

WESTY MARTIN
ON THE
MISSISSIPPI

PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

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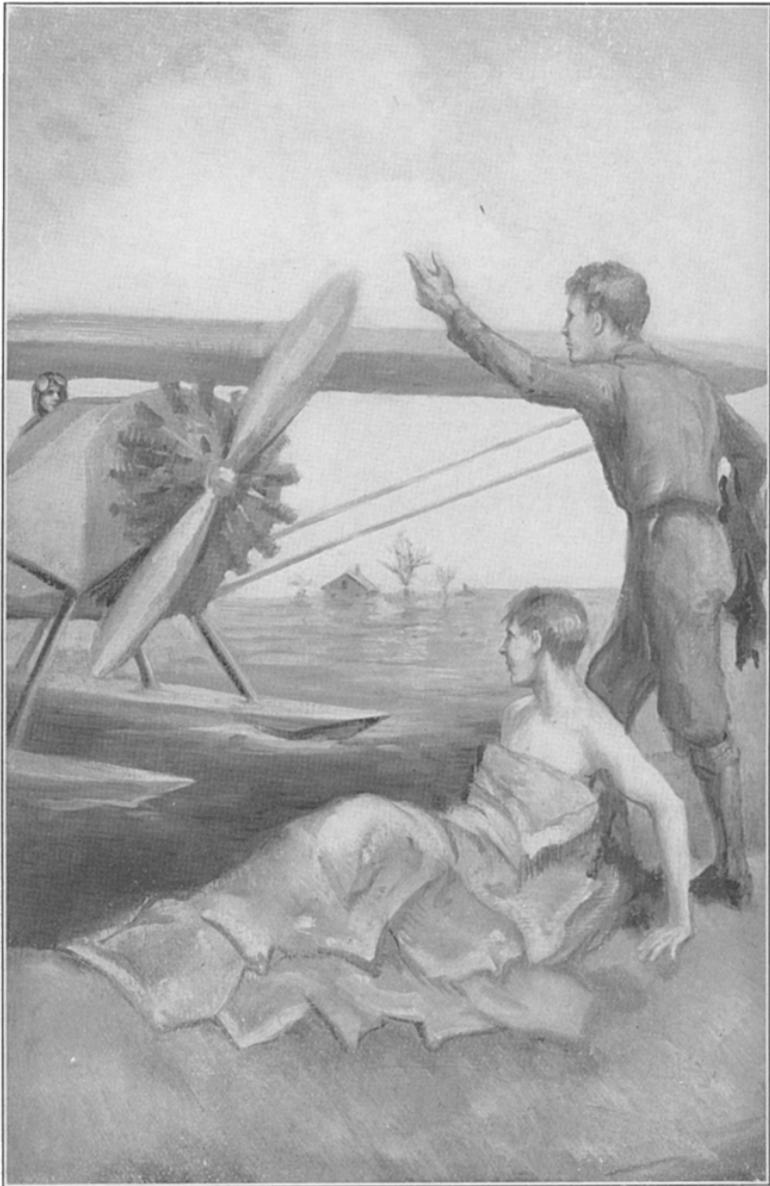
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WESTY MARTIN ON THE MISSISSIPPI



THE SEAPLANE STOPPED WITHIN TWENTY-FIVE FEET OF THE BEWILDERED, OVERJOYED WESTY.

WESTY MARTIN
ON THE
MISSISSIPPI

By
PERCY K. FITZHUGH

Author of
THE TOM SLADE BOOKS
THE ROY BLAKELEY BOOKS
THE PEE-WEE HARRIS BOOKS
THE WESTY MARTIN BOOKS

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WESTY MARTIN ON THE MISSISSIPPI

CHAPTER I AFTERMATH

“Norris Cole is under a cloud,” said Mr. Martin decisively, as he entered the living room with the Sunday papers tucked under his arm. “And as for you, my son—well, Mr. Cole thinks you’ve been a party to the whole affair.”

Westy was dumbfounded and looked it. He hunched his body up in the big chair, then frowned. “Gosh, he’s got a nerve. What’s the big idea?”

Mr. Martin leisurely seated himself upon the long divan and looked searchingly at his son’s face. “Something has been discovered since Mrs. Cole called us this morning to tell us that Norris hadn’t been home all night.”

“What?” queried Westy, cold with an unnamed fear.

“There’s five thousand dollars missing from Mr. Cole’s safe,” he answered quietly. “Five thousand dollars in twenty dollar bills. Old Brower had counted it and put it in an envelope. The safe was open while you boys were in the store, but he didn’t discover the loss until he was ready to close up. Then he called up Mr. Cole about it but nothing was said to Mrs. Cole until about an hour ago.”

Westy was indignant. “Gosh, that’s going some—do they mean to say that I had anything to do with that money?” he shouted.

“Calm down,” said his father. “Nothing of the kind was implied about you. Mr. Cole merely said that Brower had remembered the safe being open while you and Trainor and his friends were in the store. That was after Norris had left for the movies.”

“Then why is Norrie under a cloud if he wasn’t there?” Westy demanded to know. “Mr. Cole has some nerve to...”

“Hold on, son,” said Mr. Martin patiently. “Mr. Cole is taking facts and summing them up in just the same way that you or I would sum them up under the circumstances. Now wait until you hear what he told me: First, Norris demanded that his father give him permission to go to the movies, thereby leaving them shorthanded in the store. And Saturday night, as you know, is their busiest time.”

“Oh, I know all that,” said Westy, restlessly. “I was there when he asked his father and I heard all the argument that went on. Does Mr. Cole think I put him up to do that?”

Mr. Martin shook his head. “Not exactly, but he does think that you made Norris restless with your talk of adventure on the Mississippi. He said

that Norris never before demanded anything—he always asked.”

“Hmph!” said Westy, with utter disgust “Norrie’s not a baby. He’s seventeen. I’d have a swell chance of leading him into something he didn’t want to do—anyway, it wasn’t any crime for me to tell him what fun he could have if he went down the Mississippi.”

“I should say it wasn’t,” smiled Mr. Martin patiently. “But you can’t blame Mr. Cole for feeling that this thing wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t come back with your vivid word pictures of flood times on the Mississippi.”

Westy shrugged his shoulders. “He’d have gone away, anyhow,” he said, sullenly. “He told me the first day I met him that he was getting sick of working for his father and not getting anything. Gosh, he never went anywhere.”

“Perhaps that is so,” said Mr. Martin, thoughtfully, “but I do wish he had arranged his disappearance before you got back to Bridgeboro. Now it appears that you are the logical one to blame it on since Trainor has also disappeared. His father and mother haven’t seen him since dinner-time yesterday.”

Westy whistled with surprise. “And the money—do they think *he* has anything to do with it?”

“They think Trainor and Norris planned this together.”

“I don’t believe it—not about Norris anyway.”

“Well, the police believe it. They’ve handled a good many cases where a loafing boy like Trainor can lure an adventure-seeking boy like Norris into just such predicaments. And the missing money seems to be the crux of the whole affair. Mr. Cole seems to think that Trainor would be capable of planning that and Norris knowing Brower’s movements on Saturday nights seems to bear out the theory that it was a premeditated disappearance.”

Westy scoffed that idea silently. “It’s a coincidence, that’s what it is,” he insisted.

“I’d say it was anything but that,” smiled Mr. Martin. “I’ve saved the last apple out of the bag to shatter that notion, son, for the police have found out that Norris and Trainor met on the ten o’clock bus bound for New York. The driver knows them and remembers well that he let them out in front of the Pennsylvania station. Now you can see why Mr. Cole resented you setting the Mississippi bee buzzing in Norris’ ears.”

Westy was silent, but none the less amazed at this latest revelation. “How about Trick’s friends—do they know anything about it?” he asked at length.

“Oh, they’ve maintained a discreet silence through all the questioning they’ve had,” said Mr. Martin, opening up his papers. “A couple of

detectives have been giving them quite a grilling, I heard downtown. Chief Hobert said they had told him that they didn't think the boys had anything to do with it. Their opinion is that Trick Trainor used them as lookouts and had them keep Brower in the front of the store until he got what he was after. They only admitted that Trainor walked back where the safe was a few times."

"Well, I saw him do that too," said Westy calmly. "But that doesn't prove anything. He never sits still or stands still, Trick doesn't. I don't like him any more than Mr. Cole but I wouldn't accuse him of stealing five thousand dollars just because he was walking around the open safe."

"No, but on the other hand he hasn't come back to defend this accusation and neither has Norris," Mr. Martin said, with an air of finality. He read his paper in earnest.

"I wish I had gone with Norrie to the movies now," said Westy, regretfully. "He wanted me to but I didn't like the picture. That shows he wasn't planning anything then when he asked me to go, doesn't it?"

Mr. Martin appeared not to have heard. He had said all he knew about the matter and apparently had enough of it. But Westy was persistent. He rambled on in an abused tone and finally his mother tactfully hurried into the living room, having left her dinner preparations half completed.

"Don't take on so, Westy," she said, consolingly, and hurried over to smooth out a wrinkle in the east window curtain. "Facts do not lie and it's just what one would expect when a nice boy like Norris is swayed by Trick Trainor's influence."

"Oh, gosh," said Westy, despairingly, "*you too?* Anyone would think that Trick was a gangster or something. Just because he's been out of High a year and hasn't worked...."

"Don't forget how hard he's worked standing around in front of Pellett's drug store," his mother smilingly interposed.

"All right," Westy admitted freely. "Maybe he has, but there isn't anyone in Bridgeboro can say that he's done anything else. Gosh, I've sometimes felt pretty sore at Trick with that swaggerish way he has and trying to make other guys feel that they aren't worth two cents, but I wouldn't hint that he was crooked unless I knew it—then I'd say it right out."

"Mrs. Trainor told me that she didn't ever give him more than two dollars a week for spending money," said Mrs. Martin. "And of course you realize, Westy, that one can't travel far on that, much less two."

Westy was going to answer that they could get as far as New York where they probably were now, but he thought it useless. "You're all dead set on it that Norrie's guilty," he said, angrily, "and I'm dead set on it that he isn't. Trick's friends were there as well as me. Why don't they say that I did it?"

But no, just because it's a coincidence that Norrie and Trick decided at the last minute to beat it away together they're supposed to be thieves too."

At this thundering statement, Mr. Martin looked up from his paper and frowned. "I think," he said sternly, "that from this moment on, we'll leave the troubles of the Cole family to the Coles."

Westy was duly silenced but not squelched and as his mother hurried back to the kitchen to resume her duties, he arose and sauntered out on the front porch. It was a likely place to regain his usual good temper for there was a brisk March wind blowing and a hint of spring in the air.

He perched himself on the porch railing and tried thinking over the events of the past four days since he had come back from Arizona. "Gosh, it sure looks black enough for them," he said reflectively. "If Norrie only hadn't lost his head last night and beat it away so sneaky. But I know him and—why, I can go right back and think of all we talked about Let's see now..."

He shut his eyes and let his mind drift back to the day, his first day in Bridgeboro in over a year, when he had been standing on that very porch. He had been looking up and down the street in hopes of seeing someone he knew, some familiar face when....

CHAPTER II

NORRIS COLE

It was the hatless figure of Norris Cole that suddenly emerged from the side street and came hurrying past his house. Westy leaped down the porch steps and out to the sidewalk.

“Whoa, boy,” he shouted. “What’s the idea of passing me up, Norrie?”

Norris turned quickly and, seeing Westy, smiled. “Oh, Wes,” he cried joyfully. “I didn’t think of looking for you. When did you get back?”

“This morning—hard luck. Gosh, I liked it. But my mother and father are going to California in the car and they wanted me to come home before they started. Did you quit military school, Norrie?”

“Nope,” smiled Norris. “I graduated, boy—in February. I’m working for Pop while I’m waiting for the fall sem at the Institute.”

“Good,” smiled Westy. “That’s where I’m headed for myself. I’m trying to make Dad let me go down the Mississippi with Major Winton. He’s invited me to go along with a party of engineers and himself on an inspection tour of the big levees. Gosh, I hope I can make him say yes but he thinks I’ve had enough time with the major in Arizona.”

“Boy, I wish I had a chance like that,” said Norris, enviously.

“That’s what I’m trying to put across in the house,” said Westy seriously. “It’s only for a few months and I’ll probably be back long before September but no. Dad keeps harping on rest. Gosh, I can’t make him see that I won’t do anything else *but*, if I go along with the major. He says I’d sort of be his guest, because I don’t know anything about that kind of work—it’s much different than what I was doing in Arizona.”

“It’s a crool worl’, Wes,” said Norris, laughingly. Suddenly he became serious, then: “You’d know something if you had a father like I have. Gee, he sure believes in all work and no play, believe me. I had a tough enough time for four years away at school and he won’t even stand for me having a little vacation now.”

“Maybe I can put in a good word for you,” said Westy, thoughtfully. “Your father liked me better than the rest of the kids in our bunch, remember?”

“That’s not saying much, Wes,” said Norris, bitterly. “Pop doesn’t see anything outside of work. He’ll even have something to say when he hears that you’re going to loaf until fall.”

“I should worry. I’ll compromise and follow you around the store then. That won’t be loafing.”

“A feller’s a fool not to loaf when he has the chance,” said Norris. “I sure would like to have you with me in the store after not seeing you all this time, but it won’t be any pink tea, Wes. I’m getting so I even dream about hardware. Gee, Pop has me going all the time. I’m getting sick of it.”

Westy had heard this plaintive cry from his friend many times in their scouting days and he recalled how difficult it had been for Norris even then to get away on hikes. Mr. Cole never wanted for some excuse to detain Norris in the store and had it not been for the maternal ingenuity of Mrs. Cole, Norris would have seldom found time to mingle with his brother scouts and friends.

“Try and stick it out, Norrie,” he said, sympathetically. “You’re not a baby any more—you’ll soon be able to do what you like.”

“Bet your life I will,” said Norris with a flash of strong looking teeth, “I’ll do it before that, if he keeps pushing me the way he has been. Gee, I don’t even get off long enough to go to the movies, but I’m going to fix him this Saturday, you can bet I’m all set to ask him to let me go to the movies and just let him refuse me—just let him!”

Westy tried to coax him out of his mood. “Atta boy,” he laughed. “Don’t get mad, Norrie, you can go down the Mississippi if you can’t go anywhere else. There’s lots of young college fellers working on the levees down there—Major Winton told me that. Gosh, you’re good and strong and it would be a nice vacation for you.”

Norris’ blue eyes sparkled with lively interest. “Are you on the level, Wes?” he queried.

Westy nodded smilingly. “The levees aren’t on the level though—they’re high and dry.”

“Gee,” Norris said, obviously captured by the suggestion, “what do they do on levees, huh? How does a guy know what levee to go to, huh?”

Westy laughed heartily at his friend’s enthusiasm.

“You’ll have to find the Hotel Malone in St. Louis and get Major Winton to answer those questions. He’ll tell you where to go and what you’ll do.”

By this time, they were seated on the top step of the porch. The necessity of getting back to sell hardware for his father did not occur to Norris now. “Does Major Winton have charge of the men who work on the levees?” he asked seriously.

“No,” Westy answered, “the main line levee system runs from Cairo, Illinois to New Orleans. He only inspects the big levees but I guess he could tell anyone where the best place would be to get work. Why, Norrie?”

“Nothing,” said Norris thoughtfully. “I’m glad to know those things though, Wes, in case I ever did get enough money to go there. But a swell chance I have of getting any further than New York. Pop pays me a big salary—a dollar a week. Sometimes when he feels generous he makes it a dollar and a half. Gee, that kind of treatment makes a guy feel that he doesn’t care about what happens.”

There was considerable bitterness in his tones and Westy watched him sympathetically. “Have you ever asked your father to let you go on a vacation—I mean since you’ve been home from school?”

Norris laughed sardonically. “Gee, have you forgotten Pop as much as that?” he returned. “If he thought for a minute I was going to ask he’d start telling me how poor business has been and how it is he can’t give me a regular salary. But I know better, Wes. I know he keeps piling his money up in the safe—he’s even scared to trust it to the bank. Trick Trainor said he’s a fool to do that, because sooner or later someone will get on to it.”

“Trick out of High?” asked Westy.

“Yep. One year. Hasn’t done anything but loaf, though. Boy, my father sure hates him but I stick up for him. He’s kept me company since I’ve been home. Comes in the store every day.”

“It’s easy to be friendly when you haven’t anything to do, Norrie,” Westy reminded him. “My father and mother never liked the way he’s always had of hanging around Pellett’s but I never saw him do anything. The one thing about him that gets my goat is his sneering way.”

“He doesn’t mean a thing by it,” Norris said. “Take my word for it—I know. It’s just his way.”

“Well, he ought to work anyhow. Maybe I ought to tell *him* about the Mississippi too,” laughed Westy. “That’s going pretty far for a job but it might be the only way Trick would care to work.”

“That’s only one thing about him, Wes,” Norris confided. “He doesn’t like to overdo himself but he’d like the idea of traveling. Anyway, I like it all around and I’m going to spring it on Pop tonight. I’ll tell him what you’ve said.”

“He’ll have my life tomorrow,” Westy laughed.

“You should worry if he does. Oh, he wouldn’t mind me going there to make money if I could get the carfare to go.” Norris sighed and stirred preparatory to leaving.

“Well,” said Westy, in an effort to be consoling, “you can do as you like when you get through at the Institute. That’s one thing.”

Norris shook his head. “Don’t kid yourself, Wes,” he said. “Pop thinks he has me chained for life to that store.”

Westy glanced at him wonderingly. “Do you mean your father’s going to make you work in the store after you’re finished with school?”

Norris leaned back in the rocker and laughed heartily. Suddenly he stopped, his mouth drawn tightly and his eyes hard and determined looking.

“That’s just one of life’s little jokes, Wes—that idea of Pop’s,” he said, vehemently. “He thinks he’s going to *make* me.”

CHAPTER III

ADVICE FROM TRICK

Westy strolled down to Cole's Hardware Store later that same day. It was his first visit there in perhaps three years. He had little occasion to go when Norris was away at school and his own absence of a year had seen many changes in Bridgeboro's Main Street shops. But not so Cole's—they prospered but never progressed.

As he approached the old store and looked up at the rickety sign precariously waving in the high wind, he did not wonder at Norris' evident rebellion against his father's antiquated methods and ideas. Mr. Cole was still living in the year eighteen hundred and ninety nine.

Perhaps there was no one in Bridgeboro who knew the adamant qualities of Mr. Cole any better than did Westy. And, too, he knew that his thriftiness was taking on a parsimonious look. In truth, he felt that Norris was entirely justified in wanting to get away from it. He sauntered in through the street door and encountered Brower, Mr. Cole's faithful old clerk who had served the establishment since eighteen hundred and ninety. He had shriveled up in those years of devoted service and looked as dry and uninteresting as the carton of wire nails he was unpacking.

He nodded distantly in answer to West's friendly greeting and went on with his task. Hearing his friend's voice, Norris called gaily from a distant aisle where he was perched high on a gaunt, rolling ladder and surrounded by a formidable looking array of stock boxes.

"I'll be down in a minute, Wes," he said brightly. "Grab a stool for yourself and get out of the dust. We have enough of it here to fill Main Street."

Westy laughed, but he shuddered at the thought of happy, carefree Norris spending his life in that desolate, dusty store. "Gosh, I don't know why I should mind it so," he whispered to himself as he swung around on one of the aged oak stools that were ranged along in front of the counter. "It oughtn't to be my funeral what happens to Norrie, but somehow I feel it is."

That was Westy all over—a creature of sunlight and adventure and he pitied anyone who could not have it in the measure that he had it, especially Norris.

In a few moments, Norris descended the ladder and taking a graceful leap, landed on the worn, gray counter. He sprawled his long, slim body across the counter and sighed, restlessly. "That's the way it is in this

business, Wes. You're either rushed to death or there's nothing to do. It's dead on Friday afternoons but we make up for it tomorrow and tomorrow night." He grinned mischievously.

"What's the big joke?" Westy asked, taking another swift revolution on the creaking stool.

"I'm thinking about tomorrow night," Norris answered in an undertone. "Pop doesn't know that I'm going to get off yet. I'm going to spring it to him after dinner tomorrow night. Be here and watch the fireworks."

"I will," laughed Westy. "Where are you going?"

"Movies," Norris answered with sparkling eyes. "Trick and I are going—that is, he's going to meet me later. Want to come?"

"I don't like the talkies much, Norrie, else I'd come."

The store door opened at that juncture and a young fellow of their own age strolled leisurely in. His small, light blue eyes glittered at sight of Westy. "Well, if it ain't our little Arizona cowboy!" he exclaimed jovially.

"It's me all right," said Westy, frowning at Trainor's indolent swagger and sleek, small town elegance. "What are you doing now, Trick, studying your brains away or working yourself to death?"

Trick Trainor bent forward and with his thumb and forefinger, smoothed down the already knife-like crease in his wide-bottomed trousers. Then he glanced at Westy and smiled. "Neither, is the answer to your question," he said hoarsely. "I'm just having a hard time spending my spending money."

"I was just asking Wes if he wanted to go to the movies tomorrow night," Norris interposed.

"I'd rather see real adventure than go to the movies and watch the make-believe," said Westy, modestly. "Gosh, when a feller's had a taste of it like I did in Arizona you can't be satisfied with watching it in the movies."

"Gee, I don't blame you," Norris agreed. Then to the smiling Trainor he said: "Westy may go along on an inspection tour of the big levees with that Major Winton. He'll go in every big town on the Mississippi. Boy, wouldn't you like that, Trick?"

"I'll say," Trick condescended. "Anything's better than this berg."

Norris' eyes were alight with some inner enthusiasm. "If we had the carfare we could go down," he said in hushed tones. "Wes says that they'll give jobs to strong fellers on any of the big levees—even college fellers are working there now."

"*Work!*" Trick repeated scornfully. "That doesn't mean anything to me. And *you* ought to be the last one in the world to get fussed up over it, Norrie. Your old man doesn't give you anything *but* work in this dump. If you said vacation I might listen."

Norris colored faintly. “Oh, Pop doesn’t mean to be the way he is—he just won’t listen to reason,” he said bravely. “If I could only make him see that I’d like a little fun once in a while.”

“*Fun,*” laughed Trick, sardonically. “What you need is a lot of spending money and a year’s vacation like I’ve had.”

“You’ll soon be going into your second year, won’t you, Trick?” Westy asked mockingly.

“That’s my funeral,” Trick answered. He jerked his splashy blue tie and patted his tight-fitting collar. “As long as my old man ain’t worrying, why should you?”

Brower, passing at that moment, glared at Trainor. “It’d be better for you if your father did worry some,” he grumbled. “Boys nowadays ain’t got enough on their minds, that’s the trouble.”

Trick smoothed his shining blond hair and laughed. “That’s enough from you, old horse-feathers,” he said with a sneer.

Brower pretended not to hear that retort and went about his duties. Norris frowned and bit his lip. “Be careful, Trick,” he said softly. “I know Brower’s a cranky old duffer, but he’s gotten just like Pop. They’re both rusty and in a rut, that’s all. I wouldn’t want...”

