mighty stream once more.

"This sort of thing is simply grand," Fred Garrison had remarked, as he stood on the forward deck of the craft, yet an hour later he had changed his tune. The houseboat had gone whirling in a bend of the stream, struck a snag and hurled poor Fred overboard. He was hauled up by Sam and Dick Rover, and then it was ascertained that the houseboat was leaking and would have to be laid up again for repairs.

They had stopped at the town of Shapette, a small place, and there they found a carpenter who promised to do what they wanted. When the houseboat was laid up the captain had come to them with a letter.

"My brother in Cairo is dead," said Captain Starr. "I shall have to leave you and look after his children."

The captain was an eccentric individual and the Rovers did not like him much, so they were perfectly willing to let him go. They decided to look around for somebody else to manage the houseboat and in the meantime run the craft themselves.

With the party as cook and general housekeeper was Alexander Pop, a colored man who had once been a waiter at Putnam Hall, but who was now attached to the Rover household. The boys had expected to leave Aleck, as he was called, in charge of the *Dora* while they visited a nearby sugar plantation, but the colored man had begged to be taken along, "jes fo' de change," as he expressed it. As Aleck had remained on the houseboat during the entire time the boys were on the plains Dick agreed to take him along; and thus, for the time being, the *Dora* had been left in the sole care of the planter.

After the visit to the sugar plantation the party had ridden to Shapette, to do a little shopping before returning to the houseboat. There Tom and Sam had left the others, to make certain that the *Dora* was in proper trim to continue the trip down the Mississippi. On the way Sam stopped at a plantation house to get a drink of water, and when he rejoined his brother it was to learn the dismaying news that the houseboat and the man left in charge of the craft had mysteriously disappeared.

CHAPTER II

ABOUT A MISSING HOUSEBOAT

"Let us go down the river and see if the *Dora* is behind yonder trees," suggested Sam, after he had had time to digest what his brother had said.

"All right, if you say so," answered Tom. "But I feel it in my bones it won't do any good."

The two brothers ran along the wet and slippery bank of the river, which at this point sprawled out into almost a lake. They had to walk around several wet places and were pretty well out of wind by the time they gained the patch of wood the youngest Rover had pointed out. They ran to a point where they could get a clear view of the stream for a full mile.

"Gone – just as I told you," said Tom, laconically.

"Oh, Tom, do you really think that planter stole the houseboat?"

"I don't know what to think, to tell the truth. We have fallen in with all kinds of evil characters since we began this trip."

"Even if we go back to Dick and the others and tell them, what good will it do?"

"I don't really know. But I am going to tell Dick, just as fast as I can."

There seemed really nothing else to do, and with heavy hearts Sam and Tom retraced their steps to where the *Dora* had been tied up, and started to return to town.

"This will certainly worry the ladies and the girls a good deal," observed Sam, as they hurried along. "If the houseboat is gone, we can't continue the trip."

"They won't be worried any more than we are, Sam. It's hard lines all around. If that planter really stole the boat he ought to suffer for it."

"Just what I say."

The brothers soon came in sight of Shapette, – a small settlement where half of the inhabitants were of French extraction. As they reached one of the streets they heard a cheerful whistle.

"That's Dick!" said Sam. "He won't whistle so happily when he learns the news."

"Hullo!" came from Dick Rover, as he caught sight of his brothers.

"What brings you back so soon?"

"Thought you were going to stay on the houseboat until we got there," added Fred Garrison, who, with Hans Mueller, accompanied the eldest Rover.

"There is no houseboat to stay on," answered Tom.

"What!"

"The houseboat is gone – and so is that planter who said he'd take care of her."

"Mine cracious me!" burst out Hans Mueller. "You ton't tole me alretty!"

"Tom, you don't mean – " Dick paused.

"The houseboat is gone, clean and clear, Dick."

"And that planter, Gasper Pold – "

"Is gone too," returned Sam. "And so is that carpenter who said he'd repair the craft."

"This is certainly too bad. Tell me the particulars," and Dick's face grew decidedly serious.

"There isn't much to tell," said Tom. "We got there, looked around, made a search, and here we are. No boat in sight, no person to be seen, just nothing and nobody."

"But the houseboat must be somewhere, Tom."

"I agree with you, but not being a second-sight mind reader I can't tell you where."

Alexander Pop, who was with the boys, had listened closely with his eyes rolling in wonder.

"Fo' de Ian' sakes!" he ejaculated. "Dat's de wuss news I's heard in a long time. Seems lak da was no end of troubles fo' dis crowd!"

"Well, if this doesn't beat the Dutch!" murmured Fred Garrison.

"Yah, und it beats der Irish too alretty!" came from Hans Mueller. "Chust ven ve dink der sthars vos shinin' it begins to rain; eh, ain't dot so?"

"You've struck the nail on the head, Hans," answered Sam. "I thought we'd have plain sailing from to-day, and now it looks as if we'd have no sailing at all!"

"Boys," spoke up Dick, sharply, "if that houseboat has been stolen we must get the craft back."

"So say I, Dick," answered Tom. "But how are you going to begin about it?"

"That remains to be seen. Of one thing I am pretty certain – if the houseboat went anywhere it went down the stream. Only a powerful tug or steamboat could pull such a boat up this mighty river."

"That's true – and we must look down the Mississippi for the craft," said Fred.

"Where is Songbird?" asked Tom.

"I left him with the ladies and the girls. They will be along presently, in a carriage," answered Dick.

"There won't be any use of the ladies and girls going down to the river, so long as the *Dora* is missing," said Sam. "They'll have to stay in town, or go back to that sugar plantation, until we learn about the craft."

It was decided that Sam should join the other crowd and acquaint them with the news. He found them at one of the stores, where Mrs. Stanhope was buying some embroidery silk.

"Have you got tired of waiting for us, Sam?" asked Grace Laning, who was the first to see the youngest Rover.

"Oh, I've got bad news, Grace." And then he told the girl of what had occurred, in the midst of which the others came up.

"Missing again!" ejaculated Songbird Powell. "Too bad! What's to be done?"

"We don't know yet."

The ladies were much alarmed and so were the girls. Sam did what he could to quiet their fears, yet he felt unhappy himself.

"I did not like the looks of that planter at all," declared Dora Stanhope. "He had the face of a sneak. I was going to speak to Dick about it, and I am sorry now that I didn't."

"I presume we shall have to remain here until you find the houseboat," came from Mrs. Laning.

"Either here or at the sugar plantation," answered Sam.

"What will you do?"

"I don't know yet – probably go down the river and look for the *Dora*.

She is so large they can't hide her very well."

"Maybe the current of the river carried her away and the planter got scared and left," suggested Songbird. "You'll remember, she broke away once before."

"She couldn't break away – she was tied up good and tight," answered Sam, decidedly.

"Well, if you cannot find the houseboat, we'll have to go home from here instead of from New Orleans," said Mrs. Stanhope. "That will shorten our trip somewhat but not a great deal. But I hope, for your uncle's sake, that you get his property back."

"We'll do that, or know the reason why," answered Sam.

"What's this trouble about your houseboat?" asked the storekeeper, who had caught part of the conversation.

"It's missing."

"So you said. Too bad!"

"Do you know the planter who had charge of the craft?" went on Sam.

"He was tall and thin and went by the name of Gasper Pold."

"What, did you leave your boat with that man? You should have known better. Didn't you know Pold was an old lottery sharp?"

"We did not."

"Well, he is, and has cheated many a poor white man and nigger out of his hard-earned savings. He's in bad flavor around here, and some of the citizens were just about to ask him to leave or run the risk of tar and feathers."

"Well, he has left, and taken our houseboat with him," said Sam, bitterly. "What about Solly Jackson, the carpenter who was going to do some repairs for us?"

"Oh, Solly's a fairly good kind, but years ago he used to work the lottery ticket game with Pold. He's an old bachelor and never has much to say about anything."

"Has he any regular shop?"

"Oh, no; he's a come-day-go-day sort of fellow, boards around, and like that."

"Then he must be in with Gasper Pold," said the youngest Rover.

"They've cleared out together with our property."

"Hum! Might be so, lad. Have much on board the craft?"

"Yes, a great many things – furniture, a piano, books, and all of our clothing."

"Hum! Quite a haul – if they can get away with it. Maybe you had better notify the authorities."

"We certainly will – if we can't find the houseboat," said Sam, and then, after a few words more with the ladies and the girls, he started off to rejoin Tom and Dick, and Songbird Powell went with him.

CHAPTER III

A FRIEND IN NEED

It was ten o'clock in the morning when the discovery was made that the houseboat was missing, and by the middle of the afternoon the Rover boys and their chums were certain that the craft had been stolen by Gasper Pold and Solly Jackson.

A negro boy who went by the name of Wash – evidently short for Washington – gave them more information than anybody else. This boy, who had been fishing near the woods below Shapette, stated that he had seen the two men go aboard the houseboat early in the morning, accompanied by a young man who was a stranger. The three had cast off the ropes, poled the houseboat far out into the stream, and then drifted out of sight down the mighty Mississippi.

"I thought dat it was werry funny da should be gwine away," said the young darkey. "But I didn't dare to go show myself, fo' I know dat Gasper Pold is a bad aig when he's riled up, yes, sah!"

"You didn't know the young man who went along?" asked Dick.

"No, sah – neber see him afoah, sah."

"How did he look?"

"He looked putty much lak a tramp, yes, sah! He was putty dirty too, he was!"

"Some tramp they got to help them," was Tom's comment. "The question is, Where will they go with the houseboat?"

"I don't think they'll dare to go to any of the big towns," said Dick. "They'll be afraid we'll telegraph ahead to catch them. More than likely they'll land at some out-of-the-way spot and cart our valuables off in a wagon. Then possibly they'll cast the houseboat adrift, or set fire to her."

"If that's the case, what's to do?" questioned Fred Garrison. "I hate to sit still and do nothing."

"Yah! let us go after dem fellers mit pitchforks alretty!" added Hans, vehemently. "Such robbers ought to peen electrocutioned mit a rope, ain't dot so?"

"You mean hung, Hans," said Sam. "They certainly ought to be punished."

"Well swing them high, I do declare,
And let them dance on naught but air!
And When they've danced and hour so slick,
We'll cut them down and bury them quick,"

came softly from Songbird, who could not resist the temptation to burst into verse.

"Great shoestrings, Songbird! To think you'd make up poetry on such a subject," cried Fred.

"Couldn't help it – I haven't composed anything to-day," was the calm answer.

"Maype Songpird been komposing boultry ven he been in his coffin," remarked Hans.

"All of which doesn't answer the question, What are we going to do?" said Sam.

"I wonder if I can charter a small tug or steamboat to go down the river after the houseboat," came from Dick.

"There isn't much to be had in the town," answered Fred Garrison.

"Still, we can try."

The Rovers with their friends returned to Shapette. Here they ran into the chief of police, who also acted as a sort of detective.

"Boat stolen! Is it possible!" burst out that official. "Never heard of such a thing befo', sah, never! I am sorry, sah, exceedingly sorry, sah! Have you any idea who is guilty, sah?"

"I have," answered Dick, and told what he knew.

"A bad man, sah, that Gasper Pold – ought to have been arrested long ago, sah, yes, sah. But nobody would make a complaint – all afraid of a shooting – very quick man to draw a pistol, yes, sah."

"That's interesting," said Tom. "He'll be a fine man to confront, if we catch up to him."

The chief of police said he would do anything he could, but in the end refused to leave Shapette, and so did nothing. The Rovers soon learned that all he was good for was to talk, and they left him in disgust.

"We must take this trail up ourselves," said Sam. "And the quicker the better."

They walked down to the river front, and after a number of inquiries found out that to charter a tug or small steamboat was just then out of the question, for no craft of that sort was near. But they learned that a young man of the vicinity named Harold Bird, who was the owner of several valuable plantations in that district, owned a new gasoline launch of good size which was housed at a place a mile away.

"I am going to see Harold Bird," said Dick. "Perhaps he'll lend us his launch."