“Cut out the lecture,” Trick interposed lightly. “You’d be a swell guy with me to guide you.”

“It’s my turn to laugh,” said Westy mockingly. Trick turned to say something but voices from the street boisterously claimed his attention. They were the voices of his friends—three counterparts of himself and at their insistent beckoning he swaggered off to join them.

“S’long,” he called over his shoulder. “See you again.”

Norris watched until he and his friends disappeared in Main Street’s throngs. Westy frowned. “Gosh, Norrie,” he said, “there’s something about Trick—I don’t know—he’s in with the wrong bunch of fellers or something. He’s worse than when I saw him last. The way he talked to Brower and all—gosh, I’d be careful of him. I know I’ve talked to you about going away but I really wouldn’t want you to do it. That is, I wouldn’t want you to sneak about anything. I’d tell your father first and if he refuses why then it’s up to you.”

“And have a fine rumpus,” said Norris tersely. “Don’t you worry about me, Wes. I’m not a baby. Gee, I can look out for myself.”

Westy sensed that Norris resented his advice. “Boy, I didn’t mean to preach,” he said apologetically, “but I’m just afraid that you’ll get into trouble through Trick. You heard him laugh about working. He wants easy money and my father says a feller like that always gets into trouble sooner

or later. Gosh, I wouldn't say anything if you weren't a friend of mine. We were scouts together...."

"Do you think I'd ever forget that!" Norris said with vehemence. "But I've got to stick up for Trick, Wes. He's been friendly ever since I've been home and I can't forget that he's a lot of noise and he doesn't mean a bit of harm. My mother says he'll get over his loafing one of these days and work as hard as any of us."

"Maybe you're right," said Westy thoughtfully. "Gosh, I'm a fine ex-scout to talk about a feller like that, huh? I'll take it back, Norrie, and believe me I'll never say a word against Trick until I know it's the truth."

"Atta boy, Wes," smiled Norris. "There's lots of things Trick does and says that I don't like exactly but when I'm a friend, I'm a friend."

Westy had much cause to ponder on the weight of that statement during the coming weeks, but innocently he asked: "Does that include me too, Norrie?"

"I'll prove it to you," answered Norris stoutly.

"You can wait until Christmas, huh?" Westy laughed.

CHAPTER IV JUST TALK?

By chance, Westy happened in Cole's Hardware Store that next evening after dinner. Trick Trainor and his friends were there and Norris stood behind the counter with his father. One could feel the tense atmosphere.

"You're just in time to referee this argument," Trick Trainor laughed loudly. "Norrie's threatening to strike unless he gets tonight off."

Norris frowned at Trainor's tactlessness and Mr. Cole scowled angrily. "Let him strike then," he said, without glancing at his son. "'Tain't any of your business if he does or not, Trainor."

Trick merely smiled and walked toward the back of the store with that indolent swagger he affected. He stood for a few seconds and watched Brower who was busy at the open safe, then turned and came back. Westy wondered why he didn't have sense enough to take his friends and leave.

Norris looked at Westy and smiled. "Would you want to stay and help Pop for an hour, Wes?" he asked. "The worst of the rush will be over then—I'm leaving in ten minutes."

Faint patches of color showed in Mr. Cole's pinched looking features. "I don't want none of your friend's help, Norrie," he said harshly. "If you want to go—go, but don't think you can smooth things over by asking him to stay. Ain't it bad enough that he's got you dead set on goin' down the Mississippi on some fool adventure?"

Westy opened his lips to protest but Mr. Cole would have none of it. "Don't say you didn't tell him, 'cause you did. Maybe you didn't mean no harm but it's made him dissatisfied with his home and even working for his own father. He'd sooner work like them niggers on the levees than do nice, easy respectable chores in his father's store," he said, breathlessly.

Norris reddened perceptibly and without a word walked from behind the counter and out of the store. Westy felt decidedly uncomfortable and did not know whether or not to stay. It was evident that Trainor and his friends were not perturbed by that little family scene for they retreated to one end of the counter and were soon engrossed in their usual flippant conversation.

Mr. Cole went about the store silently and after a few moments approached Westy. "Anyhow, I can rely on you more than that fool bunch," he said, with a jerk of his thumb toward Trainor and his friends. "I'm going to slip out to the lunch room and get a bite before we get busy so I'll just let you sit here and watch 'till Brower gets through with the safe. I'm not

asking you to wait on anybody, just call Brower if someone comes in.” He coughed as if he had already regretted asking that small favor and reached back of the counter for his worn-looking derby hat.

He had only been gone a minute when a customer came in and Brower was called. Trainor’s friends came forward also, spoke to Westy for a few moments while Trick paced around the store restlessly, then left. Mr. Cole hurried in a few minutes afterward.

“Too many in there,” he explained to Westy curtly. “They’re going to bring me in some sandwiches so you needn’t wait.” He bowed distantly.

Westy moved toward the door gladly and Trainor joined him. “Guess I’ll blow too,” he said casually. “Have a date before I go to the movies.”

They walked to the corner together but Westy found nothing to say. The scene between Norris and his father had thoroughly depressed him and he felt that Trainor was in some way responsible for it.

“I s’pose you’re making for home and mother, huh?” queried Trainor, laughingly, as Westy made a move to cross the street.

“I suppose I am,” answered Westy drily. “Why?”

“Nothing,” Trainor returned with his eyes averted. “I’m going up this way to keep my date. S’long—see you in church.” He swaggered away up Bond Street without looking to right or left.

Westy watched him for a swift second then went straight home and to bed. Midnight found him still awake wide-eyed and beset with strange premonitions. They were vague, yet haunting enough to make him restless and sleepless. “Aw, I’m crazy,” he said half-aloud as the big clock in the hall struck the half hour. “Why should I worry myself to death over what Norrie’s going to do or Trick either, for that matter?”

But even as he asked himself that question he knew. He knew that in some vague way he was concerned about Norris, he always had been. “And like a fool I’ve been gassing about the Mississippi to him and set him off,” he rambled on. “Gosh, there was something queer about that store tonight—Norrie sure didn’t care what his father said. Anyhow, he’s not a baby, but I wish he’d cut Trick out.”

Thought after thought flashed through his mind until sleep came to him and then his dreams were wild and terrifying. He awoke at eight o’clock next morning at the insistent ringing of the telephone and jumped out of bed as his mother answered.

“Yes,” her voice echoed up the stairway and into his room. There was something in that word that aroused Westy’s interest and he tiptoed silently out into the hall and leaned his arms upon the broad balustrade.

“Why, no, I don’t know, Mrs. Trainor,” Mrs. Martin continued. “I’m awfully sorry.” There was a pause. “You’re right, they’re no longer babies.”

Another pause. "I hope so. Goodbye."

"What's up?" asked Mr. Martin in the midst of his breakfast.

"Trick hasn't been home all night and the queer part of it is, neither has Norris Cole," Mrs. Martin answered, replacing the receiver. "Mrs. Trainor said that Trick had passed the remark yesterday that Westy told them they could get work on the Mississippi levees and that he and Norris would think it over. I suppose they're going to try and ride freights there. Well, they won't get very far."

"I wish Westy'd keep his adventurous ideas to himself," said Mr. Martin from the recesses of the breakfast nook beyond the kitchen. "Mr. Cole and Mr. Trainor won't thank him for that."

"Well, Mrs. Trainor said herself that they were no longer babies," Mrs. Martin said as she hurried back to the kitchen. "She says if they want to leave nice, comfortable homes for a rough and tumble life like that, why it's up to them. They've spoiled Trick terribly though, it's a wonder he isn't worse. But I can't understand Norris."

"I can," Mr. Martin called out. "Old Cole's been hard with that boy—I've often wondered if he'd ever break away. It's all right if he doesn't encounter worse difficulties away from home. There's worse things in the world than skinflint fathers."

Westy could hear no more after that. His mother had probably joined his father in the breakfast nook and all the sound that reached him was the monotonous hum of their distant voices speaking in ordinary conversational tones. Shrugging his shoulders, he went back to his room and dressed.

"I guess I knew that's what was going to happen—I guess I knew it last night," he said, pulling on his shoes. "Anyway, Norrie would have gone whether I came or not. I haven't anything to do with it."

He reached the breakfast nook just as his father was getting ready to leave the house in pursuit of the Sunday paper. "Well, I heard all you were talking about," he announced, frankly. "I kind of felt last night that it was going to happen. Norrie's been talking about it ever since I've been home but I thought it was just talk. I didn't think he'd have the nerve to do it."

Mr. Martin stopped at the threshold. "It will be a good experience for him if he keeps the scout laws in mind, Westy," he said kindly. "What I don't quite like, is his going with Trainor. There's something about that boy that makes me suspicious. Maybe it's just an idea, but...."

"Norrie said there's no harm in him," Westy spoke up stoutly. "He said he's just a lot of talk."

"I've heard of talk that did a lot of harm, son," smiled Mr. Martin. "I'm going down Main Street now and I'll stop at Cole's and hear what's to be heard." He closed the door lightly and was gone.

CHAPTER V

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

The words of his father rang in his ears: "Norris Cole is under a cloud." Westy shifted his position on the porch railing and aimlessly scanned some feathery-looking wind clouds overhead. Cloud, clouds; he thought of the simile and realized that Norris had certainly enveloped himself in some pretty black ones by his first act of independence.

Too, he thought of Norris' words to him in the store saying: "When I'm a friend, I'm a friend." Well, that was enough for him to know. He wouldn't believe any of these incriminating details against either of the absent pair. He'd have to hear it from them, first.

"The only thing—I wish he had told me," said Westy, moving away from the railing. "That's all. It would seem as if he meant what he said about friends, then. This way I have to stick up for them and tell people everything when I don't know anything."

And Westy had a good deal of "sticking up" to do during the next forty-eight hours. He was interviewed by newspaper reporters and by the chief of police, until on Tuesday morning he began to feel that perhaps it *was* all his fault. People that he had been familiar with all his young life looked at him curiously (or so he thought), and he wished heartily that he was miles away.

On Wednesday, Bridgeboro was united in condemning Norris and the other conspirators (as the paper called them), and Trainor was listed as the brains of the whole affair. Old Brower, the headline of the afternoon edition said, had dropped dead in the store as a result of the shock. He had had charge of Mr. Cole's safe for fifteen years and had told one of the reporters just the day before that he felt responsible for the loss of the money. It was said he actually brooded over it all Tuesday night. At any rate, he was too old to bear up under it.

"Boy, but Mr. Cole's all het up now," said Vic Norris, a friend of Westy's whom he met on Main Street. "They say he's sworn out a warrant for Trick and Norrie. He was fond of old Brower and he told my mother that it was almost like murder. Gee, he won't listen to reason—he won't give Norrie any quarter."

Westy walked on and was still a-tingle from the injustice of that news when he saw Mr. Cole coming down Main Street. It almost seemed that Fate had planned the meeting.

“I won’t keep you a minute, Mr. Cole,” said Westy, stopping directly in the man’s path. “I—I just want to tell you that I’m sorry for what’s happened, but I don’t think it’s right to kick Norrie when he’s down and can’t defend himself.”

Mr. Cole sniffled through his thin, pinched nose, drew himself up and stopped, aghast. “*Kick him! Defend himself!*” he repeated. “What do you mean, young man?”

“I mean about you making charges against him,” Westy answered bravely. “You can’t prove he’s taken the money until you see him with it. Another thing, when a feller’s father goes back on him the whole world will too,” he said, breathless at his own temerity.

Mr. Cole frowned. “He’s got to be taught a lesson, young man,” he said hoarsely. “Yes, sir! And what’s more—if he didn’t have the money he’d be back before this! Didn’t that scamp Trainor tell his friends that my own son told him about all the money I kept in that safe and that Brower always counted it between six-thirty and seven on Saturday nights? Yes, sir, that’s what he told ’em and you can’t tell me they didn’t mean anything by that. Why were they so particular to be in the store at that time and why was Norrie so crazy to get out to the movies before poor old Brower shut the safe? Answer me that!”

“A court wouldn’t listen to that kind of evidence,” said Westy with blazing eyes. “That’s circumstantial. And anyhow, Mr. Cole, if you don’t stick up for your own son, I will. I’ve been doing it right along and I’ll go on doing it till he tells me differently. Trick too—I don’t like him any more than you do but I wouldn’t call him a thief until the law proves that he’s one. Gosh...”

“I guess you know where you can find Norrie and that Trainor to tell you, too,” interposed Mr. Cole ambiguously. “You’re pretty cocksure about their innocence, ain’t you? Well, time’ll tell, that’s all I say. I don’t forget that you started Norrie off about this Mississippi thing—he was crazy for me to pay his carfare there. Now I’m paying his carfare and that scamp’s twenty times over, I guess.” He started moving away.

“It’s not fair!” Westy shouted at the man’s back. “You’re not giving him a chance—you never *did* give him a chance and now you see what happens!”

Mr. Cole swung around, more puzzled than angry. “I never gave him a chance, eh?” he asked.

“No, you didn’t,” answered Westy firmly. “You never gave him a chance to have fun; you’ve always kept him in that store vacation times when all the other fellers were away or having a little recreation. Gosh, Norrie’s only human and he’s not an old man and he’s crazy about adventure.”

Mr. Cole looked wide-eyed at his breathless accuser. “He’s crazy, all right,” he said grumblingly, “he’s crazy to do what he’s done. I’m through with him—he needn’t come back. We don’t want him!” With that he turned and went on his way.

Westy stared after him as if he could not even then believe what the man had said.

CHAPTER VI AN INVITATION

“Gosh, it sure is funny the way things happen,” Westy said quite vehemently as he flung his hat into the hall closet.

“Why, funny?” queried Mr. Martin, just taking his place at the dining-room table.

Westy told him in a few words of his conversation with Mr. Cole. “He didn’t mention about old Brower but I know that was on his mind,” he said, thoughtfully. “Do you know, Dad, I’d give anything if I knew where I could find Norrie and tell him what people are saying about him here. Gosh, it’s terrible now, with Brower dead. To hear Mr. Cole talk, you’d think that Norrie and Trainor had murdered him—anyway, you’d think that Norrie was a criminal. It isn’t right!”

“Don’t you suppose that Norris can read the papers,” Mr. Martin reminded him. “He must know it all by this time, wherever they are.”

“Thank goodness, we’re leaving Friday,” sighed Mrs. Martin as they began the meal. “I’m really getting tired of hearing it, sorry as I feel for the boys’ mothers. I think it’s affected Westy worse than anyone. He actually looks haggard.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Westy asked. “I blame myself, sort of—no, I don’t either—not now. Not after I talked to Mr. Cole. Gosh, with a father like that I wouldn’t blame Norrie for doing anything—outside of stealing. Anyway, I wish I could leave Bridgeboro miles behind until summer.”

“Maybe you can,” smiled Mrs. Martin significantly. “Peek under your plate, Westy. There’s a letter in Major Winton’s handwriting.”

Westy’s face beamed as he shoved the plate aside and saw the familiar handwriting on the white envelope. “It’s from St. Louis,” he said happily. “I bet—I bet....” He tore it open and spread it out.

“Go on,” laughed Mr. Martin, “let’s hear the worst.”

Westy smiled at his father and read aloud:

Dear Young Martin:

This is the last chance I’ll have to write for quite some time as we’re starting down the big stream on that inspection tour I told you of. We’re scheduled to steam off Monday next.

Now, read this carefully and see what your father thinks about letting you come. Following lines are written merely for

inducement.

A Mr. C. J. Curran of St. Louis who has just left for a year's vacation in Italy, has offered his graceful looking yacht, the *Atlantis*, for any service the government sees fit during this flood period along the river. Incidentally, Uncle Sam has ordered me to use it for our tour.

There will be a small company of us and room enough for you as my guest. You can follow me around and keep your eyes open and any young chap with as strong an engineering kink as you have ought to get a heap of experience and useful knowledge out of the trip. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Am still at the Malone and will still be here until Monday at dawn. Now then, send me a brief wire and I'll be watching out for you. Also tell your father that I'll send you home in plenty of time to rest up before school opens.

Best wishes to your parents and hoping to see you on Sunday

—

Winton.

Westy whistled with delight and read the letter again to himself. When he looked up it was to see his parents exchanging favorable glances and his heart leaped expectantly. Was this to be his chance to get away?

His mother nodded. "That's nice of the major, Westy," she said. "He surely takes an interest in you."

"He's pretty keen about having you go along, isn't he, son," Mr. Martin said.

Westy did not miss the softness of his father's tones. He raised his head, his eyes shining expectantly. "Gosh, and if he says he'll send me home in time, he'll *send me home!* May I—gosh, will you?"

Mr. Martin put down his knife and fork and smiled. "I suppose there's no real reason why I shouldn't say yes, son. And now that this other affair's cut you up so, why, I guess it will do you good to get away."

"Boy, you're great!" Westy's eyes glistened. "If Mr. Cole was like you—well, Norrie would be here now to go with me. Major Winton would even make room for him, I bet."

"I bet," said Mr. Martin.

"And Norris could have gone with you if we had known the way things were with him," said Mrs. Martin. "I would have even been willing to pay his carfare out there myself rather than have happen what has happened. Somehow we always think of those things when it's too late."

“It’s just as I said before,” Westy said, “it’s funny the way things happen. I sure didn’t think that Major Winton liked me enough to write me an invitation. Gosh, when he asked me about going just before I left for home and I told him I thought Dad wouldn’t like it—well, I just decided; he wouldn’t ask again. If I got out there, all right and if I didn’t all right—that’s the way he is with most everybody. But he must like me to write me, huh?”

“He likes you because you generally accomplish what you set out to do,” said Mr. Martin. “That’s what he told me, so keep up your reputation with him, son.”

“Leave it to me, Dad,” Westy said determinedly. “Leave it to me.”

CHAPTER VII

A FAMILIAR FACE

It was a lighthearted, carefree Westy that smiled as the train left New York. He had left his troubles and perplexities in Bridgeboro and determined that they should stay there. Nothing, he promised himself, should disturb his peace of mind, and the enjoyment of this trip.

He sauntered into the club car just after they left Chicago and sank luxuriously into one of the comfortable chairs. Directly opposite, he noticed at once, was a bulk of a man with florid complexion and shrewd, black eyes. And as he stared the eyes immediately centered their attention upon the passing landscape.

Westy swung himself around and also gazed at the snow-covered country through which they were passing. But his thoughts were upon the man opposite. There was something familiar about the florid face and shrewd, black eyes. He tried to think what it was.

After five minutes of contemplation he decided that the man reminded him of Bridgeboro. That was it—he had seen him some time, some place, there. It came to him in a flash and mentally he saw that human bulk peering at him in the passing throngs of Main Street.

“Maybe I’m wrong,” he murmured as they rattled over a grade crossing, “and then again, maybe I’m not. Anyway, it wouldn’t hurt to ask him. It’d be nice having someone from home to talk to all the way to St. Louis.”

Westy glanced over his shoulder but the man had gone. He looked up and down the car but there was no sign of him. “Probably gone back to the Pullman,” he said, disappointed. “I’ll see him again, though—I’ll look for him if I don’t.”

He sat watching people coming in and going out at each end of the car until the first call for luncheon pierced through his abstraction. Automatically, he arose and followed the tall, gaunt crier of these good tidings, for to Westy food came before all else.

He was the first one seated in the dining car and all through the meal he kept his eyes upon the door. It wasn’t until he went back into the Pullman, however, that he saw the man again, sitting two sections back of his own. He walked straight up to him.

“Say-a,” he began, a little confused, “haven’t I seen your face somewhere before?”

The man frowned slightly and shook his head.

“In Bridgeboro?” Westy queried.

The frown and shake were more pronounced this time and when the man yawned rudely Westy felt so embarrassed that he retreated awkwardly to the privacy of his own section. While he was trying to regain his composure he espied the man leisurely making his way to the dining car.

“He needn’t have been so grouchy about it,” Westy mumbled and drummed his knuckles upon the narrow sill. “Gosh, it wouldn’t have cost him anything to smile or even say no. He just didn’t want to talk to me—that’s all.”

“What’s a-matter, boy,” said a soft, friendly voice at his side, “did Mistah Silent give yo’ de air too?”

Westy looked up to see the smiling countenance of the colored porter. He smiled in return. “Won’t he talk to you either?”

The porter shook his black head profoundly and seated himself upon the arm of the seat. “Ah cain’t get a word out o’ dat man but yes and no. ‘Ceptin’ fo’ dat, ah’d o’ swore he wuz deaf ’n dumb. Yes suh!”

“You should worry about him,” Westy said, delighted at the chance to talk to someone. “I wouldn’t speak to him again—no matter what. Gosh, I only wanted to be friendly. I thought I saw his face somewhere before.”

“Ah saw him give yuh de cold shoulder,” said the porter with a chuckle. “And ah says to m’self—what kin yuh expect’ o’ such a man! S’pose yu’ wuz jes’ lonesome, boy, huh?”

“You bet,” answered Westy, brightly. “I thought it would be nice to have him to talk to all the way to St. Louis and I couldn’t get it out of my head but that I knew him. I can’t get it out of my head yet! I’m sure I’ve seen him in Bridgeboro—that’s where I live.”

“Whar ’bout’s is dis place you live, boy?” the porter inquired with evident interest.

“New Jersey. Ever been there?”

“No suh. Ah cain’t ever remember anythin’ east o’ Chicago.”

“Well, Bridgeboro’s a nice town anyway. It’s not a city, of course, but it’s big enough to remember people. And no one can make me believe that I didn’t see that guy on Main Street—I know it.”

“Did yuh ask him?”

“Sure. That’s what makes me sore. All he did was shake his head when I asked him. I think he thought I was too much of a kid to be bothered with. I should worry.”

“Absolutely, boy,” the porter agreed, abstractedly.

“Aw, I don’t care now,” Westy said indifferently. “I’ve got too much else to think about anyway. I’m going all the way down the Mississippi on a private yacht called the *Atlantis*.”

“Yo’ is?”

“Yep. A man in St. Louis is letting the government use it for an inspection tour of the big levees and a government engineer named Major Winton has asked me to go along on it.”

“Boy, yo’ sho’ am lucky. Is dis here Major goin’ to meet yuh?”

“Yep,” answered Westy, proudly. “He’s been at the Hotel Malone—do you know where it is?” The porter nodded and chuckled amiably as he shuffled off in answer to the insistent ringing of a bell.

CHAPTER VIII INFORMATION

After a few seconds the man strolled leisurely back into the Pullman, passed Westy without even a glance and kept on through the aisle in the direction of the club car. Presently, the porter reappeared, still chuckling.

"Heah I is," he announced pleasantly and seated himself as before. "Ah'm sho' interested 'bout yuh goin' down the river, boy. They say de flood wuz never so bad befo'. In some places, I heerd, de water am reachin' right up on a level with de levee top."

"I bet I'll see some excitement there, huh?" Westy asked, thrilled.