They found out where the young man lived and visited the plantation in a carriage. It was a beautiful place, with an old family mansion surrounded by grounds laid out with exquisite taste.

"Evidently these folks have money," observed Tom.

"Oh, some of these planters are immensely wealthy," answered Sam.

As they drove into the grounds they saw a young man playing with a bird dog on the lawn. He smiled at them pleasantly.

"Is this Mr. Harold Bird?" asked Dick.

"Yes," was the reply. "What can I do for you?"

"Let me introduce myself, Mr. Bird. I am Dick Rover, and these are my brothers. Sam and Tom. These are my friends, Fred Garrison and John Powell."

"Is it possible!" exclaimed Harold Bird. "Why, I was reading about you only yesterday, in the newspaper. You are the young fellows who helped to round up that gang of counterfeiters at Red Rock ranch. It was certainly a stirring piece of work. You deserve a great deal of credit." And then the young Southerner shook hands all around.

"Mr. Bird, we are in trouble," went on Dick, "and we thought that perhaps you would be able to help us out."

"I will certainly do anything that I possibly can for you. Come, sit down and tell me what is wrong."

The young Southerner led the way to the broad veranda, and all took seats. Then Dick and the others told about the missing houseboat and of how they had wanted to charter a tug or a steamboat to go in pursuit.

"I could not find a vessel of any kind," said Dick. "But some folks told me that you had a big gasoline launch, and I thought perhaps you would let us have that. Of course we'll pay you for –"

"Never mind about pay, Mr. Rover. I shall be glad to be of service to you. I will let you have my launch on one condition."

"And that is –"

"That you will take me with you. I love excitement, and this pursuit of those rascals is just to my taste. We can take one of my best dogs along, so, if we find they have landed anywhere, we can readily trace them."

"But the danger?" said Sam.

"Why should I be afraid if you are not? Of course you will go well armed."

"Indeed we will," said Tom. "More than likely they'll be well armed, too."

After that a long talk ensued, and Harold Bird had the servants treat the boys to light refreshments. He was a capital fellow, with a winning, though rather sad smile, and all liked him from the start.

"I've seen a bit of adventure myself, – visiting Mexico and Europe, and climbing high mountains," he said. "But I haven't had such stirring times as you. It is very quiet here, and I shall enjoy the change."

"Are you alone here, may I ask?" said Fred, curiously.

"Yes, excepting for my overseer and the servants. The estate was left to me by my mother, who died three years ago."

"It must be rather lonely," murmured Songbird.

"It is exceedingly lonely at times, and that is why I travel a great deal – that and for another reason." And the face of the young man clouded for the time. Evidently he had something on his mind, but what it was he did not just then mention.

He told them how he had come to buy the gasoline launch and said it was big enough to take on board a party of twelve or fifteen with comfort. It was decided to take some provisions along, for there was no telling how long the chase would last.

It was evening before all arrangements were completed and the whole party went to town. There they met the ladies and the girls, and Harold Bird was introduced.

"I should consider it an honor to have you remain at my plantation while we are off on this search for the houseboat," said the young Southerner. "You can stay there as long as you please and make yourselves thoroughly at home."

As there was no good hotel in the town, this invitation relieved Mrs. Stanhope and Mrs. Laning a great deal, and they said they would accept the offer, and thanked the young man very much. Carriages were obtained, and inside of two hours the ladies and the girls were at Lee Hall, as Harold Bird called his place. There were rooms in plenty for all, and each was made to feel perfectly at home. It was decided that Aleck Pop should also remain at the plantation for the time being.

"The hospitality in the South is certainly marvelous," said Dora to Dick. "When I left home I never thought I should be treated so well."

"You are right, Dora. The whole world over, you will find no greater gentleman than one from our South."

"And what a beautiful plantation!" cried Nellie. "What grand walks, and trees and flowers!"

"And what a fine lot of colored servants," came from Grace. "Really they won't let me do a thing for myself!"

"I should think Mr. Bird would be very happy," said Mrs. Laning, for at that moment the owner of the estate was not present.

"You'd think so," answered Dick. "But do you know, notwithstanding his smiling face he appears at times to be very sad."

"I thought so," said Mrs. Stanhope. "He acts as if he had something on his mind."

"Yes, and something that worried him a great deal," added Tom.

They were right, Harold Bird had a great deal to worry him, and what it was we shall learn as our tale proceeds.

CHAPTER IV

HAROLD BIRD'S STRANGE TALE

Early in the morning the Rovers and their friends were ready to take their departure. Dick came down in the garden at sunrise, and was soon joined by Dora, and they took a short walk together.

"Oh, Dick, you must keep out of danger," said Dora. "Promise me you will be careful!"

"I will be careful, Dora," he answered, as he looked down into the depths of her clear eyes. "I will be careful – for your sake," he added, in almost a whisper.

"If something sh – should happen to you!" she faltered.

"I'll take care of myself, don't fear, Dora," he made reply, and then, as they were all alone he drew her up to him. "Dora, may I?" he asked, softly and tenderly.

She did not answer, but looked up at him, innocently and confidingly.

He bent over and kissed her, and gave her hand a little squeeze.

"We understand each other, don't we, Dora?" he whispered.

"Of course we do," she whispered in return.

"And some day you'll be Mrs. Dick Rover?"

"Oh, Dick!"

"But you will be, won't you?"

"I – I – suppose – Oh!" And then Dora broke from Dick's hold, as Fred Garrison and Hans Mueller appeared, around a bend of the pathway.

"Breakfast is waiting!" sang out Fred. "Hurry up, if we are to start that search."

"All right," answered Dick. – "We'll be in right away."

"See, I vos bick me a peautiful roses," put in Hans Mueller, coming closer. "Dick, of you ton't peen – vot you call him? – jealousy, yah, I gif him to Dora," and he passed over the flower.

"Oh, thank you, Hans," replied Dora, and she placed the flower in her hair. Then she gave Dick a look that meant a good deal, and they understood each other perfectly, and both went in to breakfast feeling very happy.

In the meantime Sam and Tom had been out on a side veranda with Grace and Nellie. Tom was as full of fun as ever and kept the two girls in a roar of laughter. Yet both girls grew serious when the time for parting came.

"You look out for yourself," said Grace. "Remember, those men are bad characters to meet."

"Yes, I shouldn't want you to get hurt for the world," added Nellie, and when she shook hands with Tom there was something like a tear in her eye.

Then came good-byes all around, and the carriage that was to take Dick and the others to the town drove around to the door. The party climbed in and in a moment more were off, the girls and ladies waving their handkerchiefs and the boys swinging their caps and hats.

"Yo' boys dun take good care ob yo'selves," said Aleck, who stood by, with a look of concern on his ebony face. "If yo' come back killed dis coon will neber fo'give himself!"

"Come back as soon as you can!" called out Dora.

"Don't worry – we may be back in a day or two," answered Dick. But it was destined to be many a long day ere the two parties should meet again.

Down at the riverside they found the launch in charge of a negro and all ready for the start. The provisions were stored in two lockers on board, and another locker held their firearms and some raincoats.

"Hurrah! Here is news," cried Dick, after perusing a telegram that had been handed to him. "You'll remember I telegraphed to Benton, the town below here. Well, here is word that the

houseboat was seen passing Benton yesterday at about five o'clock, and headed towards the west shore. That ought to give us something to work on.

"It will," answered Harold Bird. "Come, the sooner we get started the better."

All stepped aboard of the *Venus*, as the launch was named, and soon the gasoline motor was buzzing away at a good rate of speed. Then the power was turned on the screw, Harold Bird took his station at the wheel, and away they sped from the landing and out onto the broad Mississippi.

"Hurrah for a life on der oceans vafe und a ship on der rollings deeps!" sang out Hans, who sat near the bow.

"Gosh, Hans is getting poetic!" said Tom. "That's right, Hansy, my boy, keep it up and you'll soon put Songbird out of business."

"What I want to know is," came from Fred, "if we strike a sunken snag is this launch safe?"

"As safe as any craft of her size," answered Harold Bird. "But I shan't strike a snag if I can help it. I am not running at full speed, and if you'll notice I am keeping where the water is fairly clear."

"Which isn't saying a great deal," came from Sam. "I never saw a river as muddy as the Mississippi."

"I know one other stream that is worse, and that's the Missouri," said Harold Bird. "And as that flows into the Mississippi it makes the latter almost as bad."

As soon as they were well on their way Dick brought out the firearms which had been brought along, and examined them with care.

"You certainly have some fine weapons," said he, referring to the pistols brought by Harold Bird. "Do you do much shooting – I mean with a gun?"

"I never go shooting at all," was the young Southerner's reply, and once again the boys saw that strange look of sadness come over his face.

"Funny, you wouldn't care to go out," said Songbird, carelessly.

"Must be quite some game around here."

"There is plenty of game, but – " Harold Bird heaved a deep sigh. "I presume I may as well tell you my story, for you are bound to hear it sooner or later," he went on. "About four years ago my father went out hunting in the forest to the north of our plantation. He was out with two friends, but about the middle of the day the party separated and my father found himself alone. Then he saw something that to him looked like a wildcat on a big rock. He fired quickly, and when he drew closer he saw to his horror that he had shot and killed a man – an old hunter named Blazen.

"The shock of the discovery made my father faint, and when the others came up they found him working over the dead body of Blazen in a vain endeavor to bring the hunter back to life. A doctor was called, but nothing could be done for Blazen, for the shot had killed him instantly, taking him squarely in the heart. Of course it was an accident, but my father couldn't get over it. He raved and wept by turns, and at last the doctors had to place him in confinement for fear that he would try to do himself some injury. My mother was prostrated by the news, and you can imagine how I felt myself."

"It was certainly terrible," said Dick, and the others nodded in silence.

"Blazen was an old bachelor, with no relatives, so there were few to mourn over his death. We saw to it that he was given a decent burial and advertised for his heirs, but nobody appeared. In the meantime my father grew melancholy and the doctors thought he might become insane. They advised a trip to new scenes, and my mother and I took him to Europe and then to Kingston, Jamaica, where an old friend of the family had a plantation. One day my father disappeared."

"Disappeared?" echoed Sam and Tom.

"Yes, disappeared utterly and forever. We hunted high and low for him and offered a big reward for any information. It was useless. We have never seen him or heard a word of him since."

"And what do you think became of him?" questioned Songbird Powell.

"I cannot imagine, excepting that he may have thrown himself into the bay and drowned himself. He had a habit of going down to the water and gazing out to sea by the hour."

"Too bad!" murmured Dick. "Mr. Bird, I sympathize deeply with you."

"And so do I," came from the other boys.

"The disappearance of my father made my mother ill and it was all I could do to get her back home. There we procured the best of medical skill, but it did little good. She had always had heart trouble and this grew rapidly worse until she died, leaving me utterly alone in the world."

Harold Bird stopped speaking and wiped the tears from his eyes. All of his listeners were deeply affected. It was several seconds before anybody spoke.

"I don't wonder you don't care to go hunting," said Sam. "I'd feel the same way."

"I have never visited the forest since the time the tragedy took place," answered Harold Bird. "At first I thought to sell off the stretch of land to a lumber company, but now I have changed my mind, and I intend to give it to the heirs of Blazen, if any appear."

"Is it a valuable tract?" asked Fred.

"The lumber company offered me twenty thousand dollars for it."

"If your father was drowned it is queer that you never heard anything of his body," said Fred.

"Bodies of drowned people are not always recovered," answered the young Southerner. "But he must have been drowned, for if he had been alive we surely would have heard something of him. The reward we offered set hundreds of people to hunting for him."

"It is certainly a mystery," said Dick. "I suppose you'd give a good deal to have it cleared up."

"I'd give half of what I am worth," answered Harold Bird, earnestly.

CHAPTER V

STUCK IN THE MUD

Noon found our friends at the town of Benton – a place of some importance in the cotton trade. Without delay Dick sought out the man who had had to do with the telegrams.

"I can't tell you much more than what I put in the message," said the man. "I saw the houseboat out yonder and headed in that direction. I was watching her when a fog came up and hid her from view."

"I think I can follow her," put in Harold Bird. "Anyway, we can try."