"Yes suh," answered the porter. "But ah'd rather it be you den me, boy. I likes to do all mah travelin' on dry lan' 'n I can't see no excitement where de people am drownin' 'n de homes floatin' away. No suh."

The smile left Westy's face and his eyes grew serious. "No kiddin'—is it going to be as bad as that?"

"Ah dunno, boy, but dat's what de river's done many times 'fo' dis and de water ain't been racin' 'long as bad as 'tis now," he said seriously. Then: "Ain't yuh never been down this way befo'?"

"Nope."

The porter shook his head. "Yo' don' know what yo' is in fo' den," he said ominously. "If yuh ain't seen a Mississippi flood befo' den yo' ain't seen nuffin' yet. Jes' take a look out dat window, boy, 'n if yuh can multiply dat water by one hundred yuh'll git an idea what dat country down thar looks like in a flood."

Westy's eyes roved over the lowlands of Missouri and he saw that he did not have to stop and multiply the scenes they were passing in order to get an idea of what destruction the water could do in the Mississippi valley. This landscape before him was a vast stretch of forlorn looking shanties and stunted trees and the water in some places had crept up to the very doorstep of these makeshift homes.

"De po' whites," the porter commented. Then: "Say boy, ah got somethin' to tell yuh." He looked rather furtively up and down the aisle.

Westy sat up straight. "What is it, a dark secret?" he laughed.

The porter smiled but his eyes were serious. "Take it or leave it," he said in hushed tones, "it may be a secret an' then again, maybe no. But jes' the same ah'm passin' the word on to yuh that Mistah Silent am a 'tective, sho' as anything."

"*Detective*—is that what you mean?" asked Westy, interested at once.

"Absolutely, absolutely."

"How do you know?"

"Ah saw his badge wif mah own two eyes. It fell out-a his pocket when he wuz washin' dis mawnin'. Yes suh."

"How is it you didn't tell me that before when we were first talking about him?" Westy asked, interested.

"Fo' sev-erial reasons," answered the porter, promptly. "Ah didn't know who yo-all were at first and den when yo' told me 'bout thinkin' yuh knowed him 'n was sho' yuh saw him befo', I was suspicious."

"Suspicious?"

"De very same. Ah thought maybe yo-all was de one he was travelin' after. Then ah got thinkin' how yuh said this army man asked yuh to go 'long and ah knew ah was wrong in my first impression. Yes suh—ah knew den dat you wasn't de one he's trailin'. An' he's after someone on dis heah train, boy—sho' nuff."

Westy turned his face toward the window and frowned. Then quickly he looked up. "You mean—you mean he's watching someone on this very train—*this very car*?"

"De very same," the porter answered complacently. "Den again maybe he's goin' after someone in St. Louis. Yuh jes' cain't tell 'bout dem 'tectives sometimes. Dey sho' is like ghosts."

Westy agreed with a mechanical nod. "I knew I saw him somewheres," he said in monotones. "Now that you say detective, I'm almost sure."

"Yes suh, he am a 'tective." Then confidentially, "If ah find out mo' 'bout him, boy, ah'll pass yo-all de word."

"Thanks," said Westy listlessly. "I'd like to know all right. I sure would."

The porter departed upon his duties once more and Westy leaned back against the cushioned headrest. For some reason his heart was thumping wildly and each time the porter's words recurred to him, his mind seemed deluged with threatening voices and vague fears.

"What's the matter with me?" he said, by way of restraining those tormenting voices within. "What have I got to do with him? Why should I care who he's following or who he's after, huh? I should worry if he's watching everyone in this train."

The train was picking up speed and rushing him nearer and nearer to St. Louis. He felt that he couldn't get there quick enough now. The knowledge of the man's identity had somehow spoiled his trip and yet when he reasoned the thing out he asked himself what a detective could possibly want with him.

At intervals, above the clamor of the wheels just beneath, Westy could faintly hear the engine's siren screeching its right of way and he pressed his burning face against the cool window-pane to hear it better. Anything was better to listen to than the clamor and turmoil of his thoughts.

But he soon found that he could not bar those insistent voices within. They were asking, why, suspicion? And he answered that it was a lot of rot. In the fraction of a second his own voice was saying, "Rot? Very well, but here's the detective on the train and right in your own car. Incidentally, he's from Bridgeboro—your own town. What do you make of that?"

Still harder did he press his face against the pane and he clenched his teeth. But soon he was shouting within himself, "He's crazy if he's following me! They're all crazy! I'm crazy! Why should I worry, huh? Why should I be afraid? From now on, I won't be. I'll make up my mind that I won't!"

Westy was not a coward, but he was human enough to fear the presence of the law.

CHAPTER IX

A PROMISE

They were two hours late getting into St Louis and, much to his relief, Westy saw nothing of the ponderous Mr. Silent. The porter, however, managed to whisper a word of reassurance when he handed him his bag on the broad platform.

“Ah thinks Mistah Silent am gwan right on traveling boy,” he whispered. “He done give me orders tuh get him off first one, cuz he said he had tuh make connections. Yes suh, he am now on his way. G’bye ’n g’luck, boy.”

Westy returned this parting shot and looked around but could see no sign of Major Winton. He had hardly expected that he would for he knew that the major wouldn’t waste five minutes, much less two hours, waiting. His time was too valuable. After he had made sure that the major wasn’t in the vast waiting room, he turned and pushed his way out of the crowds and into the dark street. A rush of soft spring air filled his nostrils and he hailed a passing taxi with a feeling of exultation. There were no more fears to disturb his peace of mind and the annoying presence of Mr. Silent was a closed chapter. Adventure seemed to beckon him forward and as he stepped into the cab he had a delightful vision of that tawny river lying somewhere below the murky streets, waiting, just waiting for him.

Travel weary as he was, he jumped briskly out at the Malone and swung eagerly through the big, revolving door. In the lobby a bellhop approached him and deftly claimed his bag.

“Yo’ name Martin?” he inquired with a polite smile.

Westy nodded, surprised.

The boy chuckled. “Major Winton’s had me watching fo’ yuh an hour and more. Train’s been late, huh?”

“I’ll say,” Westy answered, genuinely pleased. “How’d you know me?”

They stepped into the elevator and the boy smiled pleasantly. “Major Winton described yuh,” he admitted, then laughed. “He said yuh had a great habit o’ swingin’ yuh right hand way out when yuh walked so I watched fo’ that and it turned out right.”

Westy laughed. “That’s a hot one. Who’d ever think Major Winton noticed that.”

“He don’t miss nothin’,” said the boy, as they stopped at the fourth floor and got out. “But I like him.”

That was a subject dear to Westy's heart and he would have liked very much to discuss it further had it not been that Major Winton flung open the door in response to the bellhop's knocking. And to quote a certain young man whose acquaintance Westy had made out in Arizona, "There's never any use in praising the major when the major's right there."

For all that, Westy silently agreed with the bellhop and was secretly pleased when Major Winton gave him a friendly push into a big chair. He tipped the smiling boy, sent him on his way, then surveyed his guest thoughtfully.

"Well, young Martin," he smiled, "I guess you're pretty tired, eh?"

"I was when I first got off the train," Westy admitted, "but I don't feel it now. It's so nice and warm here compared to Chicago and Bridgeboro."

Major Winton nodded and sat down on the arm of a chair opposite. "Talking of Bridgeboro, reminds me. I received a special delivery letter from your father today. He thanked me for being bothered with you." There was a soft chuckle, then: "He also told me of a rather unfortunate happening in your town involving you more or less indirectly."

Westy nodded, feeling not quite pleased that his father had mentioned it in the letter.

"He said you were quite upset by it as one of your best friends figured chiefly. Tell me about it," he said casually.

Westy sighed at the thought of reviving Bridgeboro troubles way out in St. Louis. But the major was waiting and wanted to know—given facts he was eager for details. "Norrie Cole was my best friend before he went away to military school," he said at length. "He would have been my best friend again if this thing hadn't happened."

Major Winton walked over to a desk and procured a cigarette. He lighted it and went back to the chair listening intently the while to Westy's short narration of the clouds that had gathered on Norris Cole's horizon.

They were frequently interrupted by telephone calls and from the major's answers one gathered that they were all pertaining to the imminent departure of this brilliant army engineer. After the fourth call was finished he apologized.

"There'll be no more tonight, thank goodness," he laughed. "They're all in on our little tour—those four—Wade, Grimes, Jones and Roberts. You'll see them all tomorrow. Wade and Grimes are my right hand men. This is a big job we're going on, Martin. That's why I'm taking you—it'll be a big help if you ever go in for engineering seriously."

Westy felt elated that a man of the major's standing should take such an interest in him. He wanted to hear all about what they were going to do and

just where they were going and hoped that he would hear more engineering talk. But he was disappointed.

“Where do you think this young Cole is now?” queried Major Winton, obviously more interested in human matters at that time. He settled himself in the chair and flung a trim, khaki clad leg over the arm.

Westy was intensely disappointed but cleverly concealed it. Would he ever get away from hearing about that affair? Finally he answered, “Gosh, I don’t know where he is, Major Winton. And if they’re together, I don’t know either. Neither of them ever had much money at a time so I can’t see how they’d get very far.”

“You believe they didn’t take the money, then?”

“Well, I promised Norrie once that I wouldn’t say anything against Trick until I could prove it and I’m going to stick to my promise. I can think as I like about him, but I won’t say anything. Anyway, I can almost swear to it that Norrie wouldn’t touch a cent of anybody’s money.”

“You’re quite sure then that he didn’t confide in you that this Trainor had even suggested robbing Mr. Cole?” Major Winton asked him pointedly.

Westy flushed at the directness of this question. For a second he felt as if he were floundering, mentally. “Why—why,” he stammered, “how could Norrie confide in me about something he didn’t even know was going to happen? I tell you, Major Winton, I believe in Norrie.”

“And what makes you so cocksure about him?”

“Just something tells me, that’s all,” Westy answered, wonderingly. “We had a couple of talks—just like I told you. He was mad at his father for keeping him down and he talked to me about it but I noticed when Trick made any remarks about Mr. Cole or Old Brower, why, Norrie stuck up for them right away. That shows what he was made of, doesn’t it?”

Major Winton conceded that it did and puffed leisurely away on his cigarette. He stared hard across the room and the smoke rose from between his long, thin fingers and enveloped his tanned face. Suddenly he leaned forward and dropped the stub into an ash tray on his desk. There was something almost deliberate in his gesture.

“And you say they were last seen getting off that New York bus together?” he queried, interlacing his fingers thoughtfully.

“Yes,” said Westy, aroused by this veritable barrage of questioning. “But it could have been a coincidence that they met on that bus, couldn’t it?”

“Yes.” The major smiled pleasantly and looked directly at his guest, “but whether or not it was, is another matter. I’m not so interested in that, Martin. Indeed, I was only curious about the affair just so far as it concerned you. All I wanted to hear from you was that you knew nothing of the affair until

after it happened and that you have no idea even now as to what has become of your friend, Cole, and his friend, Trainor.”

“I *don't* know where Norrie or Trick are,” Westy said, vehemently. “As true as anything. Major Winton, I was as surprised as anyone else to hear that Mr. Cole had been robbed.”

“I believe you, Martin,” Major Winton said, smiling. “I have great faith in you concerning this little affair and it means a whole lot to me that you don't fail me in my belief.”

“Well, I never failed you yet, and I guess I never will,” said Westy stoutly.

CHAPTER X

JAKE MILLER

Westy slept that night in a room adjoining Major Winton's. That is, he slept until two o'clock in the morning and spent the remainder of the night in contemplating his life, past, present and future. Perhaps that is going pretty strong for one of his age, but at any rate he was certainly contemplating himself.

The major's talk recurred to him at intervals and each time he went over it in detail just for the delight of repeating his words before they had said goodnight. But suddenly he paused and asked himself a question. Why had Major Winton pressed him so about his knowledge of Trick and Norrie's whereabouts?

He puzzled and frowned over it in the dark room, then smiled sleepily. "It's because he's taken an interest in me," he answered himself, "gosh, I suppose he just wanted to make sure I wouldn't be mixed up in an affair like that—that's all. After all, I can't blame him because it'd make him look like a monkey if I turned out to be something he didn't expect."

He turned over on his right side and vainly tried counting sheep. The stars blinked themselves into nothingness in the heavens above his window and soon that vast realm seemed but a yawning black abyss. It was approaching dawn.

Suddenly the door opened and Major Winton called him and made apologies for having to start off so early. The *Atlantis* was scheduled to start at dawn, he said, in order to make their first stop that evening. He hurried into his room to complete his packing and left Westy to dress.

A few minutes later they were being jounced around with their baggage in a taxi along the dark streets. Westy got a glimpse of dismal looking houses and as they swerved around a corner a shabby negro lounging against a lamp post stared idly as they passed.

"Gosh, I wouldn't mind stopping and taking a peep at St. Louis," he remarked.

"Maybe there'll be more time for that on your way back," the major said. "But if all you want is the stops, why you'll have plenty of them from tomorrow on. You may even get tired of stopping."

"Not me," laughed Westy. "I like to keep on going, and in this case to stop means to keep on going, huh?"

“I guess so,” Major Winton smiled. “At any rate, just act as if the *Atlantis* belonged to you—this is your vacation.”

Westy was a little disappointed with his first glimpse of the great river. It looked anything but great to him—more like some huge mud puddle as he viewed it in the gray light of morning. True, its waves lapped greedily about the rope ladder of the shining, white yacht as they ascended to the deck, but they were not the dancing blue waves of his anticipation.

He spoke of this to Captain Earl after they had been introduced and were seated at breakfast in the luxurious dining-room. “When it comes to looks the Hudson has it beat forty ways,” he concluded proudly.

The white-haired, blue-eyed captain winked across the table at Major Winton. “That may be true, son,” he said jovially, “but your lordly Hudson isn’t the magician that our muddy Mississippi is.”

“Magician?” Westy queried.

“Exactly,” answered the captain with a broad smile upon his benign face. “This stream of mud can play the durndest tricks on a feller that you could think of. I’ve known it for twenty-five years now and it ain’t never behaved the same twice in succession. It’s what them writing fellers call a dual personality, I guess.”

Westy thought the captain was teasing him but when he looked around the table at the interested faces of their party he changed his mind and ventured to ask, “How?”

Captain Earl leisurely bit off a piece of toast and chewed it complacently. “In threatening flood times like now,” he answered slowly, “the river’ll flow along under a warm spring sun as lazy and harmless looking as a country brook. But all the time, mind you, it keeps rising and the further on down we get the higher it’ll be. Then finally in some places you’ll see it squirming against a weak levee. Even when it flows in through a crevasse and down the streets of a town it doesn’t seem to be in a rush but all the same it is. It can fill up a whole village the quickest I ever did see. A poet feller I knew one time said ‘it slays with a caress’ and I guess he was pretty near right.”

Major Winton had turned and was looking out of the wide window at his elbow. They were now under full steam and the city of St. Louis was fast becoming a blur on the horizon. At length he shook his head, doubtfully.

“I guess it’s higher now than it has been for years, eh?” he asked.

Captain Earl nodded. “Some say it’s no worse, but I say it *is* worse,” he said emphatically. “Tain’t no use to be pessimistic, I s’pose, but when you see a thing you see it and when the Mississippi Valley has to face the facts of a flood they might as well admit it and get to work fightin’ it as best they can.”

“I agree with you,” said Major Winton, his eyes still fixed on the passing landscape. “There’s been a pile of erosion since I was last here. Too bad they don’t plant more trees.”

A discussion started then between the major and his assistants. Or rather, there started a friendly argument among that little group as to which was the simplest means of curbing this great river. Westy listened with interest until he saw Captain Earl rise and walk out on deck and, seeing that he would not be missed, he went also.

He followed the captain aft and gained his side just as he stopped at the rail. “I was interested in what you said about the river, Captain Earl,” he said, eagerly. “I—I hope you didn’t feel offended at what I said about it because I only meant that I was surprised to see how funny and muddy it was after all I’d heard about it.”

Captain Earl tousled Westy’s curly head and laughed. “Offended!” he said. “Why, son, folks down here never get offended at anything strangers say about their river. They know it’s muddy and they know it’s treacherous so you can’t hurt their feelings none by telling them. They love it just the same.”

“And you don’t get offended either?” queried Westy.

“If you mean, would I, if I were a southerner, I’d answer no, too,” he smiled.

Westy looked at him, puzzled.

The captain laughed heartily. “I’m only a southerner when I’m on the Mississippi, son. And when I take a four months’ vacation every winter at my home in Connecticut I s’pose you’d call me a northerner. Anything else troubling you, lad?”

Westy liked him, “Sure,” he answered, encouraged. “Have you ever been down on our river—the Bridgeboro River? Why I ask you is because it curves and bends like the Mississippi even if it isn’t very long.”

Captain Earl’s sparkling blue eyes took on a puzzled expression. “Bridgeboro River, eh?” he asked. “Is that where you live—Bridgeboro?”

“Yep,” answered Westy. “Ever been there?”

“No,” answered the captain, thoughtfully. “I was just wondering—Major Winton must have a weakness for Bridgeboro people, eh?”

“Weakness? I don’t know—why?”

“Nothing, ’cept that I took on an extra deck hand at the major’s special request and he told me the feller was from Bridgeboro, too. But then I s’pose you know all about it, eh?”

Westy shook his head, puzzled.

Captain Earl smiled. “Well, I s’pose Winton’s been so busy he hasn’t thought about telling you. And maybe it’s just a coincidence that you both

come from Bridgeboro. Maybe you know the feller, eh—Jake Miller?”

Westy shook his head again.

“Then it is a coincidence,” said the captain genially. “Maybe it’s another Bridgeboro he’s from, eh? There could be more than one Bridgeboro in the country just the same as there’s a dozen or more Hicksvilles and Cold Springs.”

“Maybe,” said Westy, not very convincingly.

“Anyway, there’s only one Mississippi,” laughed the captain, his hands firmly clasping the shining rail. “Just look at it, son, wouldn’t it make you think of a sleeping tiger with its claws sheathed?”

Westy looked over the side, his eyes dark and thoughtful. Indeed, the lazy, tawny stream reminded one of just that, and its placid lapping against the speeding yacht seemed to mock his whirling thoughts. Captain Earl’s splendid simile had struck a responsive chord in him.

Why hadn’t Major Winton mentioned about this Jake Miller from Bridgeboro? Who was he?

CHAPTER XI A DISCOVERY

"I'll ask him, I will!" he exclaimed, after the captain had left him to go about his duties. "Gosh, it's darn funny—anyway, I'll go ask him right now." He hurried back to the dining-room, or the mess room as Major Winton called it, and the only person he found there was a negro waiter who was clearing away the remains of their breakfast. "De major and de other gen'lemen am in de liberry on de fo'ward deck," that person informed him politely. "I heerd de major say dat dey would be in conference if anyone should ask."

"That means me, too," said Westy irritably, as he left the mess room. "That means he doesn't want to be bothered by anyone."

He knew the major well enough to respect his wishes on that score, but he dared pushing a deck chair along to the forward deck and adjacent to the door that opened into the library. "I'll be right here when he comes out," he told himself, and proceeded to read a magazine that he had found in the empty chair.

For the next two hours he heard the low murmur of their voices and eagerly waited for the door to open. But it did not open and he grew tired of sitting and reading and went up to pass away some more time with the captain.

At intervals he would see a deck hand passing below and he anxiously scanned each face trying to seek out this other protege of the major's. For some unknown reason he did not want to ask Captain Earl's aid in identifying this extra deck hand that he had mentioned.

Luncheon was announced and when Westy entered the room they were all seated at the long table. He felt terribly disappointed that he couldn't get the major's ear alone, for even then he was occupied in a lengthy discussion with his right hand men, Wade and Grimes.

Westy tried making the best of it and spoke occasionally to Roberts and Jones, both serious-looking young men. They, on their part, did not seem very sociably inclined, obviously preferring to keep an attentive ear upon the remarks of their superior.

"They think I'm just a kid—eighteen," said Westy, disgruntled. He attacked his lunch almost fiercely and finished it in record time. "Anyway, Major Winton doesn't think I'm too young to learn things or he wouldn't

have asked me to go along,” he said, after he had repaired to the deck once more.

Shortly afterward he learned that the major had retired to his stateroom for the afternoon as he was suffering with a headache. They were scheduled to stop at Cairo sometime between six and seven o’clock of that evening, where the engineers were to have an important conference with the levee board.

All this Westy learned from the yacht’s engineer, with whom he became quite friendly. The afternoon passed rapidly and at five-fifteen o’clock he had dinner with Wade and Grimes and Captain Earl. Jones and Roberts were still busy and the major wouldn’t be getting up till they came into Cairo, he was informed.

He experienced a twinge of homesickness after the meal was over and attributed it to the major’s absence. “I hope I find more to do,” he murmured. “Gosh, nobody to talk to—gosh!”

He sought a comfortable chair on the deck where the last rays of the sun were playing and lazily watched the water swirling out of the yacht’s path. A drowsiness stole over him and he did not try to fight it. Instead he welcomed it—it brought thoughts of what adventure he might have.

Might have? He smilingly asked himself that question. “I better have,” he mumbled, drowsily, “or I’ll be wishing I’d gone to California.” With that in mind he fell asleep.

Someone put a covering of some kind over him but he was too sleepy to open his eyes and look. He was content to feel the warmth and snuggled in it like a child. Dreams, wild and terrifying, tossed his mind about and he seemed to be struggling to awaken but could not. Suddenly he felt a tugging at the covering about him and heard a voice call his name.

He awoke, staring into darkness. The yacht seemed to be standing perfectly still and there was a great profusion of lights glowing somewhere in the darkness. He threw aside the covering and looked up.

Major Winton and the four engineers were standing around him, laughing. “You’re some sleeper, young Martin,” the major said pleasantly. “I thought I’d better wake you and let you spend the rest of the night in your stateroom. It’s pretty cold out here.”

Westy blinked his heavy lids. “Huh?” he asked, astonished. “What’s—what time is it?”

“Ten o’clock,” answered Wade, looking at his wrist watch in the light from the library.

“I wanted to take you along,” said the major, “but you looked too peaceful to disturb. Wade covered you over before we left.”

Disappointment was evident in Westy's brown eyes. "You mean you've been—we've been in Cairo?"

"We're there now," laughed the major.

"And you've been at that conference while I was asleep?" he asked.

Major Winton nodded. "I'd have wakened you if I'd known you wanted to go that badly," he said. "There really wasn't anything so interesting for you though and you looked all in. I thought you needed the sleep more. But never mind, you won't get left again—we'll stay at our next stop for a week perhaps."

Westy got up and stretched his cramped legs. "Gosh, that won't make me mad," he said. "I'd like to have something to do, all right." Then: "One thing, I'd like to talk to you Major Winton—I want to ask you something."

"Do you think it will keep until morning?" the major asked, pleasantly.

Westy nodded. "It'll have to if you say so," he answered.

"That's settled then," said the major. "We have some reports to go over and then I'm going to turn in. My headache isn't quite gone, and I'll feel more like answering questions in the morning."