"Did those fellows steal the houseboat?" questioned the Benton man.

"They did."

"Then I hope you catch them."

Our friends did not stop to get dinner, but took their lunch on board of the *Venus*. The river at Benton was broad and deep and consequently Harold Bird turned on full speed, sending the launch forward with such a rush that the water often came in a shower of spray over the bow.

"I may be mistaken, but I have an idea that those rascals headed for Lake Sico," said the young Southerner. "Gaspar Pold used to hang around that lake, and most likely there are men there who would aid him in disposing of whatever is on the *Dora* of value."

"Where is Lake Sico?" asked Sam.

"About fifteen miles from here. It is a very broad and shallow sheet of water, and is reached by a narrow and tortuous bayou all of four miles long. One end of the lake is a perfect wilderness of bushes and brake – an ideal hiding-place for the houseboat."

"Then perhaps we had better explore the lake," said Tom.

"There is only one objection," answered Dick. "If the houseboat is not there, we'll be losing a lot of valuable time."

"Is the entrance to the bayou very narrow?" asked Tom. "For if it is, the houseboat would be apt to strike the mud shore and leave marks."

"Yes, it is narrow, and we'll look for marks by all means," answered the young Southerner.

As they were moving with the stream it did not take the launch long to reach the bayou that connected the lake with the Mississippi. But close to the bayou entrance the swirling waters had cast up a ridge or bar of mud and on this the launch slid and stuck fast.

"Hullo, we're stuck!" cried Tom.

"And we are up out of the water too," came from his younger brother.

"Can't we back?" asked Fred.

"I'll try it," returned Harold Bird.

The screw of the launch was reversible and he made the change in power. The water was churned up into a muddy foam, but that was all. The *Venus* did not budge an inch.

"One of the joys of a life 'on der rollings deeps!'" grumbled Tom, imitating Hans. "Songbird, can't you compose an ode in honor of the occasion?"

"Certainly I can," said Songbird promptly, and started:

"As firm as a rock, our launch now rests
Upon her bed of mud,
As safe as a ship on a golden sea – "

"Or a clothespin in a tub!" finished Tom. "Songbird, give us something better, or none at all."

"Say, vot has a clothesbin in a dub to do mit being stuck here alretty?" questioned Hans, innocently.

"Why, Hansy, old boy, that's easy," cried Tom. "A clothespin is for sticking something fast, and we are stuck fast. Now, can't you see the joke, as the blind astronomer said to the deaf musician?"

"Yah, dot's so, but ve ain't stuck on no clothes-pins," answered Hans, soberly. "Ve vos stuck on der Mississippi's Rifer, ain't it."

"Score one for Hans," came, with a laugh, from Sam. "Hans, what do you think we ought to do?"

"Dake a rope py der shore und bull der poat loose."

"That's the talk," said Songbird. "Hans can carry the rope ashore."

The water is only a foot deep."

"And the mud is about sixteen feet deep," put in Dick, quickly. "Don't try it, unless you want to sink out of sight."

For several minutes all sat still in the launch, viewing the situation with considerable dismay.

"This is something I didn't bargain for," said Fred. "But we may as well make the best of it."

"Let us try to shove her off," suggested Dick.

On board the launch were three poles of good size, each fixed so that a small, square board could be fastened to one end. Dick took one of these poles and Tom and Sam seized the others.

"Now, Hans, Fred, and Songbird, get in the stern," said Dick.

"That's the talk, and I'll try to back her at the same time!" cried Harold Bird. "All ready?"

In a minute they were ready to try the experiment and the power was turned on. As the screw churned the water and mud once more, the three Rovers pushed on the poles with all their might.

"Hurrah! she's moving!" cried Fred.

He was right, the *Venus* was slowly but surely leaving the bank of mud. Suddenly she gave a twist and then ran backwards rapidly, and then the power was shut off again.

"Free at last!" cried Tom. "Now what's the next move?"

"We must find the proper channel into the bayou," answered the owner of the launch.

Dick and Tom went to the front with their poles and the power was turned to a slow speed forward. The Rovers felt their way in the water with the poles, calling to turn to the right or the left, as the case required. By this means they soon left the treacherous mud bars behind and reached a point where forward progress was more certain.

"Now then, let us look around and see if we can find any traces of the *Dora*," said Dick.

"The houseboat couldn't have come over that spot – she would have been stuck sure," said Fred.

"Years ago Solly Jackson used to be a riverman," said Harold Bird. "He would probably know exactly how to get the houseboat into the bayou. Gasper Pold couldn't run the craft himself, so he had to take in a fellow like Solly."

As the gasoline launch entered the bayou all kept their eyes on the alert, and presently Songbird set up a shout:

"Look over yonder – there are some sort of marks on the bank!"

He was right, and they turned the launch in the direction indicated, advancing slowly. There was a sharp cut in the mud and also several pole holes which looked to be rather fresh. A few feet further on they came to a piece of a pole painted blue.

"That settles it," exclaimed Dick. "They certainly brought the houseboat in here. Our poles were painted blue, and that is a piece of one."

"The very one I cracked in the storm," added Sam.

"I can explain it," said Harold Bird. "They got the houseboat around the mud bars, but the force of the current, combined with the current in the bayou, swung the craft up against this bank. Then they had to pole the houseboat off."

"But how did they go on, against the current from the lake?" asked Songbird.

"Pulled and poled the houseboat. Just wait and see if I am not right."

They waited, and soon reached a point where one bank of the bayou was fairly firm. Here they could see footprints and the "shaving" of a rope as it had passed over the edge of the bank.

"We are on the right track," said Dick. "Now, all we have to do is to locate the houseboat and corner the rascals who stole her."

"All!" cried Fred. "I should say that was enough!"

"Especially if they offer to fight," added Sam.

"It is a pity we can't come on them unawares," said Tom. "But that is impossible, for you can't run the launch without making a noise."

"Maybe you don't besser git out dem bistols alretty," came from Hans.

"Of da ton't gif ub ve plow der heads off, ain't it!"

"Yes, we may as well get out the firearms," said Dick. "The sight of the pistols may have a good effect. Perhaps the rascals will give up without fighting."

The pistols were gotten out, and all of the youths saw to it that they were in perfect condition for immediate use. As he looked at the weapons Harold Bird shuddered.

"I suppose you hate the sight of them, – after what happened to your father," said Dick, in a low tone.

"I do. I sincerely trust there is no bloodshed," answered the young Southerner.

It was nightfall by the time the launch was clear of the bayou. In front of them lay the calm waters of Lake Sico – a shallow expanse, with mud flats at one side and a wilderness of trees, bushes, and wild canebrake at the other. They shut off the power and listened. Not a sound broke the stillness.

"Talk about solitude," was Tom's comment. "Here is where you can chop it out with an ax!"

"It's enough to make one shiver," added Fred.

Just then the dog Harold Bird had brought along set up a mournful howl.

"Even the dog doesn't like it," said Songbird. "Let us go on – I'd rather hear the puff-puff of the gasoline motor than listen to such stillness."

"I thought a poet craved solitude," said Dick. "This ought to fill you with inspiration."

"I think it will fill us with chills and fever," said Fred. "Ugh, how damp it is, now the sun is going down."

"There is a mist creeping up," said Harold Bird. "Too bad! I was in hope it would remain clear."

Soon the darkness of night settled over the lake. The mist continued to roll over them until they were completely enveloped and could no longer see where they were going.

"It can't be helped," said the owner of the launch. "We'll have to wait until daylight. If I light the acetylene gas lamp it will simply put those rascals on guard."

"Vot is ve going to do – sthay on der poat all night?" asked Hans.

"We can either do that or go ashore – just as you wish."

"Let us move towards shore," said Dick. "It will be more pleasant under some overhanging trees or bushes."

This was agreed to, and they steered for the bank of the lake, which was not far away. None of them dreamed of what that night was to bring forth.

CHAPTER VI

FIGHTING BOB CATS

It was certainly a dismal and dreary outlook, and it did not help matters much to run the launch under the wide overhanging boughs of several trees growing at the edge of the lake. They were in something of a cove, so the view was shut off on three sides.

"I wish we had brought along some extra blankets," said Sam. "If it is raw now what will it be by midnight?"

"Hadn't we better build a little campfire?" questioned Fred. "It will make it ever so much more pleasant."

"I do not advise a fire," answered Harold Bird. "If those rascals should see it, they'd come here to investigate, and then try to slip away from us in the darkness."

"You are right," put in Dick. "We must keep dark until we have located them, – otherwise the game will be up."

To protect themselves still more from the mist and cold, they brought out four rubber blankets of good size. These were laced into one big sheet and raised over the launch like an awning. Then all huddled beneath, to make themselves as comfortable as possible.

"Don't you think somebody ought to remain on guard?" asked Tom. "We don't want those fellows to carry us off and us not know it!"

"Da can't vos carry me off dot vay," said Hans, who could never see the funny side of a remark. "I would kick, I tole you!"

"As there are seven of us, why not have everybody stand guard for just an hour?" suggested Sam. "If we turn in at ten that will carry us through to five in the morning – when we ought to continue our hunt."

"Providing the mist will let us," smiled Harold Bird. "But I think your plan a good one," he added.

Lots were drawn and Fred went on guard first, to be followed by Hans and Tom. At ten o'clock all of the crowd but Fred turned in, to get as much sleep as possible.

"I tole you vot," remarked Hans, as he tried to make his head feel easy on one of the seats. "Dis ton't vos so goot like mine ped at Putnam Hall!"

"Not by a good deal!" answered Songbird. "Dear old Putnam Hall! After all the pleasures we have had, I shall be glad to get back to that institution again."

The Rover boys had been through so much excitement during their lives they did not think the present situation unusual and so all went to sleep without an effort. Harold Bird remained awake nearly an hour, thinking of the new friends he had made and of the strange fate of his father. The young Southerner was of a somewhat retiring disposition, and it astonished even himself when he realized how he had opened his heart to the Rovers and their chums.

"I feel as if I had known them for years, instead of hours," he told himself. "There is a certain attractiveness about Sam, Tom, and Dick I cannot understand. Yet I do not wonder that they have a host of friends who are willing to do almost anything for them."

When Tom went on guard he was still sleepy and he did a large amount of yawning before he could get himself wide-awake. He sat up in the bow of the launch, the others resting on the cushions on the sides and stern. All was as silent as a tomb, and the mist was now so thick that he could not see a distance of six yards in any direction.

"Ugh! what a disagreeable night!" he muttered, as he gave a shiver. "I'd give as much as a toothpick and a bottle of hair-oil if it was morning and the sun was shining."

A quarter of an hour went by – to Tom it seemed ten times as long as that – and then of a sudden the lad heard a movement at the bottom of the launch. The dog Harold Bird had brought along arose, stretched himself, and listened intently.

"What is it, Dandy?" asked Tom, patting the animal on the head. "What do you hear?"

For reply the dog continued to listen. Then the hair on his back began to rise and he set up a short, sharp bark.

"He certainly hears something," reasoned Tom. "Can any of those men be in this vicinity?"

The bow of the launch was close to a sprawling tree branch, and to look beyond the rubber covering, Tom crawled forward and stepped on the branch. The dog followed to the extreme bow of the boat and gave another short, sharp bark.

"He hears something, that is certain," mused the boy. "But what it can be, is a puzzle to me."

Tom tried to pierce the darkness and mist, but it was impossible. He strained his ears, but all he could hear was the occasional dropping of water from one leaf to another over his head.

"Maybe I had better arouse the others," he murmured, for the barking of the dog had apparently not disturbed them. "I am sure the dog wouldn't bark unless there was a reason for it; would you, Dandy?"

Tom looked at the animal and saw the dog had his nose pointed up in the tree next to that which the launch was under. He peered in the direction and gave a start.

Was he mistaken, or had he caught the glare of a pair of shining eyes fastened upon him? Tom was naturally a brave boy, yet a strange shiver took possession of him. The dog now bristled furiously and gave two sharp barks in quick succession.

"Hullo, what's up?" came from Dick, who was awakened.