The big yacht was again under way and after the little group had entered the library Westy strolled around the decks. He poked his nose inside his stateroom door in passing and decided that it was more pleasant outside. His long nap had rested him too thoroughly, and he went below to chat with the engineer.

It was past midnight when he came up on the dark, shadowy deck and the lights from shore seemed to accentuate the still gloom about him. He walked very quietly and had just reached his stateroom door when he heard a footstep. Instinctively, he drew back into the protecting shadows.

Someone came around and stopped at the rail, striking a match. Westy watched the little yellow flame ignite the tip end of a cigarette and in the glow he got a fleeting glimpse of a large, round face. Then the smoker walked on.

Westy crept inside his stateroom like some hunted animal. He felt like one, he told himself. His hands and head were perspiring and cold and he groped his way to his bunk. Confusedly, he sank down upon it and tried to think.

"It's gosh-blamed funny," he murmured after a little time. "And it's that same guy, Mr. Silent—oh, my! So that must be Jake Miller, huh? *Jake Miller! Detective!*"

He could think no more than just that and sat there for five or ten minutes before he decided to undress. An hour must have passed and he was still awake. Suddenly he sat up.

“How would I know anything about it!” he said, his voice sounding small and strange in the darkness. “Haven’t they got brains enough to know that Norrie never told me anything—Norrie didn’t do it, anyhow—he didn’t know any more than I do now! And that feller’s crazy if he’s following me—*he’s crazy!*”

CHAPTER XII

IT'S A GO!

Westy awakened the next morning full of the questions that he was going to ask Major Winton. "I'm not a fool," he said aloud, while he dressed. "I'm wise enough to know that there's a trick in this somewhere."

There was bitterness in his tones and he felt that he had been deceived. All that the major had said in the hotel about faith and believing in him seemed like so much empty talk in the light of this newest revelation.

"Yeh, he believes in me," he said, mockingly. "It looks it when he gets a detective to come along with us. But he won't fool me—I'll ask him straight off."

He was as good as his word for the door of the library had hardly closed upon him when he told what had been troubling him. "I know who this Jake Miller is—I saw him on deck last night," he said in quivering tones. "I've got to know why you didn't tell me when we were talking the other night—I've got to know why you should let him come along and follow me as if I were a thief or a murderer!"

Major Winton pulled a chair up to the big, mahogany table and sat down. His face was grave, but not angry looking. "Well, well, young Martin," he said slowly, "you've completely taken me by surprise."

"You mean you didn't..." Westy began.

"I mean I didn't think there was much chance of you seeing Miller. He's on the night watch."

"Then you *didn't* tell me on purpose, huh!" Westy exclaimed.

Major Winton's eyes sparkled. "You certainly have spirit," he smiled. "So you charge me with deceiving you and aiding and abetting Miller in following you down on this yacht, eh? Do you honestly think I'd approve and consent to such methods with a boy of your type and age?"

Westy flushed and sat down in a chair near the door. "Gosh, what else would I think? I saw him on the train to St. Louis—I was sort of suspicious then. And yesterday, Captain Earl let it slip that you asked him to take on an extra deckhand—this Jake Miller from Bridgeboro. It all came about by me telling him where I came from. Anyhow, I put two and two together and I guessed right away what it was—gosh!"

"To begin with, Martin," the major said quietly, "Captain Earl doesn't know the reason of Miller's presence here. Indeed, I don't suppose Miller would thank me for telling you what it's all about. You know, Martin, the

law does things in its own peculiar way and the people are helpless to protest.”

“Well, it’s a mighty punk way they have of doing things then, if you ask me,” said Westy, his anger rising again. “Since when have they a right to follow me just because I happened to be a friend of Norrie’s?”

“That’s just what I intend explaining to you,” said Major Winton, pleasantly. “Calm down first and tell me if you remember exactly what I said to you in the hotel.”

“Sure, I do,” said Westy vehemently. “That’s what made me so sore. Gosh, I thought when you said a thing that you meant it!”

The major smiled. “I did and it still holds good, young fellow. Is that not enough to dispel any doubts you may have had?”

Westy nodded, sheepishly.

“Can you not understand that I was powerless to do anything but comply with Miller’s request that we take him with us on this trip? He said that your friend Norrie’s father had demanded the Bridgeboro police to follow you out here—he’s sworn to make an example of his son, and Miller has to do it, so who am I to refuse anything that’s asked in the name of the law?”

“Yes, but you could have told him about me and that it wasn’t fair for him to sneak around after me as if I were a crook!” Westy protested.

“Indeed, that’s what I did tell him,” the major said, patiently. “I told him that before I even heard your side of the story. He called me up about five minutes before you got to the hotel. I guess he ’phoned from the terminal.”

Westy gasped in amazement. “How did he know I was coming here—how did he know you or anything else?”

“Those fellows have an uncanny knack of getting their information—that’s their business,” answered the major. Then: “Did you happen to tell anyone on the train where you were bound for or anything like that?”

“Sure, the porter.”

“Ah, there’s your mystery solved in jig time.”

“But he was the one that told me about Miller being a detective. He called him Mister Silent because he didn’t talk much. He wouldn’t even answer me when I asked him if he came from Bridgeboro—but I knew I’d seen him on Main Street. I didn’t know his name, that’s all. Gosh, I’d never thought that that porter was two-faced—he was so friendly and nice to me.”

“No doubt I dare say he took a liking to you, but at the same time considered the generous tip Miller would give him for divulging a little information about you. At the same time your porter was giving you a timely warning in the event that you would have any need to elude the watchful Miller.”

“He said he didn’t know about that, and it wasn’t here nor there. He was given orders to follow you in order to find out where this young Norris is and from all accounts that’s why you came down here. They think you have it all planned and Miller was sent to be on the spot when it happens.”

“Huh! So that’s it!” said Westy, contemptuously. “They really think I think that Norrie’s down here some place and that I just came along with you as a blind until I get ready to meet him—is that it?”

“That’s about it,” answered the major. “But just put it out of your head for the time being. I’ve made a little wager with Mr. Miller that he’s going to be fooled as far as you’re concerned.”

Westy’s face lighted up with a smile. “You mean you let him take the job so’s you could show him up—make him realize that he’s off his head about me?”

Major Winton nodded. “Don’t ever lose sight of the fact that I picked you out myself, Martin. I’ve not known you to fail in anything yet and I know when you say a thing, that you mean it.”

“You bet I do,” said Westy exultantly. “And just to show that smart guy, Miller, I’m going to say that I’ll prove he’s even on the wrong track about Norrie. I’ll prove Norrie’s innocent if it’s the last thing I do! I hope I hear from him now—gosh, I hope I do!”

“I hope so too,” Major Winton agreed. “Your faith in him warrants some return.”

“Well, if you’d been all through a thing like this and knew what kind of a guy Norrie is you’d understand,” Westy said, stoutly. “Anyway, when it comes to detectives sneaking around after me—why, that’s the limit. Gosh, I’d like to make a monkey out of him—out of them all for being so darn suspicious.”

Major Winton pushed back his chair and came across the room with his hand outstretched. “Here now, young Martin,” he said smiling broadly, “we’re going to shake on this Norrie’s innocence. I’m for you and with you on that matter, come heaven or high water. Is it a go?”

Westy gripped the proffered hand in answer and gulped from sheer happiness. “Gosh,” he said, feelingly, to think that I blamed you? I’m sorry, honest I am, Major Winton, because—well, you’re one peach!”

CHAPTER XIII FOLLOWED

Weeks passed and Westy was fast becoming a true and tried member of the *Atlantis* household. Bridgeboro and all that it contained ceased to be real to him and even Miller had dwindled into the shadows of memory. He had not seen him since that one night and did not try to. Indeed, he had purposely avoided the deck after ten o'clock at night for, as he explained to Major Winton, what he didn't see didn't worry him.

He had followed the major around to various levee board meetings and soon learned that the gigantic ramparts of earth that raised their crowns above these valley towns were all that protected the fertile lands and people from destruction. Everywhere they stopped there were scenes of almost feverish activity along the dikes, putting in cribbing in the weak places and topping it as far as the eye could reach north and south.

While the major was inspecting he would sometimes stop and watch them drive the posts into the levee earth and then build a board fence against them. Against this topping were piled sandbags and everyone seemed satisfied when that job was done that it would do wonders, do everything in fact, in keeping out the river when the crest of the flood should be reached.

But there came a day in April when even the yacht had to be guided with especial care along the rising crest of the Ole Devil River as the negroes were wont to call it. There had been warnings sent out to all river craft to proceed with the utmost care. Waves from passing steamers washed out great gaps in many of the crumbling levees. Then they anchored one drizzling afternoon outside the city.

"Well, she looks pretty safe," said Major Winton, as they sat down to dinner that evening. "On the other hand, you never can tell."

"Never can tell is right," said Wade, taking his place at the long table. "Captain Earl just told me to tell you that Arkansas is calling for tents. The river bottoms are flooded.

"That doesn't sound very good, eh?" he said. Then: "That'll give us a few days' work here and a few days' pleasure for young Martin. He can go to the movies and see the town thoroughly."

Westy smiled with delight. It would be the first time that they had stopped anywhere long enough for him to thoroughly explore a town and he looked forward to it eagerly. "I hope you'll be able to come along with me," he said to the major. "I'd like it better."

“So would I. Maybe I’ll be able to sneak away from this bunch a little while tomorrow,” the major laughed, with a wink at Westy. “If I do we’ll put something over on them, eh?”

“I’m game,” laughed Westy. “I feel like putting something over on someone—I know that!”

That remark was received with a good deal of laughter, and it was said out of the fullness of his physical well-being, but he had occasion many times afterward to wonder if it had been construed otherwise and held against him. For, in all innocence, he had pronounced a sentence upon himself in saying it, and whether for good or evil time alone held that secret.

The next morning the sun glistened brightly along the dew-covered levee as Westy ate his breakfast Major Winton joined him and announced almost at once that their little holiday together would have to be called off.

“We’ll have to wait until I get down the line and can fit it in,” he said. “My mail this morning was full of orders from Washington and there’s too much to be done to take any leisure time while we’re anchored here. That won’t interfere with you, young Martin—you go ahead and amuse yourself all day—a couple of days, for that matter. I’ve got to go down to Arcadia today and I won’t be back until after nightfall.”

Westy was a little disappointed but after he got ashore he felt a sense of freedom in being alone. He realized suddenly that he had been lonely and had missed the companionship of fellows of his own age. He had a chance to dwell on the riotous fun that his hiking days had offered and longed for them again.

He stopped at a drug store and gorged himself with several varieties of the confectioner’s art and while he was washing it down with a tall glass of lemonade he inquired of the clerk where the best movie house was located. He meant to make the most of the day.

“Yo’ stranger in town, huh?” asked the clerk politely after he had directed Westy to the city’s best movie emporium.

Westy lingered on the high stool, glad of this chance to talk to someone near his own age. He told his whole interesting history and wound up with an account of the *Atlantis*’ destination and his own feelings about the matter. “Gosh, don’t think because I’m lonesome that I don’t like Major Winton, because I do,” he said naively. “I think it was swell for him to ask me when he was so busy—that’s just it—he’s sort of too busy to bother much with me and it doesn’t make any fun for me. It would have been swell if I had had another feller along—a feller I liked” (he didn’t mention Norris but he distinctly visualized him as he spoke) “then things would be different.”

The clerk listened with all the sagacity of his nineteen years. “Boy, yo-all are sure out o’ luck, travellin’ like that,” he said, sympathetically. “Ah’d

offer tuh go with yuh myself, but things are sure bad 'round heah, 'n my mammy sho' needs me. Ah've got leave tuh go home in a half hour 'n bring her down heah tuh the city—a cousin of mine lives heah. We're spectin' the levee tuh break most any time and we'll be livin' heah till that Ole Devil River takes a notion tuh back out whar she b'longs. Ah live at the Landing."

Westy looked at him, interested. It was the first time he had approached the human side of the threatened flood. "Do you really think the levee can break up there?" he asked, recalling vividly now all that Captain Earl had spoken of.

"*Break!*" he repeated. "Boy, it was crumblin' away when ah left at nine o'clock this mawnin'. They've been fightin' it off all week 'n now nobody's botherin' no mo'. They're all tryin' tuh clear out as fast as they can. Some folks won't budge 'n my mammy's one o' them but she called up 'n said she's ready tuh come now."

A querulous lady entered the store at that moment and the clerk excused himself and went to wait upon her. Westy was rather loath to leave the young fellow—the movies could wait, he decided.

To kill time, he got off the stool and walked across the front of the store, inspecting a counter of springtime remedies. Just beside it and right by the door stood a spring scale upon which he immediately jumped to weigh himself, and as soon as his penny was inserted in the slot he fixed his eyes upon the mirrored dial.

He smiled at the reflection of his tanned face and upon learning his weight was just about to step down when he caught a glimpse of another face in that tiny mirror. He stood quite still until it passed beyond the drug store, then got off slowly and thoughtfully, although his cheeks burned with just anger.

What was Miller's idea in standing there outside the store, deliberately spying on him as soon as his back was turned?

CHAPTER XIV A HELPING HAND

“So that’s it!” he said between clenched teeth. “The reason I haven’t seen him before was because Major Winton has always been with me. What does he think—does he think I’m going to run away?”

He leaned over the cigar case in such a position that he commanded an excellent view of anyone passing by. Miller did not pass again, but Westy knew that he was close by and the more he thought of it the more he resented his spying.

“I won’t stand it,” he whispered fiercely. “I’ll go around this town as I please and he *won’t* follow me. I’ll go out and find him and tell him too!”

But suddenly he remembered what Major Winton had told him about his wager with Miller and the thought brought a smile to his face. “I’ll make a fool of him,” he said, calmly. “I hope he does follow me around because he won’t see anything. I’ll....”

The querulous lady left the store and the clerk was calling to him. “Ah expect my boss any minute,” he explained, as he reached for his hat behind the prescription counter, “and minutes am precious, b’lieve me!”

They sat thus in the front of the store at the soda fountain and talked, the clerk thinking of the ruin that was facing his mother’s home and Westy thinking what a fool he would make of the detective. Soon the proprietor came in and they left.

“Well, boy,” the clerk said amiably, despite his worried face, “ah’ve got my flivver ’n ah’ll make that Landing in about twenty minutes—what yo’ say?”

“What do I say?” Westy queried, wonderingly. “What do you mean?”

“Would yuh like tuh come ’long?”

“To the Landing?”

The clerk nodded, smilingly. “Ah thought yuh’d like tuh, being yuh’re so lonesome. After ah fetch my mammy we’ll come back and ah’ll show yuh the city right.”

Westy looked at him admiringly. Here was the true southern spirit at its best—wanting to bestow hospitality even in the face of a flood. “Gosh, you’re aces up, all right,” he said happily. “But how about your mother—do you think she’ll like it if she sees me with you?”

“Sho’ nuff,” said the young man. “We’re done grievin’ ’bout what we cain’t help, b’lieve me. Ah’ll have the rest of the day off and my mammy’ll

want me tuh make the most o' it." He walked to the curb where a seasoned flivver was standing. "C'mawn 'long."

A bulky figure shadowed a doorway just down the street and Westy followed the clerk, smiling. "Now, let him wonder where I'm going and what I'm doing," he whispered to himself as the engine started noisily.

In a second they were off and as they swung from the street into the highway, Westy felt triumphant. He hadn't even glanced Miller's way in passing. But that feeling of exultation was not of long duration for they were not five miles away from the city before the fact was borne in upon him that a dowdy looking taxi deliberately kept just behind them. Cars passed and repassed, but the little cab swerved not once out of the line to pass them.

Westy's companion seemed not to be aware of it, and he said nothing to him as his face wore an anxious look. A continuous line of cars burdened down with refugees and their household possessions were hurrying in to the city. After they had gone a few miles more someone in a passing car called to the young man. He nodded back in answer and stepped on the gas.

"Did you know that man?" Westy ventured after a few moments' silence.

The clerk nodded. "Betcha. He lives right next do' to me and he jes' said they were turnin' back the cars—the water's gettin' so high. Boy, ah should have fetched my mammy sooner."

"You don't mean anything's happened to her, do you?" Westy asked, alarmed.

"Nah," answered the young man seriously, "but ah'll have tuh fetch her in a boat, I guess, 'cause that fellah jes' looked at me as if things were pretty bad."

They raced on and in the excitement Westy forgot the taxi sputtering furiously in order to keep up with them. He only remembered afterward that the worried clerk didn't speak again until they reached a sort of promontory, which he explained was the boundary line of the Landing. Here they encountered a group of men who waved their arms for them to stop.

"Back," cried one of the men, "unless yuh got business heah."

The clerk explained that he had, and the men allowed him to park his flivver up on the promontory. "Where yo' live?" another man asked him. The clerk told him. "Sho' nuff," said the man, "a boat's goin' up Magnolia Street right now fo' some other folks, so hurry 'long."

When Westy thought of that day afterward he could only remember the chaos of that moment. Flat bottomed boats were lined along the foot of the promontory and it was into one of these boats that the drug clerk was directed. Westy attempted to get in also but a man with an authoritative manner turned him back, and before he had a chance to speak, other men

climbed in the boat and pushed it off through the flooded street. He never saw the young man again.

Other boats were rapidly put into service and while Westy stood by watching, the man spoke to him once more. “What’s yuh business, boy?” he asked, not unkindly.

Westy told him briefly.

The man looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. “While yuh’re waitin’, want tuh help?” he asked.

“Sure, how?” Westy smiled, feeling the old scout thrill of doing a good turn.

“Can yuh row?” asked the man.

“*An how*,” Westy laughed. “When do I start?”

The man smiled and took him over to one of the clumsy looking boats. There he was introduced to a big, brawny man, named Tim, a pleasant, loquacious fellow who suggested that they start at once. Nothing suited Westy better—he had something to do at last.

“We’re sposed tuh go tuh the nigger section, boy,” Tim told him, pleasantly. “You’d be s’prised how many o’ ’em stays, thinkin’ the water’ll go back. But it’s not goin’ back—not fuh a good while ’n it’ll be a deal worse befo’ it’s bettah. Why, some o’ them niggers won’t leave, I d’clare, till Gabriel blows his hawn.”

Westy laughed and helped Tim push the boat away from the curb and into the street. It took but a second to complete this action and yet it was thus that he became a living part of the great flood.

CHAPTER XV FLOOD SCENES

They moved slowly through the streets which were forsaken and silent. Only the muffled roar of the river pouring in through the crevasses sounded, and the deserted houses, with only their upper stories clear of the muddy stream, seemed to stare at them appealingly as they passed. Soon they would be entirely obliterated by that destructive monster, water.

Presently they came to what had been the corner of a street. "We turn heah," said Tim, guiding the boat cautiously among the branches of trees. "I d'clare if it ain't the greatest the way watah can mix up a fellah's geography. Only early this mawnin', I could find mah way 'round without studyin' the direction but now it clear perplexes me whar a street ends 'n the other begins."

"How about Magnolia Street?" asked Westy, thinking of the worried drug clerk. "Was that filling up this morning?"

"Naw, only since noon," Tim answered, readily. "That's on higher land than heah—it's as bad as this by now. Even Clay Street whar we started off will be filled befo' sunset."

Westy had a vague thought of how he would get back to the city if Tim's prophecy came to pass, but he did not ponder on it long. His oar touched a submerged fence and they had to proceed very carefully, close to the side of the corner house. An attic window was open and they noticed a child's rag doll lying on the window sill, with its poor sawdust legs dangling over the edge and just touching the water.

Westy could not help turning back once again to look at that pathetic sight; the doll seemed almost human. But in the middle of the next block they were startled by a dismal whining sound. Tim rested his oars and they listened.

It came again, louder than before. "It's 'round that next block," said Tim.

They proceeded around the next corner and encountered a crooked fence leisurely floating in their path, covered with a profusion of honeysuckle vines. Tim pushed it out of the way only to bump up against the huge trunk of an uprooted magnolia tree. Westy balanced the clumsy boat just in time to prevent their having a spill.

"Yuh see, yuh cain't tell," said Tim, warningly. "Jes' as like as not a human being might float up 'n hit us the same way."

Westy shuddered visibly. “Gosh,” he said, horrified, “you don’t mean to tell me that anyone’s drowned in this, do you?”

Tim smiled grimly. “Stranger things have happened, boy,” he said. “They ain’t all got sense ’nuff tuh get away while the gettin’s good.”

Again the cry rang in their ears and suddenly Westy realized that it was the yelping of a dog. Tim and he looked up and saw that it was a fine, big collie marooned on the window sill of the house on the other side of the street.

They paddled over but could not get within fifty feet of the barking dog. The porch roof had evidently caved in for part of it stuck out of the water in zig-zag fashion.

“We cain’t take a chance like that, even fo’ such a fine dawg,” said Tim, worriedly. “We’ll jes’ get as neah as we can.”

With his big brown eyes imploringly fixed them they got as close to the house as was possible. Westy snapped his fingers at the animal. “Come on, pup,” he said, coaxingly.

“Ah wonder why he didn’t jump befo’,” said Tim.

“Don’t know,” said Westy, and coaxed him some more. “Jump, pup. Come on—jump!”

The dog barked, sniffed the air and leaped toward them. He hit the water with a resounding splash and Tim and Westy leaned over the side of the boat, eagerly. But the animal seemed to be nowhere in sight.

Westy looked behind to see him come up there. “Where is he, I wonder?” he asked Tim, anxiously.

“He didn’t come up again or ah cain’t see straight,” answered Tim, foraging around with his oar.

Westy helped push the boat alongside the projecting timbers to the spot where the animal had jumped. Fifteen minutes they spent hunting in the muddy water until Tim settled back in the boat with shaking head.

“It’s no use, boy,” he said resignedly. “He must o’ hit somethin’ ’n we cain’t spend any mo’ time huntin’ when human bein’s is at stake.”

It was something of a shock to Westy to contemplate the end of that dog. As they rowed away from the scene he could not help visualizing what had happened and spoke to Tim about it. “If it could kill a dog it could kill a human being, couldn’t it,” he said.

“Jes’ what ah said to yuh befo’,” said Tim. “Yuh may be able tuh swim like ’n expert but it ain’t sayin’ what’ll happen if yuh try ’n swim through flooded streets.”