"I believe there is some wild animal up yonder tree, spotting us," answered Tom. "I think I just caught a glimpse of its eyes."

This announcement caused Dick to rouse up, and taking his pistol he crawled to the bow of the launch and joined his brother on the tree limb. Just then the dog started to bark furiously.

"There he is!" cried Tom, and raised the pistol he had in his pocket. There could be no mistake about those glaring eyes, and taking hasty aim, he fired.

The report of the firearm had not yet died away when there came the wild and unmistakable screech of a wounded bob cat – a wildcat well known in certain portions of our southern states. At the same time the dog began to bark furiously, and everybody on board the launch was aroused.

"What's the matter?"

"Who fired that shot?"

"Vos dose rascals here to fight mit us alretty?"

"It's a bob cat!" cried Dick. "Tom just fired at it!"

"Look out, it's coming down!" yelled Tom, and that instant the bob cat, unable to support itself longer on the tree limb, fell with a snarl on the rubber covering of the launch, carrying it down upon those underneath.

The next few minutes things happened so rapidly that it is almost impossible to describe them. The bob cat rolled over and over, clawing at the rubber cloth and ripping it to shreds. The boys tried to get another shot, but did not dare to fire for fear of hitting each other. But the dog leaped in and caught the bob cat by the back of the neck, and an instant later cat and canine went whirling over the side of the boat into the waters of the lake.

"They are overboard!" cried Sam.

"Make a light, somebody!" yelled Songbird. "It isn't safe in the dark."

The acetylene gas lamp of the launch was ready for use, and striking a match Harold Bird lit it. The sharp rays were turned on the water, and there dog and bob cat could be seen whirling around in a mad struggle for supremacy.

Bang! went Dick's pistol. He had taken quick but accurate aim, and the bob cat was hit in the side. It went under with a yelp, letting go of the dog as it did so. Dandy gave a final nip and then turned and swam back to the launch and was helped aboard by his master.

"Wonder if the bob cat is dead?" asked Fred, in a voice that he tried in vain to steady.

"Hasn't come up again," came laconically from Songbird. He had taken the lamp from Harold Bird and was sending the rays over the surface of the lake in several directions.

They watched for several minutes and then made out the dead form of the bob cat floating among the bushes on the opposite side of the little cove.

"Done for – and I am glad of it," murmured Tom, and he wiped the cold perspiration from his forehead.

"I don't know if we are out of the woods or not," said the owner of the launch. "Where there is one bob cat there are often more."

"In that case I think we had better move the boat away from the shore," answered Dick. "It may not be as comfortable as under the trees but it will be safer."

At that moment the gas lamp began to flicker and die down.

"Here, give the lamp to me," said the launch owner, and taking the lamp he shook it and tried to turn more water on the carbide. But the water would not run for some reason and a few seconds later the light went out.

In the darkness the boys started to untie the launch. As they did this they heard a movement in the tree directly over their heads and then came the cry of a bob cat calling its mate.

"There's another!" yelled Sam. "Say, we had better get out as fast as we can!"

The gasoline launch was just shoved away from the tree limb when the bob cat above made a leap and landed on the bow of the craft! It glared a moment at the boys, its two eyes shining like balls of fire, and then started to make a leap.

Bang! crack! bang! went three pistols in rapid succession, and as the reports died away the bob cat fell in a heap on the bottom of the launch, snarling viciously. Then Dandy, still exhausted from his fight in the water, leaped on the beast and held it down while Tom finished it with a bullet in the ear.

"Is it dead?" asked Songbird, after a painful silence.

"I guess so. Light a match, somebody."

Several matches were lit and then an old oil lantern which chanced to be on board. The bob cat was indeed dead and near it lay the dog, with a deep scratch in its foreshoulder.

"Noble Dandy, you did what you could," said Harold Bird, affectionately.

Very gingerly Tom and Dick picked up the carcass of the bob cat and threw it overboard. By this time the launch had drifted a good fifty feet from shore, and there they anchored.

"Keep that lantern lit," said Fred. "I can't stand the darkness after such doings!"

"If those thieves are around they must have heard the shots," said Sam. "So a light won't make much difference."

"I am going to examine the gas lamp," said the young Southerner, and did so. A bit of dirt had gotten into the feed pipe of the lamp, and when this was cleaned out with a thin wire the light worked as well as ever.

It was some time after the excitement before any of the crowd could get to sleep again. Then Hans got a nightmare and yelled "Bop cats! fire! murder!" and other things as loudly as he could, and that put further rest out of the question, and all waited anxiously for the coming of morning.

CHAPTER VII

THE HOUSEBOAT IN THE BUSHES

With the coming of morning the mist cleared away as if by magic, and soon the warm sunshine put all on board of the gasoline launch in better spirits.

"How is the dog?" questioned Dick, of the owner of the canine.

"He has been pretty well mauled up, but I think he'll come around with proper attention," answered the young Southerner. "He is a valuable animal – valuable to me because he was a pet of my father – and I'd hate to lose him."

All were hungry and ate their morning lunch with considerable satisfaction, washing it down with some coffee made on a small oil stove that had been brought along.

"Well, I don't see anything of the houseboat," announced Dick, as he stood on a seat and took a long and careful look around. "Not a craft or a building of any kind in sight."

"Some negroes used to live on the north shore of the lake," said Harold Bird, "but the floods last year made them vacate in a hurry."

It was decided to move around the shore of the lake slowly, scanning every cove and inlet with care. That the houseboat was hidden somewhere on that expanse of water none of the party had any doubt.

"You could take quite a trip in this launch," said Sam to Harold Bird, as they moved along. "The more I see of the craft the better I like her. May I ask what she is worth?"

"I gave two thousand dollars for her. I bought her in New Orleans and brought her up the river myself. The folks around here don't know much about gasoline launches, but I think she's as nice a craft as anybody would wish."

"How much water does she draw?"

"Only two and a half feet when loaded down – so you see we can get over some pretty shallow spots, if it is necessary."

They were moving along a scantily-wooded stretch of shore when Tom let out a short cry:

"Stop!"

"What's up, Tom?" asked several.

"I saw somebody just now – back of yonder bushes. He stepped out and then stepped back again."

"Was it one of the men we are after?" asked Sam.

"I don't know – he got out of sight before I had a good look at him."

"We'll have to investigate," said Dick, and to this the others agreed. With all possible haste the launch was run to the shore and Sam, Tom, and Dick got out, followed by Harold Bird. The dog came also, limping along painfully.

"Find him, Dandy, find him!" said the young Southerner, in a low tone, and the dog seemed to understand. He put his nose to the ground, ran around for several minutes, and then started off through the bushes.

"Do you think he has struck the trail?" asked Tom.

"I am sure of it," was Harold Bird's positive reply.

The young Southerner called to the dog, and Dandy went forward more slowly, so that they could keep him in sight. They passed through one patch of bushes and then came to a clear space, beyond which was a field of wild sugarcane.

Hardly had the dog struck the cleared spot when from a distance came the report of a pistol. Dandy leaped up in the air, came down in a heap, and lay still.

"Somebody has shot the dog!" cried Sam. "What a shame!"

Harold Bird said nothing, but ran to where the canine lay. Dandy was breathing his last, and in a minute it was all over.

"Poor fellow!" murmured the young Southerner, and there were tears in his eyes. "First the bob cats and now a pistol bullet! Oh, if I can only catch the rascal who fired that shot I'll make him suffer for this!"

"The fellow killed the dog, so the animal could not trail him," said Dick. "It was certainly a dirty trick."

"It shows that the man is a criminal," put in Tom. "He would not be afraid of us if he was honest."

"And therefore it must have been Gasper Pold or Solly Jackson," said Sam.

"What will you do with the dog?" asked Dick, after an awkward pause.

"Take him back to the boat and bury him," answered the young Southerner.

"I don't want the wild beasts to feed on him."

"Hadn't we better follow up that man first?"

"We can do so, if you wish."

They passed on and looked around that vicinity with care. It must be confessed that they were afraid of being shot at, but nothing of the sort occurred. At one point they saw some footsteps, but these came to an end in a creek flowing into the lake.

As the ground in that vicinity was very treacherous there was nothing to do but to return to the launch and this they did, Harold Bird and Dick carrying the dead dog between them. All were sorry that the canine was dead, for they realized that the animal had done its best for them against the bob cats.

They had no spade, but with some flat sticks managed to scoop out a hole of respectable depth and in this they buried the canine. Over the spot the young Southerner placed a peculiar stick to mark the spot.

"He was a fine dog and was once the pet of my father," he said. "Some day I may place a monument over his grave."

They left the vicinity and continued on their trip around the lake, scanning every indentation of the shore for a possible glimpse of the *Dora*. There were many winding places, so it was noon before the task was half completed.

"This is growing to be a longer hunt than I anticipated," remarked Fred. "I thought finding the houseboat would be dead easy."

Lunch was had, and once again they went on the search, this time at a point where a bayou joined Lake Sico to a smaller lake. Here they had to move with care, for the bayou was filled with the hidden roots of trees long since thrown down by storms.

"Of ve ton't look out ve peen caught in dem dree roots," observed Hans, looking down into the water. "Say, ton't da look like vater snakes?"

"They certainly do, and they are almost as dangerous – for the launch."

Soon came a grinding tinder the boat and the screw came to a standstill. A tree root had caught fast, and further progress was out of the question until the screw could be cleared.

"I'll go over and do the job!" cried Tom. "I know how." And the others being willing he divested himself of most of his clothing, leaped overboard, and was soon at work. It was no light task, as he had to cut the root in several places with a jackknife.

"We had better land and look around," said Harold Bird. "I'd hate to get the screw caught again and break it, for then we'd certainly be in a pickle."

"Could the houseboat get through here?" questioned Fred.

"Yes, they could pole her through, with hard work," answered Dick.

They turned the gasoline launch to shore and tied fast. Then all began to leap out.

"This won't do," cried Dick. "Somebody ought to remain on the launch."

"I would like to go with you and look for the houseboat," answered Harold Bird. "I think the launch will be safe where she is."

"If you want me to stay I'll do it, if Songbird will stay with me," said Fred.

"I'll stay," said Songbird, promptly.

So it was arranged, and leaving the two in charge of the gasoline launch, all the others of the party set off on their search for the missing houseboat.

Walking along the shore of the small lake was decidedly treacherous, and more than once one or another would slip down in the mud and slime.

"Hellup!" cried Hans, who had dragged behind, and looking back they saw the German lad in a bog hole up to his knees. "Hellup, oder I vos trowned alretty!"

"Can't you crawl out?" questioned Dick, running back.

"No, der mud vos like glue!" gasped Hans.

Tom came back also, and between them they managed to pull Hans from the sticky ooze, which was plastered over his trousers and shoes. The German lad gazed at himself ruefully.

"Now, ain't dot a nice mess?" he observed. "Vosn't I a beach!"

"Yes, but a pretty muddy one," laughed Dick. "But never mind now, come on. You can clean up when we get back."

The party soon reached a spot where the bushes grew in water several inches deep. Here, to avoid sinking in the mud, they had to make a wide detour.

"Listen!" cried Sam, presently, and held up his hand.

"What did you hear?" asked Harold Bird.

"I heard something as if somebody was walking through the brush yonder!"

"Maybe it was the men we are after!" cried Dick. "Come on!"

They continued to move forward until some fallen trees all but barred their further progress. Then they came to a small rise of ground – a veritable island in this swamp, – and reaching the highest point, gazed around them.

"What is that?" asked Sam, pointing with his hand to a round, black object showing above some bushes at a distance.

"Why, that looks like the smokestack of the houseboat!" cried Tom. He meant the stack to the chimney, for several rooms of the houseboat were furnished with stoves, to be used when the weather was chilly.

"We'll soon make certain," said Dick. "Forward, everybody!"

"Be careful!" cautioned Harold Bird. "Remember, you have desperate characters with whom to deal."

"Isn't everybody armed?" asked Sam. "I brought my pistol."

All were armed, and each took out his weapon and carried it in his hand. They wanted no shooting, but, after the killing of the dog, decided to take no chances.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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