Westy afterwards remembered Tim’s words—he was a veteran of Mississippi floods and he knew what he was talking about. Presently they came into the nigger section, as the southerner called it, where the little

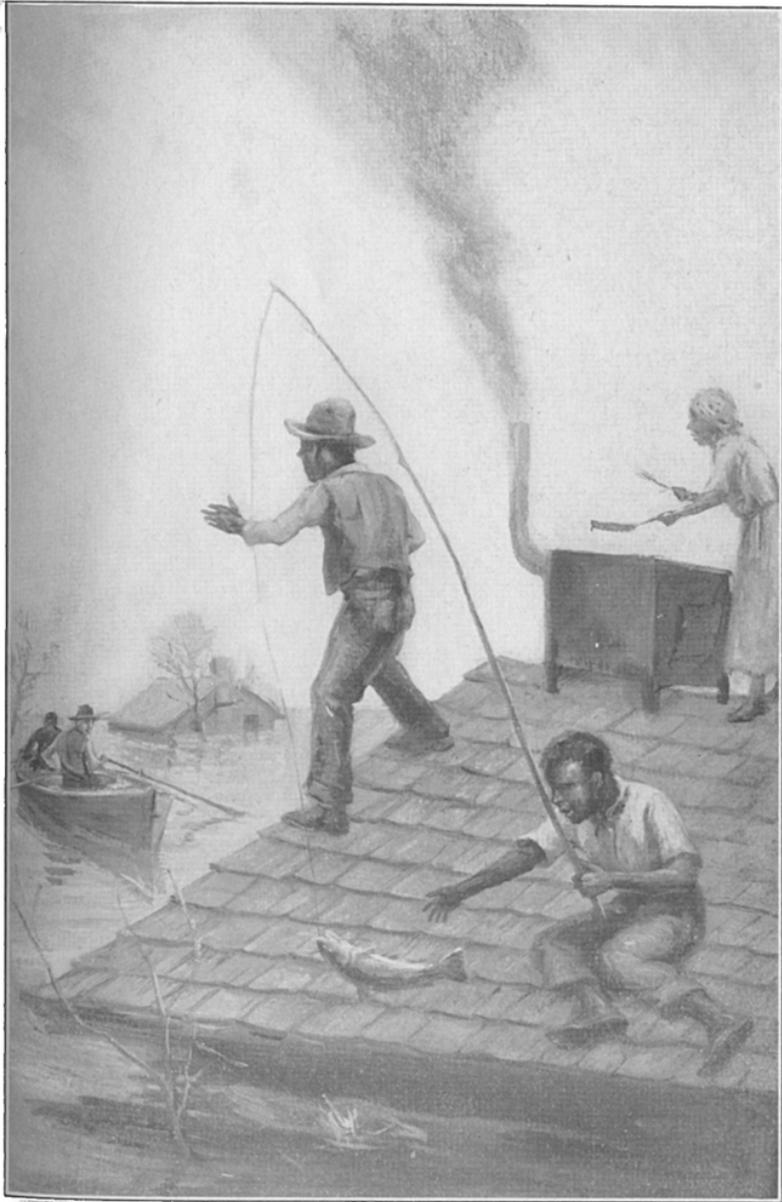
cabins bobbed around in the water like marionettes bowing during an overture.

A couple of roosters crowed lustily from a nearby roof. Tim glanced at Westy and smiled. "No, we cain't take 'em ef that's what yuh're gettin' ready tuh ask me. They'd only jump out in the watah aftah all our trouble."

Toward mid-afternoon they approached a cabin, standing up to its eaves in the muddy water. On the roof a whole family was gathered. The old negro mammy was complacently frying some fish on a little wood-burning stove dexterously balanced on the ridge-pole and the fire was being fed with shingles ripped from the roof. A young girl was performing this task.

On the edge of the roof, a boy of about twelve was patiently fishing and he waved his line in greeting as Westy and Tim rowed up. The father, an amiable old negro, came to his son's side and smiled cordially.

"We ain't goin' tuh leave," he chuckled. "Ef that's what yuh came fo', we ain't goin' tuh leave. De watah ain't goin' tuh go no higher an' we's safer heah den on dat crumblin' levee."



“WE AIN’T GOIN’ TUH LEAVE, EF THAT’S WHAT YUH CAME FO!”

The old mammy vehemently agreed with her husband’s decision, and Tim shook his head and smiled. “Yo-all is doin’ a foolish thing,” he called as they rowed away. And upon second thought: “Signal us with a torch, folkses,” he said kindly.

“if the watah gets higher tonight. We’ll be on the levee.”

Westy looked at Tim questioningly. “Levee,” he repeated. “Why the levee?”

“Cause that’s as far as we’ll get when we go back, boy,” he answered. “Clay Street is jes’ another channel by now and this Ole Devil River is travelin’ straight fo’ the city. Didn’t that fellah what introduced us ask yuh any questions?”

“He didn’t tell me anything. He only asked me if I was willing to help and I said sure. That’s all.”

“Well, then he thought yuh was willin’ tuh take the good with the bad,” said Tim. “Yuh cain’t be particulah what time yuh get home in these times, no suh. Yuh’ll jes’ have tuh wait on the levee with the rest of us and wait till we’re rescued.”

“Well, I’m game,” said Westy. He wondered what Major Winton would think and suddenly he recalled the cab that had followed him up to the Landing. “Miller’ll go back and spread the news, all right,” he told himself, and peremptorily dismissed that thought from his mind. The major knew that he could take care of himself.

He felt carefree for the first time in weeks and despite the ruin and desolation they were passing through, his senses fairly hummed at the prospects of spending a night on a crumbling levee top. Adventure was beckoning him on and while he was comparing his present plight with the tame life aboard the *Atlantis*, it occurred to him that he was hungry.

“Gosh,” he said to Tim as they neared a profusion of tree-tops peeking out of the water, “that fish smelled good. Gosh, I must be hungry.”

“I was thinkin’ the same thing myself,” said Tim. “Maybe someone’ll have a bite fo’ us on the levee. The Red Cross ought tuh be gettin’ down tuh them ’bout now. We’ll turn ’round cause ah don’t think there’s another nigger family stayin’ on heah.” He called lustily to verify his statement.

No answer came and they turned around into a street where a church belfry poked itself high out of the water. Tim attempted to say something about it when the boat ground noisily against something and they stopped.

Westy looked down at his feet. “It’s been ripped open,” he said. “It’s a hole.”

“An’ we ain’t got nothing tuh bail her out with,” said Tim. He examined the opening and shook his head. “Yo’ bail her out with yuh hands, boy, an’ I’ll row fo’ that church belfry.”

“What’ll we do there?” asked Westy.

Tim laughed and his voice echoed strangely through that flooded street. “We’ll jes’ have tuh climb it ’n hang on if yuh don’t want tuh drown,” he said.

Westy did not ask any more questions but began bailing in earnest.

CHAPTER XVI REFUGE?

The boat filled rapidly despite Westy's efforts and by the time they reached the old church, the water was above their ankles. Tim leaned forward and grasping the cornice pulled himself up on the sloping roof around the belfry.

Westy jumped after him and as he steadied himself with palms outstretched upon the slippery shingles, he heard a bubbling sound and saw that the boat had sunk out of sight. He whistled and laughed with sheer relief.

"That's what I call a close shave, all right," he said, trying to crawl upward.

Tim had reached the coping around the bell and sat there breathless, but smiling. "Yo' ain't sorry yuh volunteered are yuh, boy?" he asked, holding on to one of the posts. He leaned over and gave Westy a pull with his free hand.

"Phew!" Westy exclaimed, as he threw his leg over the wooden enclosure. "Why should I be sorry—gosh! We haven't been lucky enough to save anyone yet—we haven't even saved ourselves. But I'm not sorry; I'd rather be doing this than doing what I have been doing for the past month."

Wet and shivering, he sat there and told his companion of his life in the last month on board the *Atlantis*. The sun scurried behind some gathering clouds and shone through, a pink, sickly hue. A mist seemed to rise after that and it wasn't long before the heavens looked down upon them, one vast frowning shadow.

"Rain tonight," said Tim, squinting his kindly blue eyes upon the horizon. "Ah hope someone comes fo' us befo' then. It's kind o' creepy heah." He shouted for help three times and his deep voice seemed to ripple the very surface of the water.

Westy tried his lung power also but they did not get any response, save for the distant crowing of a rooster. The marooned pair wondered if it was the same rooster they had seen earlier in the afternoon. After that the misty silence settled about them like some chill ambassador of death.

The great iron bell seemed to move slightly with the swaying of the thick rope and as Westy peered down into the cavernous depths of the church he thought he heard someone sigh. He shivered visibly and told Tim.

“It’s the watah, boy,” the man said. “It’s prob’bly weakenin’ the foundation. This heah buildin’ must be mos’ fifty yeahs old. It wa’nt big an’ that’s lucky fo’ us ’cause we couldn’ of got up heah.”

“Well, if the water’s weakening the foundation that means it might cave in, doesn’t it?” Westy asked.

“Mo’ than likely,” said Tim, complacently. “But we won’t think o’ that till it does.”

Westy laughed outright at the man’s composure. “Gosh,” he said naively, “if you can be as calm about it as that, I guess I can too.”

Tim smiled and nodded toward the cornice. The water had already crept up past it and was wriggling over the first row of shingles like some writhing serpent. The silence was terrible and Westy was seized with an impulse to reach over and swing the bell rope—anything to hear a noise. He suggested this.

“Now that ain’t a bad idea, boy,” said Tim, admiringly. “I nevah thought o’ that.” He was thoughtful a moment, then: “Seems to me though, I heard it was put out o’ commission since a thundah sto’ m last summah. Try ’n move it, boy, ’n we’ll see.”

Westy leaned over and tried putting all his strength in the task. Nothing sounded but a dismal, hollow squeak from somewhere in the peak of the belfry, and the eerie sigh of the rising water down inside the church.

Tim changed his position and complained that his left foot was asleep. “Ah s’pose we’ll jes’ have tuh be patient ’n wait fo’ someone tuh come ’long,” he said, scanning the watery world for some sign of a rescuer. “But lan’ sakes, boy, ah shure am hungry. It must be aftah six o’clock.”

“My stomach thinks it’s later than that,” Westy said, shivering in his damp clothes. “Do you suppose we’ll get anything to eat if we’re rescued?” There was a loud *plop* in the water. Tim smiled. “Fish,” he said, licking his lips. “We could be eatin’ right now if we had a line an’ a stove.”

“And some matches,” Westy reminded him.

They both laughed but their mirth sounded forced. “Gosh, there ought to be a rescue party soon,” said Westy. “There were enough boats there at Clay Street, I should think.”

“But not ’nuff fellahs tuh take them out,” Tim said. “Mos’ all the boats came up heah this mawnin’ ’n I s’pose they think I’m nosin’ ’round’ ’n it’s aw’right. Everybody cleahed out o’ heah first ’cause it’s the lowest part o’ the Landing. Don’t worry though, boy; when Tim don’t show up by dark they’ll send a searchin’ pahty out—you’ll see.”

Westy glanced anxiously toward the water. It was past the third row of shingles now. It didn’t have so very far to come and twilight was casting its

first shadows over the stricken town. Night was a good hour away and almost anything could happen in that time.

Something rumbled ominously and the frail enclosure upon which they were sitting trembled violently. There was a roar and in a flashing second, a loud splash and the hand with which Westy grasped the wooden support shook as if he had the ague.

Tim's face had gone white. "Must be the foundation, boy," he said quietly. "I ain't borrowin' trouble but I don't think we got any grand stand seat heah."

"Think we ought to jump in and take a chance swimming around?" Westy asked, his teeth chattering.

"Yuh saw what happened tuh the dawg, boy," Tim reminded him gently. "'Nother thing, I cain't swim. We might as well hang on till the belfry goes."

After a few minutes passed and nothing happened they took courage and shouted together until they were hoarse. Each shout seemed to echo and reecho in and around that dismal belfry and long after their voices had ceased that dismal, hollow squeak seemed to mock them cruelly.

A dead cat went swirling past them and in its wake a squirrel. "The cat won't catch any more mice and that squirrel won't hide any more nuts."

"No," said Tim, peering east, west, north and south. "This ain't 'xactly what yo' nawthinahs calls a picnic. Still we ain't as bad off as them drowned animals—not yet!"

"Not yet, is right," Westy agreed. "Even when a feller's dying you can't say he's dead."

Tim laughed and called, then laughed some more. Westy joined him and watched the lengthening shadows while he stopped to rest his throat. The current was gaining all the time and pushing everything in its path. They idly watched an ironing-board and an infant's high chair bump against the church's eaves only to be rudely swerved about and sent back upon the flood stream.

The tops of trees began to take on all sorts of ludicrous shapes in the gathering dusk. Here and there, a chimney, more fortunate than its submerged neighbors, stood out clearly defined against the murky horizon. It seemed to Westy as he contemplated them that they looked like the gaunt fingers of giant skeletons beckoning to Tim and himself—beckoning them like some waiting fate.

He clung almost tenaciously to the post after that and glanced down the roof. The water was up—he couldn't count the rows of shingles now—they were too completely covered. Suddenly Tim leaned over and touched his arm and motioned him to look to the western sky.

Something black was swinging to and fro against the murky heavens and soon it resolved itself to Westy's staring eyes. He turned to Tim, questioningly.

"Buzzard," said Tim quietly. Another appeared and another until a flock had gathered seemingly from nowhere. "Buzzards," he corrected himself grimly.

CHAPTER XVII

BUZZARDS

Westy watched them, fascinated by their leisurely swinging movements. Slowly, ever so slowly, they swung nearer earth, nearer them—in their direction. “What do you think they’re after?” Westy asked at length.

“Us, maybe,” Tim smiled. “Who knows what them devils come aftah.”

Westy looked at him, aghast. “Gosh, you’re kidding me, aren’t you?”

Tim shook his head. “They’ah aftah somethin’ that’s dyin’ aw dead,” he said seriously. “We ain’t dying aw dead, neither, but the good Lawd knows how long that’ll keep up if this heah foundation bends ovah.”

Westy shuddered but courage mounted in him as he saw Tim’s smiling face. “Anyhow, it doesn’t say it’s us they’re after,” he said vehemently, “just because those things happen to be coming this way.”

“Ah nevah argue ’bout buzzards, boy,” the other said, laughingly. “Ah always says let ’em go their way ’n ah’ll go mine. But jes’ now ah’m praying that they’ll go their way.”

Westy could not suppress a smile. “How about that squirrel and cat?” he asked, anxiously. “Maybe it’s them that they’re after, huh?”

“Ah hope so—ah surely do,” said Tim. “But a squirrel an’ a cat don’t go fah with a flock like that, boy. Ah once heard mah mammy say—‘a flock fo’ a feast.’”

Westy felt actually sick. Both his hands held the post now and they felt wet and cold. He tried desperately not to look in the birds’ direction but they held his attention like some powerful magnet and at each pendulum-like swing of their bodies a nauseating tremor shook him from head to toe.

Tim too was watching them but soon he suggested calling again. “It’ll soon be dahk,” he said quietly.

“Then they couldn’t get us,” Westy remarked, hopefully.

“They’d be right heah in the mawnin’, though,” said Tim, with a sad smile. “You’d see ’em circlin’ ’round at dawn—if yuh was alive tuh see it.” Westy knew that Tim wasn’t just being pessimistic. He knew that these vultures never circled in flocks except for some distinct purpose. And never did they swing so ominously between heaven and earth unless their prey was close at hand. It might be themselves, come optimism or go pessimism. The buzzards were not particular what state of mind their victims were in—they came on just the same.

Tim reached over and put his hand on Westy's shoulder and the contact renewed their hope. They were united in their peril and as the building groaned wearily under them they clasped each other more firmly.

"At least we'll stick together," said Westy, bravely. "If we do go down, why, just do as I tell you. I got a lot of experience in life-saving from the scouts."

He had modestly refrained from telling of the Honor medal won so gloriously in his recent scouting days, but he thought of it now. It seemed as if he was giving his whole life a general review and as he clung to the post he bethought himself of how one does cling to hope—to life, even in the face of death.

He prayed for night to come quickly and shut out the sight of those awful black figures, only a little distance away now. They circled and circled in maddening precision. "Why don't they swoop right down?" he asked, desperately.

"Them rascals ah nevah in a hurry, boy," answered Tim. He cleared his throat and shouted twice, then turned back to Westy. "It makes it bad 'cause the fellahs don't know ah would come down this way, 'n they knew this mawnin' that thar wa'nt no folks 'long heah. We'll jes' have tuh shout once in a while so that when the rescuin' pahty comes out they'll heah us."

The building groaned again, longer and louder than before. They sat tense, waiting, but it seemed to settle back on its foundation once more. The belfry rope swung back and forth furiously and the bell squeaked dismally. One would almost think that some unseen hand from below were shaking it in a last desperate effort.

"Say," said Westy, nodding toward the upper portion of a live oak tree just beyond, "don't you think if I were careful we could navigate as far as that?"

Tim shock his head profoundly. "That'll be likely to go undah any time," he said, "an' while this heah buildin's cryin' the blues every so often it'll keep out o' watah longer than that tree."

"And if the foundation crumbles in, why, we won't be any better off than if we took a chance on that tree."

"Mebbe so, mebbe so," said Tim, shaking his head, "but jes' now ah suhmises that this heah buildin' will have a long, hard death. While ah'm sittin' on somethin' dry I don't crave no wet tree 'n besides anythin' can happen while we're on our way ovah there. This church may stay put fo' a half hour yet, maybe mo'."

Westy laughed, nervously. His eyes had strayed from the likely looking tree-top back to the buzzards. No, they had not swerved from their greedy

course but were circling straight in their direction. There was something grotesque about their deliberateness. Would they never stop their swinging?

He put his hand up to his forehead and brought it away dripping with moisture: Tim also, could not keep his eyes away from them, but sat tense, his right hand clenching the post and the left one now in his lap with the fingers clasping and unclasping the leg of his soiled khaki trousers.

Westy watched until a sort of panic seized him. He opened his mouth wide and shouted with all the strength that he could muster. When his voice broke, Tim lustily took up the echo.

Did it frighten the buzzards any? Westy looked up hopefully, but his heart sank within him. They were coming desperately near—sickeningly so. But suddenly something dark bobbed around from under the live oak tree and floated over toward the church on the crest of the flood stream.

Westy leaned forward. “It looks like an old door,” he said. “What’s—what’s....”

Tim grasped his arm fiercely. “Look, boy!” he cried, hoarsely. “As the Lawd made me, it’s a fellah floatin’ jes’ behind!”

CHAPTER XVIII

RESCUED

Westy felt as if he were glued to the coping. Only his eyes seemed alive, watching fearfully this floating tragedy coming close to the old church. Tim made a peculiar, choking noise in his throat and wagged his head from side to side. His eyes were fixed on the little patch of twilight that hovered just above them, for in it the flock of buzzards swung, nearer, nearer....

Every muscle in Westy's body twitched as his eyes caught sight of their gawkish, skinny necks and his pulse pounded as he heard the hard flapping of their great, raggedy looking wings. They were waiting, circling and waiting....

Westy grasped Tim's arm. "For heaven's sake, Tim," he cried, desperately, "didn't you tell me that they followed the dying? Didn't you—oh gosh...."

"Boy," Tim interposed with a break in his voice, "ah don't know what ah'm thinkin' of—yuh're right—he cain't be dead—he may be dyin' but thank the Lawd he cain't be dead yet or they would come down."

The door bunched clumsily against the cornice and the impact caused it to swerve about with its human cargo. Westy slid down the sloping roof without a word and recklessly jumped in after it but the flood stream was swift and it floated rapidly away from his reach.

He struck out desperately, deaf to Tim's warnings and entreaties. One arm he used for warding off the many floating obstacles in his path and the other for making progress toward this helpless victim. The sound of the wings flapping overhead gave him great strength and courage.

Something struck his leg and cramped it for a moment but did not deter him from pushing on harder than ever again. The worn old door had slid to the other side and Westy went after it pell mell. At the same time he received a full mouthful of the foul, yellow water.

Happily, the door had a head-on collision with an obstinate chimney and came sliding back. Westy reached it and swam around, his arm outstretched to get hold of the still figure. The upturned face was covered with leaves and mud, unrecognizable, and to his horror a stream of blood was bubbling through and into the heartless flood waters.

Terror stricken, Westy grasped the victim's leg to pull him along, but it wouldn't budge. He pulled again but with no results. In desperation he took

a couple of strokes and in attempting to grasp him by the arm, saw that his coat collar was caught by a big nail sticking out of the door.

“That’s all that’s saved him,” Westy thought as he worked furiously with his free arm to extricate him. “He would have sunk—he sure would have sunk.”

The nail had caught the collar securely and had worked into the lining, thence into the closely woven material of a knitted tie. Westy had to ease the nail out in order to release the unconscious fellow and at intervals he felt of his heart to make sure that life was still there.

When he was at last released, the sudden movement caused his head to go under for an instant, washing some of the leaves and mud off of the face. A gash in the forehead told the tale and as Westy hurriedly glanced at the face an eyelid flickered.

There was something familiar in that little movement; it caused his heart to jump a beat. Only one side of that still face was free from the sediment of the flood waters but even that one side caused the rescuer to swallow hard, for half parted lips revealed perfectly even teeth. It was a young man, a very young man.

Tenderly, Westy put his arm around him and bore him away toward the old church. Tim had evidently been frantically watching every movement for he called out words of encouragement and pleas of warning until they reached the cornice once more.

He had crawled down and was leaning over the edge with outstretched arms. “C’mawn, boy,” he said with great relief, “yo’ jes’ push that pore fellah fust ’n I’ll pull him as careful as evah ah can. Take care o’ yo’self though—take care.”

Westy pushed and Tim pulled the water-soaked victim up, up over the slippery roof until they reached the only dry spot, under the belfry. There they laid him carefully and removed his wet coat and shirt which the southerner replaced with his own partly dry clothing.

That done, Westy crawled back again down to the cornice and soaked Tim’s big handkerchief in the muddy water. It was a perilous chance to take, he thought as he wriggled his way up, but it was better than no water at all.

He mopped carefully at the injured forehead and around the face and as the mud fell away the features of Norris Cole slowly took form before his startled eyes. He gasped, held his breath and sat back.

Tim grabbed him just in the nick of time. “Yuh’d fall off that roof, boy, if ah didn’t hold yuh,” he said, perplexed at Westy’s strange attitude. “Wha’s wrong, huh—do yuh see a ghost aw somethin’?”

Westy shook his head and did not answer for his eyes were fixed heavenward. The buzzards were high now, mingling with the dusk. They

were circling, yes, but circling farther and farther east—away from them. No more could he hear that fearful, hard flap-flap of their huge wings, but joyfully did he see them at last disappear somewhere in the watery wastes beyond the Landing.

He stirred and sighed and as he turned to meet Tim's questioning face, a tear rolled down his cheek and onto Norris' flickering eyelid.

CHAPTER XIX THE TORCH

Tim produced two handkerchiefs and Westy managed to bind up the gash in Norris' head. They then proceeded to resuscitate him and before night closed in upon them he had responded to their combined efforts.

"The nail in that ole door shure was a lucky stroke," said Tim, delightedly, as Norris sighed. "It kept his head up 'nuff tuh prevent him from swallowin' too much o' that filthy watah. But of all things ah cain't get ovah the fac' that you 'n him is friends. Sho'nuff, it shure is strange how yuh could come tuh meet heah in the Mississippi 'n both o' yuh nawthinahs from the same town."

Westy couldn't get over it either. The whole thing had sort of left him groping for an explanation of the mysterious ways of Providence and as he sat by watching Norris steadily gaining in strength, his heart beat with the joy of the just. The very thing he had wished for had been delivered right into his own hands.

Norris was no less mystified. He gasped and whistled as soon as he was able to sit up and when he learned that it was none other than his own friend who had saved him from an awful death, he leaned back against the belfry enclosure and shook his head. "Words fail me, Wes," he said, weakly, "words fail me."

Westy smiled and patted him affectionately. "We'll try and dope the why and wherefore of that later, Norrie," he said. "Just now words fail me too when I see how close that water is getting."

Tim agreed with him thoroughly. He no longer talked of searching parties in the reassuring tones that he had first used and suggested that they let their feet hang inside the belfry as the water was mischievously rippling over the top row of shingles covering the roof. Norris was eager and willing to abide by this decision and protested that he was feeling quite fit and able to sit up.

They huddled then on the coping with their legs dangling into space and only the flimsy posts supporting the belfry on which to cling to keep them from falling into that yawning gap. Westy could feel Norris' questioning eyes upon him and as the seconds wore away he told of how he had come to be in that predicament, refraining from even so much as a hint of what had set all Bridgeboro agog.

Westy knew, however, that that was what Norris wanted to hear and after he had finished his story, the runaway quietly asked: “Did you hear anything before you left home, Wes—about me, I mean?”

Westy looked at him, then nodded toward Tim. That kind person, however, was anxiously trying to peer through the darkness for some sign of a torch. He seemed oblivious just then of the two boys and was straining his ears for the least sound of an oar.

“Norrie,” Westy said in almost a whisper, “there’s so much to tell you about yourself that my mind would have to be more quiet than it is now. I did nothing else but hear about you before I left and almost ever since.” He leaned very close to his friend. “In fact, Jake Miller—do you know him?”

“Yes,” Norris answered.

“Well, he’s followed me all the way—even wormed himself on the *Atlantis* as a deckhand just to keep watch on me,” Westy continued in the same hushed tones. “He told Major Winton that your father thought I knew where you and Trick were and that my trip down here was just a bluff—that it was because I had it all cut and dried to meet you and Trick. Now what do you think of that!”

Norris groaned. “And it’s all happened that way! Gee, I don’t know whether it’s luck for me and just plain hard luck for you or what. Anyway, Miller saw me—Trick too. That’s why I’m here. I ducked off in one of the rescue boats and Trick ducked off in a car that was just starting for the city. But Miller followed me though—he got in the next boat and kept after me when I got sick of it and gave them all the slip. I dove out as they were turning around by a big tree and hid there until they were all out of sight, then swam around and around until I began losing strength and something bumped me—I guess it was the old door. You know the rest.”

“Where’s Trick?” Westy asked, swallowing hard.

“Aw, I know where he’s headed for,” Norris answered. “He warned me a couple of weeks ago that Pop might be mean enough to send someone out after me for running away when I’m not of age so he gave me the address to look for him in case we saw a detective. It’s where a feller lives that we met on the way down here.”

Westy gulped and longed to fire a volley of questions at Norris—his talk had been so strange. Trick warning him that someone would be watching out for him because he wasn’t of age. Did it mean—could it possibly be then that Norris was ignorant about the stolen money?

Westy leaned over and pinched his arm. “Just answer me this, Norrie,” he whispered, “did you know that Trick and yourself are being hunted for by Miller because your father missed five thousand dollars from his safe the

night you both went away? Did you know that you're both accused of stealing it?"

Norris held his breath in a way that proclaimed his innocence to Westy. Finally he reached out and shook his informant vigorously. "It's a lie," he whispered hoarsely. "I didn't know anything about it and I bet Trick didn't either. Anyhow, I bet you didn't believe I'd do a thing like that, did you?"

"No," answered Westy, "I honestly didn't. Not about you."

"But you believe that Trick did, huh, Wes?"

"Yes. How did you get the money to come down here—stay here all this time?"

"Easy. Trick was left money by his grandmother and he drew it out of the bank. We've been working since we've been here at the Landing. On the levee—I bet Tim recognizes me even."

Tim hearing his name mentioned turned around and verified this. "Ah shure does remembah yuh," he said, pleasantly. "Ah thought when ah fust saw yuh what a kid yo' looked tuh be, away from home 'n workin' like a dawg on dat levee."

After a monotonous ten minutes had passed, Westy smiled rather cynically into the darkness. "That grandmother stuff may be worked with some people," he said in an undertone, "but Trick couldn't put that over on me, Norrie. No, siree!"

Norris' observations in the matter surprised him. "Now that you've told me, Wes," he said frankly, "I'll admit that things do look funny, but you can't accuse Trick until you hear his story. And it hurts me to think of Pop accusing me of a thing like that—gee, I'll write home now and tell them it isn't true. I sure will."

Tim shifted his position and coughed uneasily. "Ah'm glad yuh have somethin' tuh occupy yuh mind, talkin' 'bout yuh home 'n such, but take it frum me, boys, if we don't use our minds as a whole 'n think of a way tuh 'tract attention down on that levee, somethin' disastrous is shure gawn tuh happen heah."

"Gosh, we've called and everything," said Westy, alarmed at Tim's warning. "I don't know—if we only had a match, we could rip off some of that splintery wood and make a torch."

"Match—match," said Norris as if he were thinking hard. "Let's see—gee, sure! I've got Trick's cigarette lighter—will that do?"

"If it works it will," Westy laughed eagerly, and hunted in Norris' wet coat for it.

"Wet?" asked Tim, as Westy brought it forth and tried it.

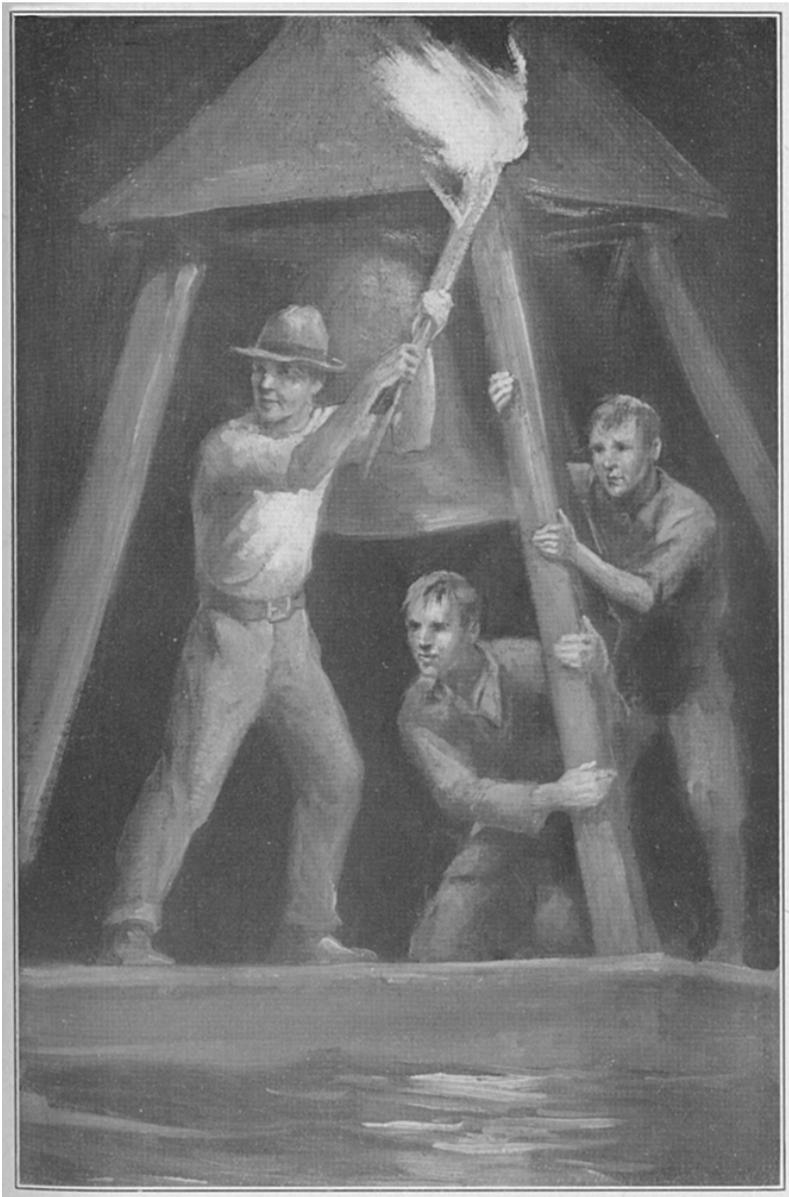
A little glow shot out as if in answer to this query and Westy clicked it with his finger nail two or three times to be sure. Tim stood up on the coping

and ripped off a good-sized piece of wood from the belfry peak and handed it down.

“Here goes,” said Westy, holding the lighter close to the dry, splintering wood. Soon a little spark gleamed in the darkness and as it grew they watched it intently, hopefully.

Tim took it, being the tallest, and swung it furiously from his advantageous stand on the coping. Sparks flew right and left and at intervals the flame leaped high in the black night. Westy prompted him to swing it according to the Scouts’ General Service Code.

“It’ll attract attention quicker,” he said, “even if they don’t understand the signals.”



WESTY PROMPTED HIM TO SWING IT ACCORDING TO THE SCOUTS' GENERAL SERVICE CODE.

Tim did so for ten minutes and more. Then he rested. "That ought tuh fetch 'em," he said. "This is gettin' serious, boys."

They could hear the water gurgling right beneath them. It was creeping, creeping up the posts and, wet and shivering as they were, their discomfort

was nothing compared to the fear they felt as they listened to that silent death slowly overtaking them.

Suddenly Westy's nostrils became filled with an acrid odor and he glanced casually at the torch. Tim was holding it out at arm's length but it had burned down considerably. Norris sniffed the air also and stirred a little farther along the coping.

"Gee, that thing suffocates me," he said, coughing. "It's.... *Look!*"

Tim and Westy followed the line of his shaking, pointed finger and stared horrified at an ominous red glow in the belfry peak. Something crackled and a swift flame darted heavenward.

"Ah've set it a-fire, sho'nuff!" Tim cried in self-condemnation. "Oh, mah goodness!"

Even as he spoke that dreaded element licked its fantastic way down the farther post. In a flashing second the whole peak burst into one terrible flame and Westy's arm went about Norris fiercely.

What was it going to be, he thought desperately. Brave that black flood all about them or be burned to death. Which?

CHAPTER XX HANGING ON

Tim's hoarse shouts rose above the crackling flames and the watery area around the old church was lighted up as if for some festive occasion. It was a time for action, a time when quick thinking and even snap judgment was better than deliberation.

Westy did not deliberate. His eyes quickly noticed the live oak tree still managing to hold her own in those surging waters, with her topmost branches a good seven feet above the crest of the flood. He cried for Tim's attention and motioned to it. "That's where we're going," he said, determinedly. "Hurry—put on Norrie's things and we'll tow you across. It's better to have your feet hanging a foot above the water than make toasted sandwiches of ourselves."

Norris laughed, almost like an hysterical girl. One does those things at such times and is amazed to hear of his actions afterward. Tim hurriedly donned the wet things and placed himself under Westy's protection in the raging current.

It was like some horrible nightmare—their departure from that burning belfry and their crossing through that foul water to the sturdy tree. But they made it, happily, and only Tim was the worse for the experience. His head had gone under, he said, and during that swift moment of immersion something had entered his mouth and in his fright he swallowed it. He declared it had either been a small mouse or a young bird.

Westy and Norris laughed heartily at that but he would have none of their mirth. To support his contention he was violently sick for a little while and clung shivering to the slippery bark of the branch that was assigned him.

Westy and Norris were clinging to the lower branches just above the water. They told Tim it was a purposeful position, for in the event that he should fall they would be right at hand to rescue him. He gladly admitted the wisdom of this and mumbled prayerfully about the searching party.

There was nothing to do but watch the little inferno from which they had escaped. Its flames were still leaping into the night, and the picturesque little belfry was almost consumed when suddenly they heard that familiar, dismal, squeaking sound. A sizzling roar and terrific crash followed, then all was still.

"The bell, I bet," said Norris, weakly.

Westy peered over his way. “Feel all right, Norrie?” he asked with a ring of tenderness in his voice.

“Yep,” answered Norris, bravely. “I’m just a little shot, I guess, and I’m blamed hungry and thirsty and cold, just the same as you and Tim are.”

“Yeh, but you’ve been through something, Norrie,” Westy said, solicitously. “Put all your strength on the limb instead of hanging on that way. It won’t break under you—gosh, if that one up there holds Tim, you’re safe.”

Tim uttered a groan to let them know that he heard but was too sick to comment upon it. And so they clung on, each with his own fearful thoughts. Westy tried not thinking of the searching party at all and let his mind ponder on the ultimate destiny of the church bell.

He wondered if it could have crashed through the organ to make such a noise and suddenly he was visualizing the ponderous thing crashing through space and recklessly slaying the mellow old instrument, thence sinking wearily upon some submerged pew. Both were still now, the bell that had called the faithful for countless Sunday mornings, rain or shine, and the organ whose melodious notes would peal no more.

The flames were dying gradually and like some tottering old man, the belfry peak swayed back and forth uncertainly and toppled into the water. Soon the posts crumbled up until nothing was left but a few hissing red embers that were swiftly whisked away on the black stream. Thus the flood had claimed it all.

They were all silent after that. Their discomfort was too great to be discussed in mere words. Only their aching bodies rebelled and their tingling nerves and numb fingers seemed not capable of bearing up under the strain much longer.

Tim groaned. Westy shouted and Norris whistled. It was a strange medley reaching out into that silent, watery waste; a medley that was almost instantly taken up by voices and echoes other than their own.

Tim was instantly alert. He groaned gratefully. “Thank the Lawd,” he said listlessly. “Thank the Lawd they came ’cause I wouldn’t be s’prised but what I’d have to have one o’ them thar operations tuh remove this troublesome feelin’ frum mah stummick.”

CHAPTER XXI

A BOAT!

When the answering voices ceased they could hear the welcome sound of dipping oars coming nearer and nearer. Then came a flash of light and soon the bright glow of a lantern resolved itself, revealing two men in a boat.

Tim groaned almost piteously and one of their rescuers immediately called, "That you, Tim?"

"Ah should say 'tis," answered Tim, with a great sigh. "Boys, yuh don't come none too soon tuh suit me. I'm like tuh die mos' ev'ry minute with stummick affections."

Tim didn't die, as you shall learn later. In point of fact, he got into the boat as ably as the rest, but there was no denying that his stomach had become a source of annoyance to him, for he stretched himself out in the bottom of the boat during their journey to the levee, and moaned with his illness.

He was much too sick to explain how they came to get into such difficulties, and Westy assumed this responsibility for him. It was enough for the rescuers, however, that they had saved the exhausted trio. "Not that things are so much better on the levee top," said one, "but there's 'bout fifty of us all together 'n there's safety in numbers. We're hopin' fuh a rescue boat fust thing in the mawnin'."

And so they came in sight of the levee, with its lanterns glowing through the darkness, cheerfully. It brought hope to the rescued ones despite their physical discomfort, and as they approached this temporary haven the little band of refugees, huddling at one end, cried out a boisterous welcome.

They scrambled up, ankle-deep in mud, Norris and Westy giving the long-suffering Tim a generous lift. Some negroes became exultant upon learning of the trio's escape from death and after giving them a resounding three cheers burst into song. Another group laughed hysterically out of sheer relief and for a little while one did not hear the river roaring through the crevasse so near them.

One almost forgot that the worst flood in history had ravaged the beautiful Mississippi delta.

Tim wanted nothing more than to lie down on the muddy ground and die in peace, he said, and immediately several lighthearted negroes rushed forward with some moldy sacking with which to cover him. After that he

went to sleep and they heard no more from him during the rest of that endless night.

Westy found a packing box and they sat down, a little apart from the rest. Most of them, too exhausted to mind the damp, muddy levee top, lay down and slept fitfully. Others managed to sit on bits of newspaper, now and again nodding their drowsy heads.

A slight drizzle set in and the wind moaned restlessly. “Dat am de ghost ob de river,” observed a negro nearby. “Ole Devil—she ain’t sa’sfied yet.” He chuckled and whistled the first few bars of Dixie.

“Gee, you can’t beat those people, can you!” Norris said, snuggling close to his friend for warmth.

“Gosh, no,” said Westy. “Trouble never bothers them—even this.”

Norris was quiet awhile, then nudged Westy. “Talking about trouble, Wes,” he said in a low voice, “we’ve got enough to think about—even *you*. Don’t you suppose it’ll look bad for you when Miller tells Major Winton that he saw you at the Landing, then Trick and me?”

“Sure, in a way. But Major Winton’s a peach, Norrie—it’d take a whole lot of Miller’s talk to convince him. He believes in me, the major does. He’s said that twice now.”

“Well, I hope so,” Norris said, doubtfully, “but it sure is hard luck that we had to meet here after you saying you didn’t know where I was. Boy, you’d sure think that we had it cut and dried.”

“I know it,” said Westy, “but my word’s just as good as Miller’s any day. Another thing, Norrie, I’m not sorry we met here. Gosh, it just looks as if it’s sort of like fate that Tim and I had to get upset. Even that my father and mother let me come looks as if it was meant to be.”

Norris edged closer. “Well, I’m glad you’re here, I know that, Wes. Gee, when a feller feels like I do, sort of hot and shivering and hungry all at the same time, gee, it’s good to have someone alongside of you that you know’s your friend.”

Westy peered sideways, alarmed. “Don’t you feel so extra, Norrie?” he asked.

“Not so extra,” Norris admitted. “But like I told you before, I guess I’m just weak.”

Westy turned, anxiously. “Take my coat and lie down, huh?”

“Naw,” said Norrie, “it makes me shiver to think of it. I’ll be all right soon as I get something to eat and some dry clothes on. They say the Red Cross have everything to give the refugees. Anyway, morning will soon be here.”

Westy put his arm across Norris’ shoulder and they talked of everything. Particularly of the missing money. “It’s funny,” said Norris, “but I can’t

believe that Trick took that. Did Mrs. Trainor say anything about him drawing the money out of the bank?"

"No," Westy answered.

"Well, I've got to see him then," Norris said, determinedly. "I've got to make him admit the truth."

"How do you know he will?"

"I know. Trick's better with me than anyone else."

Westy bit his lip. "How much money was this grandmother supposed to leave him?"

"Five hundred. That doesn't go very far when you travel way down here. That's why I suggested us taking a job on the levee—so I could pay him back what he had been spending on me. He couldn't see the idea of working at first—you know that Trick and work never agreed—but finally he gave in and we came here. We only stayed a week in St. Louis, then blew in here."

"You stopped off at St. Louis, huh?"

"Yeh. One morning while Trick was sleeping late and I didn't have anything to do I walked uptown to the Malone and inquired in there for Major Winton."

Westy swallowed hard. "You saw Major Winton?" he asked, with bated breath.

"Naw, don't get excited, Wes. He wasn't in, so I left my name and told the bellhop to tell him that I was a friend of yours and that I'd be back in the afternoon."

"And..."

"Trick wouldn't let me go back," Norris interposed. "He said that I might as well wire to Pop and tell him where I was as to get Major Winton to give us a job. He said it would be all up with us."

Westy whistled softly. "And the major never told me that," he said, hurt "I wonder why? What harm would it have done for him to tell me you had been there?"

"Maybe the bellhop never told him."

"Boy, they never forget anything for Major Winton," Westy assured him. "He knew, all right, and he had some motive—I should worry, anyway."

But Westy did worry very much. It seemed underhanded to him and he told himself over and over again that the major had plenty of chance to tell him that. "I suppose that's why he asked me if I was sure where they were," he thought, quietly. "Gosh, he even shook hands with me and said he was with me that Norrie was innocent." Then, aloud to Norris: "You don't think the major meant to double cross me or anything, do you, Norrie?"

"Naw," said Norris, sympathetically. "Not from what you tell me about him, anyway. But if he does think you were lying, that's his funeral—I know

you're not and so does your mother and father. Gee, I'm sorry though, Wes, that I came away just when an awful thing like that happened. Gee, as mean as Pop is, I hate to think of anyone stealing five thousand dollars from him—he's worked too hard to lose that all in one gulp. I'm not sorry I came away exactly—I've had a lot of fun with Trick, but I'm sorry that I haven't written home and taken the chance that I'd be forgiven and make Pop withdraw that charge."

"He won't though, Norrie," Westy said, forcefully. "He won't rest until he finds what's left of that money and he'll keep Miller on your track and on my track and on Trick's track so he does find out."

"Oh, I guess so," Norris admitted, wearily. "Gee, I can't think of why Trick would want to deceive me like that. But it sure does look funny, now that I think it all over. He didn't want me to see any papers, he didn't let me go back to Major Winton's hotel and he was always warning me that we might have to make a quick getaway—gee, that sure doesn't look any too good for him."

"That's what I tried to tell you. If you had only waited the next day you would have known and saved yourself all this trouble. You could even have come with me, I bet. Major Winton would have liked you and there would have been room."

"I wish I had now," said Norris ruefully. "I didn't really think I was going away that night or I would have told you, but after I got in the movies and got thinking of how Pop was keeping me down I didn't care. Then I met Trick afterward, right where the New York bus stops and he told me what a cold shoulder Pop had even given you."

"Aw, gosh, I know your father well enough not to pay much attention when he's mad," Westy protested.

"Well, anyway, *I* was mad," Norris continued, "and when Trick told me he had drawn that money out of the bank that night and was all set for the Mississippi, I just couldn't refuse."

Westy's eyes blazed with determination. "Norrie," he said, vociferously, "I'm going straight to the *Atlantis* as soon as a rescue boat can take us down there. I'm going to take you with me and you can tell the major the whole thing, just like you've told me. All I hope is that we can get there before Miller spots us again and whisks us away on a train with handcuffs as if we were crooks or something. Because, I'll tell you one thing. Miller wouldn't listen to your story or mine either—all he'd care about was getting us back to the Bridgeboro jail and then his job would be done. I can read him like a book."

Norris gripped his arm tightly. "I'm game," he said.

They talked little after that and hour upon hour wore slowly away, until a leaden patch of light appeared upon the black horizon. The people upon that crumbling levee top who were not sleeping watched it spread. And then as the night shadows dispersed they became aware of their perilous position, with the water dashing on both sides.

They were a pathetic looking lot, all huddled there together, Westy thought as he looked around. And they were all searching for the same thing—the rescue boat. In the growing light their eyes were fixed on the distant horizon and on the river rushing heedlessly by on its way to the Gulf with drifting logs and uprooted trees floating like mere feathers upon its swirling current.

Nothing but water on all sides, and as far as the eye could see. Norris reminded Westy of that famous, “Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink.” They, too, were having the same experience and many times were tempted to take just one sip in order to assuage their now violent thirst. But the sight of a negro’s grimace as he took a drink of the foul, yellow stuff was enough to make them bear their sufferings.

An antique, high-backed chair with part of its back missing, came bobbing along looking quite ludicrous. A negro woman suddenly threw back her head and laughed uproariously. “Ef it ain’t dat ole chair o’ mine,” she cried, between spasms of laughter. “It’s dat one ah had up in de attic and wuz goin’ tuh give away. Now it’s give itself away, sho’ nuff.”

Her laughter was infectious and soon the whole levee top was ringing with laughter. Westy and Norrie found themselves enjoying it too and soon everyone was wide awake and joining in the merriment. The sun too, in all its springtime glory, had broken through the rose colored clouds of dawn.

Suddenly a negro cried, excitedly, “Thank de Lawd, folks, thank de Lawd!”

Another cried: “*A boat! A boat!*”

Everyone turned their eyes upstream where a thin plume of smoke was rising in the clear air. Then the steamboat came into view and every heart on that levee top beat faster at the sight of the graceful looking smokestacks, glistening in the first rays of sunlight.

CHAPTER XXII

HUNGER AND THIRST AND....

“At last!” breathed Westy.

Norris gulped. “Gee, I never spent such a long night, Wes,” he said. “It’s funny though, how quick you can forget how hungry and thirsty you are when you see rescue in sight.”

Westy nodded, happily. “Here’s where we get to the city.”

They often recalled with what joy they watched that steamer slowly approach. One negro who had proclaimed the fact that his name was George Washington Smith, divested himself of his soiled khaki shirt and suspending it on a small stick, waved it frantically about his head.

“Dat’s so dey won’t forget we’re heah,” he shouted. “Dat captain will hab plenty o’ time tuh slow down fo’ us.”

“Gosh, I’m going to eat for an hour when IS get down there,” said Westy, laughing.

“And *water!*” Norris said, in a thick voice, “I’m not going to stop drinking water until I’ve had at least twenty glasses.”

Everyone seemed hysterically happy as the boat came on. They could see the decks crowded with other refugees who were shouting cheerfully to them. The air was ringing with joyous voices.

Westy read the name on her prow, *Katie C.*, and decided that he had never liked the name of a boat more than that one. And as she steamed up within a distance of one hundred and fifty feet of them, his heart beat wildly at the sight of the people swarming its decks. Part of the lower deck was occupied with every known specie of domestic animal. There was not room for another living thing.

The captain of the *Katie C.* stood aft on the top deck and shook his head sadly. “Ain’t room fo’ ’nother fly here, folkses!” he called. “I’m sho’ sorry, but there’ll be someone along soon. Don’t worry—I’ll pass the word right on.”

It was poor consolation for a thirst-ridden, hunger-ridden group of human beings. But they managed to smile bravely back at the captain and waved listless hands at their more fortunate brother refugees as the *Katie C.* disappeared around the bend.

The silence that followed was akin to pain. No one had the heart to speak of their tragic disappointment and it wasn’t until a child cried lustily from a gnawing thirst that the spell was broken.

Norris put his head on Westy's shoulder. "Mind if I do it, Wes?" he asked, somewhat sheepishly. "Gee, I've got such a headache and I feel so blamed hot and cold at the same time that I have to put my head somewhere."

Westy looked at him, alarmed. "Sure, put your head on me, Norrie. Gosh, you don't think you're sick or anything, do you?"

Norris protested that he was not. "You'll see how peppy I'll be as soon as I drink some nice, cold water and can sleep," he said, resting his head wearily on Westy's broad shoulder.

Westy lifted the makeshift bandage on his forehead. "It's stopped bleeding," he said, relieved. "That's one thing that might be making you feel weak and sick, Norrie. You might have lost more blood than you think."

Tim called to them at this juncture and solicitously inquired as to their comfort. Westy answered that they couldn't ask for more. At any rate, that brawny person seemed to be his old self again, and from his restless pacing up and down the levee top, which he attributed to acute hunger, one gathered that his predicted stomach operation had been called off.

Norris dozed after that and Westy patiently allowed the weight to rest fully upon himself. His own eyes burned and his throat was so parched that it was becoming painful for him to swallow. In this manner another tedious hour passed.

In the midst of this vigil with Norris, someone touched him on the elbow very lightly. He looked up quickly and found himself staring into the smiling countenance of George Washington Smith. That worthy negro was proffering a small, dry piece of bread.

"It ain't much, Mistahs Nawthinahs," he said, apologetically, "but it's all ah could scrape up 'n I specs it'll taste as good as cake if yo-all's as hungry as ah am."

Westy thanked him profusely and awakened Norris. They divided it between themselves, munching silently and reflecting upon the generosity of George Washington Smith. Certainly, he had been right about its being the equal of cake, they thought.

No delicacy, it was unanimously agreed, served amidst the comforts of their homes, had ever tasted so sweet as that mouthful of stale crumbs, given by those big, black hands.

CHAPTER XXIII

FEAR

It was after seven o'clock when they again sighted a steamer, this time coming up from the city. But there was not one cheer, not one exclamation of joy from that exhausted group for fear that they would again be disappointed.

George Washington Smith stood on tiptoe and shaded his eyes from the bright sun. "Her decks am clean empty, folks," he announced in hushed tones.

Mentally, they were all on tiptoe until the big boat steamed alongside of that strip of levee and stopped. There was hardly a murmur from the long waiting refugees and when the order was given to go aboard they filed up, weary-eyed and tragic looking. They bore an air of patient resignation as they settled themselves on the decks.

Westy and Norris found a spot on the sunny side of the deck, waiting with the rest while some of the negroes carried a few prized household possessions on board. It seemed an interminable time and Norris got up and walked restlessly to the forward deck.

He had not been gone more than five minutes when he came running back, his face livid save for two bright patches of color upon each cheekbone. "Wes," he whispered, terrified, "a big launch came up just before and I stood there watching—oh, gee...." He put his hand to his head, painfully.

"What's wrong?" asked Westy.

"The launch—the launch—Miller was in it, Wes! Miller! And he saw me! He saw me and he got out and it's gone away."

"The launch?" Westy asked, despairingly.

Norris nodded, unable to speak.

Westy got up and pulled him over to the rail. "Where'd you say Miller got out?"

Norris cleared his throat. "Down there," he said, "on the lower deck. He didn't let on that he saw me, but I know he did because his eyes looked right into mine, just the same way he did on Clay Street yesterday."

Westy slipped his arm through his friend's in an effort to help him regain his composure. "Don't get fussed, Norrie," he pleaded. "It gets me excited and then I can't think of anything."

“I know, Wes,” Norris said in nervous tones, “but you can’t imagine how it made me feel to see that face of his again. He just looked at me in that indifferent way as if to say ‘well, the launch can go on, but I’ll step on that boat and grab you nicely—you can’t get away from me now’—you know that look?”

Westy nodded, thinking hard. “There must be some way, Norrie,” he said abstractedly.

“Yeh,” said Norris, sardonically, “with water all around us. Gee, Wes, I can’t let him take me back to Bridgeboro in handcuffs—gee, people’d point at me for the next twenty years to come—you know how they are in Bridgeboro! Gee, I’ve got to get Trick first and make him vindicate me before Miller grabs us—he’s heartless, Miller is, Wes. Even you—he’ll take you!”

Westy sauntered toward the stairway leading to the lower deck and glanced down. It was a casual, perfunctory glance, but it convinced him of all that he needed to know and he retraced his steps back to Norris.

“He’s not in any hurry to come up, Norrie. He’ll wait until the boat starts.”

“He thinks we’re safe, that’s why. When he gets good and ready he’ll just come up and do his stuff.”

“Will he?” Westy asked in sarcastic tones. “Not if we don’t let him, he won’t.”

“How can we stop him?”

“Only one way, Norrie,” Westy proposed. “What would you do to get away from Miller now?”

“Is that a riddle, Wes?”

Westy shook his head seriously.

“I’d do anything. I won’t be a jailbird, Wes—I won’t! Even if Pop hasn’t got any more respect than to have his own son hunted for, I have respect for myself. Gee, just think of the good name I had in the scouts and everything.”

“Well, then, I’ve thought of a way, Norrie. Just one. And that is to go back on the levee after the boat leaves.”

Norris raised his eyebrows but Westy continued. “They’ll be ready to leave in a few minutes now. You can dive off first while I keep watch, then I’ll go. No one’s at that stern rail. No one will be there when the boat goes and we can stay in the water until she’s far enough away not to see us. I can keep up in it that long—think you can?”

“Gee, it’s terrible,” Norris moaned, sadly. “Here we are rescued and in five minutes we won’t be. I’m so tired and that levee’s so damp and muddy and we won’t get anything to drink or eat after all—oh gee, why did he have to come!”

“Another boat’ll come before long, Norrie,” Westy said, patiently. “We’ll have to do one thing or the other.”

“I’m game, Wes,” Norris said resignedly.

He crawled over the rail and quickly jumped, and a minute later, Westy followed. When the whistle shrieked for departure, their bobbing heads looked not unlike the bits of driftwood that were being constantly borne past them on the rushing current.

CHAPTER XXIV

VIGIL

Who knows what thoughts were theirs as they watched that steamboat gradually fading into the distance and taking with it their hope of immediate succor. Certainly they could not speak their thoughts and keep adrift too and when they at last deemed it safe to climb back on the levee, words could not express the hopelessness that they felt.

Norris staggered over the muddy top like one in a trance and sat listlessly by while Westy went around gathering all the old papers and discarded gunny-sacks left behind by the refugees and still more recent levee workers. He was seated on their old packing box and now and again would hold his head in his hands as if in pain.

Westy watched him uneasily and when he had an armful of papers gathered, trudged up to his friend. "Here, Norrie," he said, commandingly, "I'm going to spread these out for you and see if I can't cover you over too. You've got to sleep—that's what's the matter with you. You need rest after banging your head like that yesterday. Take off your clothes and I'll try and dry them in the sun while you're sleeping."

To Westy's surprise, Norris did not object at all, but submitted gratefully to every ministrations. After he was well covered he murmured his thanks and closed his eyes with a great sigh. There was nothing to indicate whether or not he was sleeping for he sighed restlessly from time to time and his breathing came in irregular gasps.

Westy tried drying his own clothes on the fast drying mud and rejoiced at the warmth that the sun was giving them. At intervals he would divert his attention from Norris to the distant horizon. Surely, he thought, help would not be long in coming, now that the morning was well along.

It must have been a terrible vigil for him. In truth, his need of food and drink was slowly amounting to physical torment and if it had not been that Norris' strange behavior kept his mind off of himself, he would have succumbed to that awful gnawing and broken down.

After a half hour had passed he found himself thawing out to the extent that the sun's rays were making him drowsy and he dared laying his head on part of Norris' covering. Just for a minute, he promised himself. That and no more, he whispered as his eyelids shut down like heavy weights.

It was many minutes before he was able to open them again; the sun was high in the heavens. It must be way past noon, he thought as he jumped to

his feet. Norris was mumbling something and he leaned over him to listen, but the boy's lips stopped moving and he sighed.

"Were you saying something to me, Norrie?" Westy asked. "I've been asleep—I fell asleep before and didn't realize. What were you saying?"

Norris slowly opened his eyes and stared up at him as if he were a stranger. "I've got to find Trick and make him tell the truth—understand!" he said, in thick, babbling tones.

Westy took a step backward. Then he leaned forward again. "Are you feeling all right, Norrie?" he asked in quivering tones.

Norris gazed into space as if he were unaware of Westy's presence. "Trick can't deceive me and get away with it—I won't be a jailbird."

Westy sank to his knees and put his hand on Norris' forehead. It felt hot and dry as did also his cheeks. There was something terrifying about the look in his eyes and his lips were parched and cracked. He was indeed a very sick boy.

Westy flopped down on the packing box and wrung his hands. "Am I in a pickle?" he asked himself. "I'll say I am. Poor Norrie's out of it—he doesn't know whether he's hungry or thirsty or what now. Oh..."

There was something on the horizon—to the south. A boat. Westy clutched his throat and stepped forward to look. For five minutes he strained his eyes upon the moving thing, hope in his eyes at first, then doubt, and finally, despair. The boat was moving away; it had already passed him on its way to the city.

Tears, hot stinging ones, welled up into his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. He dropped his hands listlessly and turned his back on the river. "I let it pass me right by," he cried, despairingly.

"While I slept it passed us by—*help, everything!* What a fool I am and Norrie so sick too. They thought we were rubbish or something, I bet, lying here."

He indulged for some time in self-reproach until Norris cried out for water—cried appealingly, piteously. Westy looked about him, frantically. Water? Yes, millions of gallons of that foul, yellow stuff running past them, but not even a drop fit to offer his sick friend. Would help never come?

"I can't give you any, Norrie," he said, as he leaned over the moaning boy. "It'd kill you now to drink any of that rank stuff. Try and wait a few minutes more—please try and wait!"

Norris murmured something unintelligible and Westy got up helplessly and paced back and forth across that still crumbling levee top. He thought of how he and Tim had cried and shouted the day before, sure that help would come, that someone would rescue them. And someone did. But this was different. There was not a living, answering soul within miles and no matter

how desperate and pleading his shouts were now they would be swallowed up by that heartless, infamous monster, the Mississippi River.

Mee-chee-see-bee, the Indians had called it, Westy remembered. It meant the Great Waters or the Father of Waters and he had learned that in about the fifth grade in school. He had always wanted to see it since that time and he had never rested until he did. Now he was looking straight upon it and wondered why he ever had such a desire. There was nothing beautiful, nothing enticing about it, he realized. Nothing but a continuous rush of foul, yellow fluid stretching its boundary upon every point of the compass. A wilful, treacherous monster that brought nothing but disaster, misery and death to all who came in contact with it. And yet....

“It flows past the prettiest country I ever did see,” he said ruminatively. “Cotton fields and sugar cane and, oh gosh—people can’t have everything go along as easy as pie. Nobody asked Norrie or me to come down here and get mixed up in it, anyhow. But I do wish I could give him some water to drink.”

It was slow torture for him to sit by and hear Norrie’s persistent appeals. “Just a little water!” he would plead. “Just one drop of cold water!” It was maddening.

He got up once more and paced the levee top. “This can’t go on!” he cried out to the silent watery wastes about him. “If I can’t get him water, I’ll be delirious myself.”

He bent down and felt of their clothes drying in the sun. They were doing nicely—almost dry. It was one thing to be thankful for, he realized. Rain would have been the last straw to break the camel’s back. His mother often used that expression and he had always treated it humorously. Now, he couldn’t see the humor in it. One couldn’t see the humor in anything on that desolate strip of land. Everything was terribly real.

He lifted his shirt up from the ground and put it on. It felt deliciously warm and dry. He decided to try and put Norris’ things back on and while he was collecting them he tried to plan how he would do it. The boy seemed utterly helpless now in his delirium.

As he approached Norris, he heard a peculiar whirring sound. Instantly his eyes sought the river but there was no sign of anything. The whirring continued; quite near it sounded. He looked right and left, north and south but could not make it out.

Then suddenly something swooped down over the river and went skimming over the rushing water like some great, graceful winged bird. It sputtered and its propeller whirled dizzily and before it stopped, this rescuing knight of the water and air had come within twenty-five feet of the bewildered, overjoyed Westy.

“A seaplane!” he exclaimed, as the smiling pilot climbed out of the cockpit. “Now that’s a hot one on me because it’s the last thing I’d ever think of to be the one to rescue us.”

CHAPTER XXV AND THEN—

“I always say it’s funny the way things happen,” Westy told the pilot naively. “Now I say it’s just right. Gosh, but your plane’s a sight for sore eyes.”

“Well, I’m glad it is,” said the pilot. “That’s my job now—to pick up the lost, strayed and stolen. And I just happened to see you moving around. Good I wasn’t flying very high.”

“I’ll say. I never heard you, honest I didn’t. Not until you were getting ready to land here. Gosh, I was so mad at this blamed river that I was deaf to everything.”

“Everything but your own thoughts, eh?” laughed the pilot. “Well, I can’t blame you a whole lot. Still you can’t blame it all on the poor river. Blame it on the hundred and one streams that empty into it and make it swell with millions of gallons of water that ought to go somewhere else. All the snow and ice from the north find divers ways of getting into the poor Mississippi—shift the blame on those elements.”

Westy smiled. “I bet you’re an army man, huh?” The pilot nodded. “Why?”

“You talk just like Major Winton,” Westy answered. “But I like it just the same.”

Perhaps the pilot would have liked to find out about Major Winton’s talk, but Norris was to be considered. They had to dress him and get him in the plane without disturbing him too much and it had to be done quickly.

“I don’t know what it is,” said the pilot, feeling Norris’ pulse. “Either pneumonia or typhoid fever. Whatever it is, he’s a darn sick kid—take it from me.

“Where’ll you take us?” Westy asked, as they wrapped the coat around Norris.

“Red Cross,” answered the pilot. “They’re just outside the city.”

“Gosh, I’m glad. Norrie’ll be cared for and have everything he wants. Gosh, you don’t know how glad I am that you came.”

“No happier than I am,” said the pilot, as they carried the helpless Norris over to the plane. “And while we’re on the subject of being cared for, you don’t look any too much in the pink of condition yourself, kiddo.”

“I guess I’m not,” Westy admitted with a little laugh. They were seated now and with Norris’ head in his lap and ready to start, he breathed freely

for the first time in twenty-four hours.

“Keep that coat well around him,” warned the pilot. “We don’t know what’s the matter with him, but still there’s no use taking any chances of his getting a chill.”

Westy listened happily to the propeller whirling around as the plane trembled and when the pilot got in, he felt that his troubles all fell away at once. Even Norris’ irregular breathing did not diminish his new found hope. He felt that he would come around all right—he must.

“We’ve got to find Trick,” he murmured, as the plane left the ground and soared into the vast blue above. “No matter what comes or goes we’ve got to find him. Maybe he’ll beat it, now that he knows Miller saw him. Anyway, he’s sure played poor Norrie for a dummy. He....”

Westy’s empty stomach rebelled as they reached a high altitude and headed directly south. It did everything a normal, well-fed stomach wouldn’t do. It seemed to leave his body at times only to return with a rushing reminder between his ribs that it had been outrageously treated during these last twenty-four hours. He suffered poignantly and wished that the pilot would fly a little lower. He was sure that that would help alleviate his sufferings considerably.

He dared not shout for fear of disturbing Norris who was sleeping quietly now and entirely unconscious of this, his first seaplane ride. Westy heartily wished that he too could be unconscious of it and almost envied the peaceful look upon his friend’s sleeping countenance. His own, he imagined, was distorted from pain.

Some evil spirit tempted him to look down upon terra firma, or rather upon the flooded terra firma, and instantly his head swam like a top and his eyes lost their vision. He whirled and swirled in a vast, black space and was conscious only of the roar of the propeller and the fact that he must keep Norris covered and warm. It was a terrible responsibility for one who was in his dying condition, he thought. And he was anything but facetious about his condition; he was deadly serious, for the nausea he felt in those few moments seemed akin to the pangs of death.

Then the plane began to drop. Westy was not capable of caring whether it dropped or rose again. All he wanted was to lie down and sleep and shut out that horrible whistling and drumming in his ears. And his stomach—well, he dared not think of it. It had risen and attacked him. That was all there was to it.

He had a swift vision of a roof, but he would not be tempted to look out and make sure. He doubted if he were even able to turn his head now but just seemed to be dropping with the plane, down, down into some black,

bottomless pit. Suddenly they must have struck the pit, he was sure, for he felt himself plunge about somewhere in that horrifying, terrifying abyss.

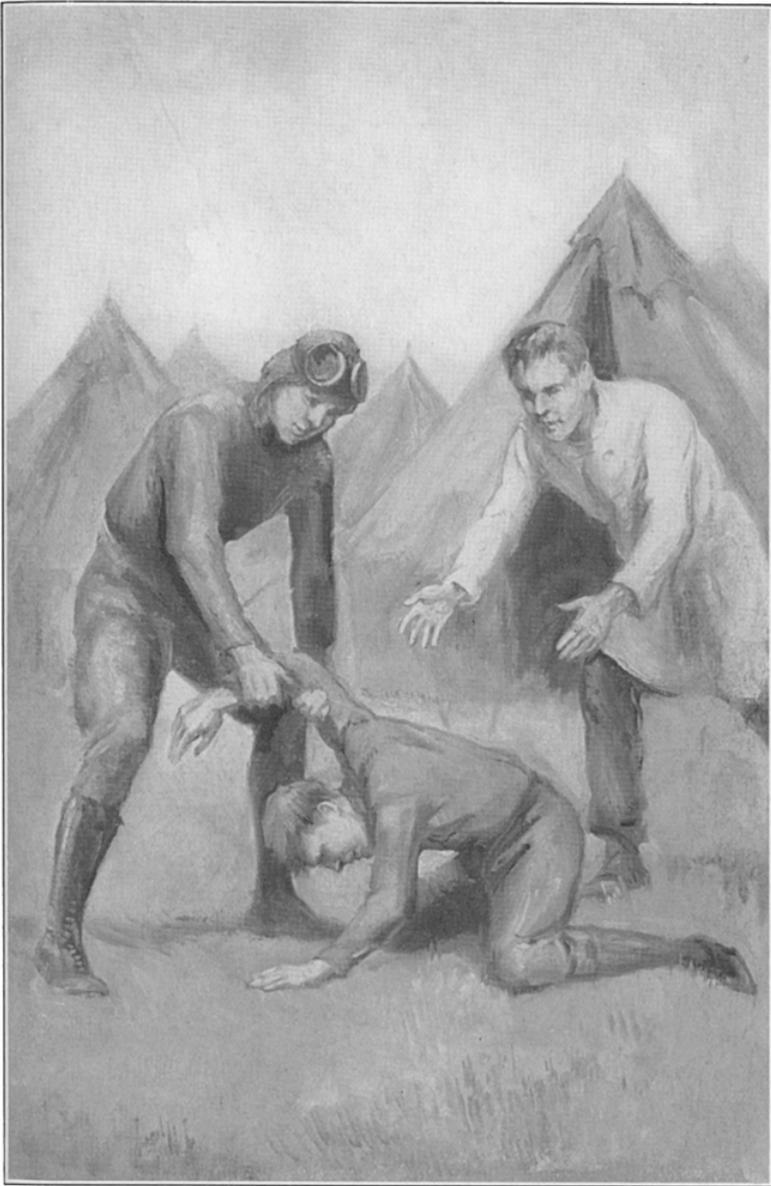
A voice found its way into the mass of his whirling senses—the voice of the pilot. “Well, here we are, kiddo,” he was saying, brightly. “Safe and sound. Just sit where you are until I get a couple of the docs to hustle a stretcher and fetch this sick boy into a nice, clean dry bed.”

Westy did as he was told. He was powerless to do otherwise. The pilot’s voice seemed very unreal. Perhaps he was speaking from the valley of the shadow—the pit. At any rate, he could only think of those words, “a nice, clean, dry bed.” That must be heaven, Westy thought.

In the midst of this lethargy, he was conscious of hands and white figures leaning over him and taking Norris up and away. His lap felt suddenly cold and desolate—it was surprising how warm he had been until then.

“They’ve been through a lot, those two kids,” said a familiar voice. “I think this one’s pretty well shot too if you ask me. He wouldn’t tell me but you can tell it by their clothes and faces. His hair is singed at the top there—they’ve even been in a fire.”

Ah, that was the pilot’s voice, Westy realized. Were they out of that pit? He put out his hand as if to feel and immediately felt a return of the nausea. His teeth were chattering. Someone touched his arm.



WESTY'S TEETH WERE CHATTERING AS SOMEONE TOUCHED HIS
ARM.

“Can you step out, son?” another kind voice asked, pressing his elbow
gently.

Instinctively Westy got to his feet. He wasn't any coward. He'd show them that he wasn't afraid of the pit. He'd step out even. And he did, with the pilot's and a doctor's help. But he didn't stand long, not a fraction of a second.

As he crumbled up and fell into the pit again he seemed to hear a distant voice say: "Exhaustion, Pilot. And plenty of it."

CHAPTER XXVI

DISHEARTENING NEWS

If Westy suffered from exhaustion he surely made up for it in sleep. Thirty-six hours it was before he had the energy to care where he was or how he got there. And when he fully awakened, he sat up, wide-eyed and staring at the trim, smiling nurse waiting at his bedside with a tray of steaming broth.

She explained all that he needed to know in order that he might sip the nourishing liquid before it cooled. "You were in a pretty weakened condition before you got in the plane, weren't you?" she asked, as Westy sipped the stimulating broth.

He acknowledged that he was.

"And it was your first trip in a plane, so you needn't tell me it wasn't. The whole thing was enough to shock you worse than it did."

"Anyhow, I'll be able to get up now, won't I?" Westy asked, feeling his old self again.

"Not tonight, young man," she answered, sternly. "You're going to put another eight hours' sleep down on your chart or I'll know the reason why." She smiled, cheerfully. "And now you want to know about your friend, I suppose."

"Gosh, you sure can read a feller's mind," said Westy admiringly. "I'll say I want to know."

"Well, he's a pretty sick boy, yet," she said. "He has typhoid."

Westy gasped.

"He'll get over it," she said, reassuringly. "He's a fine strong boy. But you can't see him until the infectious stage has passed. He's too sick to ask about you but when he does I'll tell you."

"Where is he?" Westy asked anxiously.

"In the isolation tent at the end of this row. You'll be given a bed and quartered until he's better. I hear you worked on the levee up at the Landing."

Westy nodded. If they knew where he really came from they'd send him hustling and wire to Norris' father. It was better to let them think as they did.

As if she read his mind, the nurse said: "You boys aren't southerners, are you?"

Westy shook his head.

“Well, you’re pretty young to be traveling around and working on levees, but that’s your own business.” And as if on second thought, “You both look as if you come from comfortable homes, but that’s your own business too. Let the Red Cross take care of that. I’m just an employee.”

Westy would have liked to say that his father had paid the Red Cross ten times over for what he would receive from them during his and Norrie’s stay there, but he refrained discreetly. Nothing would be gained by more talk and he was too thankful to have the subject dropped.

The next morning, after his release from the hospital tent, he was given a card assigning him to a bed and three meals a day as one of the stricken refugees. He pocketed it carefully and smiled as he went down into the city. If things worked out the way he hoped he wouldn’t have to use it at all.

“I’ll talk to the major so that he’ll just naturally consent to have Norrie join us as soon as he’s well,” he promised himself, with great assurance.

All the way down he planned the scene. He would have to go over all the lies that Miller had been telling, probably. But he knew, he felt quite sure that the major’s faith would be just as strong as ever. “It’ll be the only thing in case we don’t find Trick,” he said to himself. “The major’s the only one that’d take Norrie’s word for it and through him everything ought to come out all right, maybe.”

He strolled through the bright, sunny street and down to the levee. His spirits were keyed in a high pitch in accordance with the weather. Even when he first saw that empty space out there on the river, he had no premonition of a last, deadly blow to his heartfelt hopes.

The white, shining ships all anchored outside the levee confused him at first. There were so many that it was hard to pick the *Atlantis* from the rest. Rescue boats, supply boats, every conceivable kind of a boat carrying cargoes, human and otherwise. But he seemed not to be able to discern the graceful craft that he was looking for.

It suddenly dawned upon him that it wasn’t there, the space it had occupied was now empty. Surely, his eyesight must be disordered since he had been in the hospital tent. But no, the space the *Atlantis* had filled in the flooded river was now very conspicuous by reason of her absence.

Something was surely wrong. Hadn’t Major Winton said they would be there for quite a little while? Westy had to think it all over as he stood there in the gleaming sunlight of early morning. Idle he watched a stray heron, white and blue, swoop down upon the water and then disappear among that vast stretch of anchored ships.

An affable, loquacious negro halted by his side. “Looks like our city’ll git ovah de worst ob dis heah flood.”

Westy said that he thought it looked so. He hoped so anyway. “You around this neighborhood much?” he inquired casually.

“Um huh,” answered the negro amiably. “I’s e a levee worker, boy. Right down heah.”

“Have you noticed a nice yacht anchored out here for the last couple of days?” Westy asked.

“Guess I have,” the man answered, proud of his powers of observance. “It carried army engineers too—I know dat much.”

“What else do you know about it?”

The negro looked at Westy a little suspiciously, but on seeing his frank, youthful eyes gazing straight ahead, thought better of it. “Ah only knows that she sailed out o’ heah las’ night,” he said.

“North or south?”

“Nawth, brother, nawth,” he said, shuffling back to his duties.

Westy turned on his heel and went back up the street. Everything seemed quite futile to him now; all that he and Norris had gone through had been in vain. “Well, it’s gone,” he said, hopelessly digging his hands deep into his trousers pockets. “Here Norrie’s sick with typhoid fever and I’m marooned until he gets better with nothing to look forward to but the Bridgeboro jail in case we don’t find Trick. And all the while he might be getting farther and farther away. Oh, gosh!”

His sigh was pitiful to hear and he might have gone on indulging in self-pity had he not happened past a store window that displayed the enticing sign:

GOMEZ’ LIGHT LUNCH
HAVE A REAL HOT TAMALE
GIVE US A TRIAL!

He stood staring at the sign a second, then turned in at the doorway. “What’s the use!” he told himself. “I might as well choke to death with red pepper than to go on the way I’ve been going.”

CHAPTER XXVII

DISCOURAGED

Westy had nothing but time at his disposal for the next two weeks. He made no effort to communicate with Major Winton and did not know if there had been any effort to communicate with him. He just felt a dull, numb pain whenever he thought of the *Atlantis*' precipitate departure.

"He could have put it in the paper or something," he told himself at the end of his monotonous wait for Norris' recovery. "There's always a way of getting in touch with a feller if you really want to. The only thing I'm glad of is that Mother and Dad aren't expecting to hear from me, only if I needed them. Otherwise Norrie'd be back in Bridgeboro—and how!"

At last Westy was notified that he could see Norris and talk to him for fifteen minutes. He thought, despairingly, that he would never be able to tell all the things that he had stored up, in that time. But approaching his friend's cot he was so overjoyed at seeing him again, and recovering, that he told only the very necessary things.

Norris listened, patiently smiling while Westy recited his disappointment at finding the *Atlantis* gone. He even laughed aloud at the narration of the hot tamale and promised himself the pleasure of eating one as soon as he got out of the hospital.

"What a fine picnic, our Mississippi adventure turned out to be, huh, Wes?"

"Picnic—hah!" Westy said, contemptuously. "Nobody can ever tell me they have faith in me again. I'm disgusted with people! Just the one I thought would stick by me—hmph! Well, Norrie, I guess it's either more levee work for you and me too or home to Bridgeboro *and*...."

"No *and* about it, Wes," Norris said, firmly. "I've got news for you—Trick's in the hospital too—the one down in the city. He was hurt in the car that day. It turned over and banged his head all up."

"How'd you find that out?" Westy asked, incredulously.

"I gave the nurse the address he gave me and they directed her to the hospital. He sent me a message that he'll come to see me providing Miller doesn't see him first."

"Hmph!" Westy exclaimed, "He's pretty much afraid of Miller, isn't he?"

"No more than we were," laughed Norris. "We took a pretty long chance diving off that boat just to get out of his way."

“Yeh, because Trick’s been the one that’s held the cards in his hands, that’s why. Does he know I’m with you?”

“Nope. He wouldn’t come if he knew. I have a feeling he wouldn’t.”

“Then you have a feeling he’s guilty.”

“Yes and no,” said Norris. “I’ve a feeling about Trick, Wes—he’s guilty of something. I know it. But isn’t it funny I still can’t feel that he’s tricked me so.”

“Maybe that’s why his name is Trick,” said Westy, sarcastically.

“Now remember what you promised, Wes,” Norris reminded him. “Remember what you said about not believing a thing about him until it’s proven.”

“I know,” said Westy, contritely. “I’m sorry. But if he is guilty he’s got some nerve to come and see you again. He wouldn’t, I bet, if he knew you were going to spring that on him.”

“Well, I’ll take the chance,” said Norris stoutly. “If he lies I’ll know it.”

“If he told a dozen lies, poor Norrie wouldn’t know it,” Westy thought after he left his faithful friend. He was convinced that Trick Trainor had used him for a mere dupe.

Obligingly, Westy stayed away from the hospital tent on the afternoon of Trick’s expected visit. And it wasn’t until the next day that he visited his convalescent friend again.

He approached Norris’ bedside knowing that there could be only one side to that question. He was therefore, taken a little aback when he saw the confident, reassuring smile that greeted him.

“Gosh, you look as if you found a million dollars or more, Norrie!” he admitted, happily.

“I have,” said Norris, delightedly. “When I said to you that, ‘when I’m a friend, I’m a friend,’ that went for everybody. Even Trick. If I didn’t try and help him and be a friend to him I wouldn’t be one to you or anyone else.”

Westy smiled. “All right, Norrie. Now that you’ve got that off your mind, you can browbeat me and say all you want. Tell me I’m a dub and that I’m not living up to my scout teachings because I didn’t have faith in a fellow being. I know you’ll say that because you aren’t smiling just because the day is nice. You’ve got something up your sleeve.”

“I have,” said Norris, convincingly. “Trick told me he never touched a cent of Pop’s money.”

Westy stared, not knowing whether to laugh or to respect Norris’ faith in the indolent Trick Trainor.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A LETTER

“I want you to write home for me, Wes,” Norris announced. “Now that I know the whole thing, I want you to write home for me.”

“What whole thing?”

“All that Trick told me. He’d told me a lie about the money being his grandmother’s, of course.”

“I could have told you that much myself,” said Westy with a grin.

“Well, it was sort of a white lie, anyway. He did it to cover up the real story. That money was from an insurance policy, what they call endowment. You know.”

Westy nodded politely. “What else?”

“Oh, I know you’re thinking it’s another fairy story, but I believe him. Anyway, it had been paid up and Mrs. Trainor gave it to Trick the morning of the day we came away. It was a surprise and she told him to put it in the bank and he’d have it when he needed it. But he didn’t—he kept it out and that’s how he came to decide to ask me down here with him. He said that after all the money was his and that he would have used it some day, but the reason he didn’t want to write home or let me write was because he saw the story of the robbery in the papers.”

“Well, that’s a much better story than his grandmother’s money, anyway,” Westy laughed.

Norris smiled, and continued. “He knew I’d want to go home right away, that’s why,” he protested. “And he’s afraid to face his parents for taking that money now and that’s a good enough reason for him not wanting anyone to know where he was.”

“It’s funny his mother didn’t say anything about the money,” Westy said. “You’d think it would have been the first thing she’d think of.”

“Maybe and maybe not. They’re funny people, Wes—Mr. and Mrs. Trainor. Anyhow, it’s me as well as Trick that’s accused of stealing Pop’s money and they might have thought the one was bad enough without coming out and telling the world that Trick had taken that money when they meant that he shouldn’t have it until he was older.”

“Well, you win, Norrie,” said Westy, smilingly. “If I write home for you will you be willing to take the consequences in case your father don’t believe you?”

Norris nodded, vehemently. “Trick says he’ll stand in back of me and that if no one believes us then, why, we’ll have to go to jail—that’s all. Gee, it’s awful to think of, Wes, but I can’t go on like this, having my mother worrying her head off like she must be doing and having Pop think I’m nothing but a thief. Not only that, but I can’t stand dodging Miller all the time—gee, it’s for your sake as well as mine. It’s as crazy to think that they’re trying to pin some of it on to you as it is for them to accuse Trick and me. Anything’s better than moping like I’ve been doing. Tell Pop the whole thing as I’ve told it to you.” Westy did that and more. He eliminated not the slightest detail of their adventures in order to prove to the sceptical Mr. Cole that they were all willing to come back to Bridgeboro and take the chance of going to jail in order to vindicate themselves.

It took Westy just two hours to write that letter and when he sealed it he felt that perhaps after all it was the only thing for them to do. “Norrie’s got the right idea, I guess,” he admitted, as he walked along through the city streets. “I only hope that Trick doesn’t pull something on us and just told those things so he could get away from Norrie and beat it.”

He put a special delivery stamp on the letter and dropped it in at the post office with an anxious sigh. From there he strolled uptown again and could not resist stopping in for a hot tamale. “After you once get used to eating them,” he told Norris afterward, “you don’t even realize they’re so hot and peppery.”

He dawdled over the last tasty bits of this famous Mexican concoction and ordered a cup of coffee. While he was sipping it a man came from the back of the lunch room with an armful of newspapers and as he passed Westy, on his way to the front door, he dropped one.

Westy leaned over and picked it up but the man had gone. “I guess he was going to throw them out, anyway,” he thought as he glanced at the date of almost three weeks before and the next night after he had been in the hospital tent.

He glanced at the paper casually, the Times-Picayune. It had been thumbed and rethumbed but there were many interesting reports of the crevasse at the Landing and also an account of the rescue of the refugees from the levee top. From that account he turned to one of the inside pages and idly glanced at the want “ads,” the Lost and Found columns, and thence his eyes alighted upon a column marked Personals.

Instantly, he shoved his coffee to one side and spread the paper out before him. There was his name—his own name listed, the first one in the long column.

CHAPTER XXIX

A REQUEST

His eyes burned like live coals as he read, and then read it again to make sure that what he saw was really printed there as he seemed to see it.

MARTIN, WESTY: PLEASE GET IN
TOUCH WITH ME AT THE MALONE.
HAD TO LEAVE HURRIEDLY. SORRY.
KNOW YOU MUST BE WORKING OUT
YOUR OWN PROBLEM BUT DON'T WORK
TOO LONG. WILL WAIT TO HEAR FROM
YOU—WINTON.

His heart missed a beat as he tore the little ad out of the paper. Then he got up and walked out of the place. It was all like some dream, he thought. And to think he had doubted Major Winton for one instant! "Gosh," he berated himself, "I'm a plain fool and I ought to be kicked for always thinking the worst of everybody. Gee, I've had a chip on my shoulder ever since this thing has happened and, believe me, it's about time I knocked it off. Anyway, I'll apologize to the major and write to him just what happened and I'll not get sore at him again even if he does give me the dickens and doesn't bother with me again. Boy, he's a peach. He knows I've met Norrie—sure, Miller's told him, but just like the sport he is, he's told that old sneak that it was a coincidence. I'd like to bet he did."

Westy wrote another letter that night, one equally as long as the one he had sent Mr. Cole. It was a good day's work finished, he felt, as he crept into his narrow cot. If things didn't turn out right, why, it wouldn't be because he hadn't done his part. The only black spot on the horizon was Trainor—he couldn't make him out at all.

During the next few days he was still more puzzled for Trick had failed to appear again at Norris' bedside. "He's with that feller we met on the train coming down from St. Louis," Norris said, quickly on the defensive. "He lives down on Charlotte Street and Trick told me the feller's mother had invited him to come and stay with them until he recuperated. Maybe he's not feeling so well and can't come. You know he was pretty well banged up, Wes."

Westy said nothing. He was not cynical about Trick any more, he was only fearful. So much had happened, so much could still happen. And it was

while he was in this frame of mind that an orderly brought a letter in to Norris.

Norris grasped it with trembling fingers and then smiled. “*Ba—by!*” he exclaimed, radiantly. “It’s from home, Wes. From Pop.”

Westy sat back toward the foot of his friend’s cot and watched, breathlessly. But soon Norris’ pale face lighted with a broad smile. “Just use your ears and listen to this, Wes,” he said delightedly.

Bridgeboro, N. J.

My dear Son:

It would be silly to spend a lot of time and tell you how glad we were to get Westy’s letter concerning yourself. Remember us to him and tell him that we apologize for any false accusations we made against him.

We’re sorry for everything we’ve done and said, Norrie son—I especially. I’ve been a mean, crabby old father to you and I just woke up to that fact two weeks ago. Believe me, when I say that things are going to be run differently hereafter.

Your mother and I are sorry that you have been so sick and she would have been even more distracted than she was (if that could be possible), if she had known of it at the time. We’re glad and thankful that you are getting better and that the Red Cross have been so kind and good to everybody. Also I’ve got to ask you to thank Westy once again for his kindness and saving your life, (he didn’t say he did, but I could read between the lines when he wrote of how he saw you floating with that old door), and keeping faithful in his belief that you were innocent of robbing your father.

Well, you are innocent, Norrie son. So is that rascal Trainor, that I never liked, but I have to be grateful to him for his well meaning in taking you for a vacation on money that his mother and father meant him to have when he got married or some such thing like that. Mr. and Mrs. Trainor say they blame it on themselves for spoiling him and not making him work and earn money. Mr. Trainor says his policy with his son will be different hereafter. He’s going to make him do a man’s work and dress like a man. Anyway, I’m going to give them back what Trick spent on you and they’re going to make up the rest and put it in the bank where it belonged in the first place.

Your mother and I are laughing about the way things have turned out. Here I’ve been making you work and study for years

without the play or recreation a boy ought to have. And Trick's had nothing else but play. Now in the end you both go away together.

But never mind, Norrie son, I'm enclosing a check to bring yourself, Westy and Trainor home and it's yourself that we're longing to see. It's been darn quiet with you away and I think your mother will gain the fifteen pounds she's lost as soon as she sees you. Let us know and make it soon.

Last but not least, my five thousand dollars is safe in the bank, Norrie. Old Brower's sister was cleaning out his clothes closet two weeks ago getting ready for the spring house-cleaning you know. She went through his pockets, preparatory to giving his clothes away and found my five thousand dollars tucked loosely in his office coat pocket.

Now ain't that some ending for you? The poor old codger was getting awful absent minded and I bet he stuck it in there to go wait on a customer and forgot all about it. Two days after he dropped dead and I'll always blame myself for it. I worked him too hard and never paid him what he was worth. His sister's got money and don't need help so I guess I'll have to repent by making it up to you.

Come home soon now, Norrie and keep well. Love from,
Your Mother and Your Pop.

Westy laughed out of sheer joy. "Now that's an ear full," he said. "Who'd ever have thunk that?"

Norris just leaned back against his pillow and whistled. "Wes, it's the limit now, isn't it? Gee, all those things had to happen to make Pop write me such a nice letter and call me 'Norrie son.' He never called me that before." There were tears glistening in his eyes as he folded up the letter and tucked it under his pillow.

"Well, it's a happy ending, Norrie," Westy said, joyfully. "I'm glad for your sake and for my sake and Trick's. It's taught me a lesson—gosh, Norrie, a feller takes a chance when he believes circumstantial evidence, doesn't he?"

"I'll say," Norris answered quietly. "But you only thought that about Trick because everyone else thought it too. Gee, it pays to have a mind of your own and not think the way other people do."

"Well, I guess. It proves that I ought to be chased around the block to get some sense. But honest, Norrie, it's just like I always say—it's darn funny the way things happen."

“You said a mouthful!” said Norris, vociferously.

CHAPTER XXX

A HAPPY ENDING

Norris' predictions about Trick came to pass. He showed up at the hospital tent the very next day and said that he had been ill again. And so Westy received the last blow to his cynicism.

They were a happy trio after that, waiting for Norris to recover sufficiently enough to stand the journey back to Bridgeboro. And Westy was resolved to go with them even though his mother and father were not expected to get back before the end of June.

"We'll have a swell ride home together and we'll go places and do things," said Norris, happily. "Pop won't make me work in the summer any more, I bet. Not while I'm going to school anyway. We'll have good times just like we used to. Maybe we'll even go up to Temple Camp this summer and raise the dickens. Gee, I'd like to."

"Yeh, and I miss the scouts too," Westy admitted. "After all, we never had such good times as we had with them, did we, Norrie?"

"Nope. It's once in a lifetime, I guess," Norris answered. "Anyway, we've had some experiences down here. Boy, you can't deny that."

No, Westy couldn't deny it and when he reached his tent that night there was a letter from Major Winton awaiting him. It was brief but to the point and resounded with his applause for his protege (as he called Westy) sticking by his friend until he was vindicated.

He extended a warm invitation to the trio to come and see him in St. Louis on their way home. "I suspect that's what you'll be doing," he had written, "and I also suspect that you won't care to sail the Mississippi just yet."

He concluded by telling Westy that he had orders from Uncle Sam to go back to St. Louis, where the *Atlantis* was once again at anchor. At any rate their inspection tour was given to other engineers as Washington had other matters for Major Winton to attend to.

"Well, that's all there is to it, Norrie," Westy said after he had shown him the letter. "He wants us to come and I'd like to see him again, but honest, I'm anxious to get back to Bridgeboro. It's come over me all of a sudden."

"Same here," admitted Norris. "We could stop over if you want to but just for a day or so, huh? Gee, I sure am anxious to see Pop and find out what he meant about running things differently hereafter."

“Me too. I’m as nosey as you are. Anyway, we’ll have lots of time together, Norrie, and we haven’t had that in four years. When are they going to let you navigate on your legs?”

“Tomorrow,” Norris answered happily. “If I’m not too weak they’ll let me go the day after next. Gee, boy!”

“Boy, is right. It’ll be bon voyage for us, huh? But that isn’t what you say when you ride on a train, is it?” he asked, as if it were a matter of great importance.

“No,” answered Trick, as he came into the tent, swaggering in that indolent way he always affected. “It’s bon voyage when you cross the Atlantic and bum voyage when you sail the Mississippi in flood times. Take it from me—I know.”

“Who doesn’t!” Westy returned, laughing. “Just the same Trick, I like it down here and I’d like to come back when there isn’t a flood. Gosh, it’s sure beautiful—cotton fields and sugar cane and....”

“Cut out your poetizing,” said Trick with a grin. “I brought a time-table along so we could hop the train as soon as Norrie says the word. Gee whiz, I’ve got a big dose of medicine to take when I get home and *man*, I’m going to take it! I got off lucky even this long.”

Westy looked at him, admiringly. At least Trick was not a whiner. “That’s the stuff,” he said. “Gosh, you would have made a peach of a scout. They like a feller to take his medicine standing up.”

Trick waved the compliment away modestly. He might oil his hair and wear a knife-like crease in his trousers, but he didn’t whine about taking punishment. And Westy decided that he could forgive him all his other shortcomings in favor of that one admirable quality.

THE END

[The end of *Westy Martin on the Mississippi* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh]